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The Power of TV News: An Insider's Perspective on the Launch of BBC Persian TV in the Year of the Iranian Uprising

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INTRODUCTION

“Well, of course you’re from MI6. You’re a spy.” ... “Pass the pomegranate juice, please.”¹

The accusation was made to the director of the BBC’s World Service, Nigel Chapman. He and I and the BBC’s senior Persian analyst, Sadegh Saba, were sitting in the headquarters of the Iranian President, Mahmud Ahmadinejad. His head of communications and senior advisor, Mehdi Kallur, didn’t beat about the bush.

The pomegranate juice — and dates — and nuts — became the segues between different parts of a symphony. A two-and-a-half-hour symphony. Can you imagine President Obama’s senior advisor giving a foreign broadcaster two and a half hours? Not in a month of Sundays. Nothing’s quite what it seems in Iran, as I was about to discover all over again...and again.

We were leaving when we saw his assistant printing out pages from the BBC’s Persian website, which the Iranian government blocks very effectively. “Yes,” came the response, “they’re briefing notes for the cabinet and the president. We trust your information, but not your motives.”

We were in Tehran to help prepare the launch of a new BBC Persian TV channel. Naturally enough Mr. Kallur said “no,” without actually ever saying “no” to our newsgathering presence in Tehran. All very Iranian.

Trust is gold dust in the news business — creating it and keeping it. How on earth, I wondered, could we even begin here? I found a country still blaming

America and the West for supplying the gas to Saddam Hussein, which killed and injured their countrymen in tens of thousands in the 1980s. In the 70s the West had supported the Shah, whose regime had run one of the world's most notorious secret police systems. Even worse, America and Britain had instigated the coup of 1953 against Iran's first democratically elected government.

It didn't matter whether it was the cafés of working class South Tehran, the professional salons of middle class north Tehran, or just bumping into people around the wonders of Isfahan. In my 10-day visit to Iran ordinary people did speak to me, and their message came over loud and clear. It wasn't just Mehdi Kallur and his merry men. "The West has meddled for decades. We just don't trust what you're up to."

And yet, there were signs of hope. A sea of satellite TV dishes² dotted the rooftops. And in nearly every home I went into family and friends were watching the U.S. Voice of America TV, avidly. The chest-beating chanting of "Death to America," I also discovered, was nonsense — a carefully choreographed clique drummed up for special occasions. Virtually every Iranian I spoke to really liked America — even loved it. They might not trust it, but they love the culture: California, coast and cars, and what they see in the movies.

On the face of it, though, as Brits, and therefore junior players in this saga, the BBC was seemingly up the Persian Gulf without a paddle. It was the end of 2007. No staff, no reporters in Tehran, and seemingly no audience.³

Roll forward 18 months to the uprising of June 2009. "I went to bed in one country, and woke up in another."⁴ The memorable words of (UK) Channel 4 News reporter, Lindsey Hillsum. Hundreds of thousands were out on the streets

in Tehran and cities across Iran, disputing the “stolen election.”⁵ Joe Klein, reporting the Iranian election in Tehran for *Time* magazine and CNN, describes it like this: “Anarchy, total chaos, and everyone watching the BBC.”

Internet pictures, e-mails, text messages and alike were coming into BBC Persian TV in London at the rate of between six and eight a minute at the height of the upheaval. And as for that non-existent audience, IRIB State TV estimated between 12 and 14 million regular viewers of BBC Persian TV — a figure backed up by the country’s Institute for Strategic Studies.⁶

So how did we go from my first insight into Iran to the image of a state in chaos with a significant proportion of its population hanging on our every picture, every word? Strangely enough, when I asked that question of Britain’s most senior career diplomat, Sir Peter Ricketts, he wasn’t able to say precisely. I then discovered that nobody (outside Iran)⁷ had actually tried to work out a coherent narrative on western TV’s impact amid the turmoil.

And that turmoil continues. I’m now at Harvard University, on sabbatical from the BBC, researching the impact of the TV channel I helped launch — and still on that voyage of discovery. What’s emerging is a clear and coherent picture of influence far greater than might have been predicted — though, with limitations.

Let me be quite clear. The BBC aspires to be impartial. But my account *cannot* be impartial; it is bound to be biased. I have tried to be honest, owning up to mistakes and problems. And I admit to luck in many areas. However, I would claim my perspective is important because it gives an insider’s insight into a very high-profile media project in a country which is intoxicating and frustrating for most westerners in equal measure.

I'll guide you first through the pre-launch debates and fine decisions, how we overcame the inherent mistrust of the Iranian people, the hiatus of the election and the uprising and finally draw some conclusions on where we are now and the ongoing legacy and impact of BBC Persian TV. That does sound grand, but I do believe this has been a truly extraordinary venture and adventure. I would not be so presumptuous as to say this is a blueprint for all major media endeavors. But we clearly did some things right, and those lessons might be applicable elsewhere.

"IT'S THE PICTURES, STUPID."

Iran's Reign of Terror can seem a long way away. And sometimes not. There are plenty of Iranians here. They'll all talk. But nobody wants to go on the record.⁸ The fear is manifest. BBC Persian TV and Voice of America carry regular reports of rape, torture and murder against opponents of the regime. Neda was just the start.

So, what happened to change everything?

"It's the pictures, stupid. The impact of TV news lies in the pictures. Doesn't matter if it's Iran, or wherever. Same story."⁹ Enayat Fani is the presenter of BBC Persian TV's *Hardtalk* and *Politics Show* programs and (with Sadegh Saba) the channel's most experienced analyst. He remembers the 1979 Revolution. He was there. His pithy and pointed response was still the most eloquent if simplistic explanation of why western TV news channels in Persian have had a significant impact in this most tumultuous year in Iran.

“The shooting of Neda Soltan — and the killings and beatings that followed — changed everything,”¹⁰ according to Karim Sadjadpour at the Carnegie Endowment for Peace. “Those pictures were seen by everyone in Iran — mostly on the BBC, but also on Voice of America or CNN. And make no mistake, the very existence of BBC Persian TV was a critical factor. Everyone had access to the pictures. If they didn’t own a satellite TV, they would know someone who did and see them that way. The impact would not have been the same if it had simply been passed round on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and alike. The television news pictures made all the difference.”

His view is supported by Mehdi Khalaji at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. For 10 years he trained to be an Ayatollah in Qom: “All this cannot be overstated. After Neda there was a flood of impact-making pictures and reports. The mentality changed; that is, the level of trust in the government by the governed — and the growth of trust in western media to tell it as it is. Even many of the clergy in Qom and Najaf went out and bought satellite dishes after Neda. They no longer trusted the Iranian government or State TV.”¹¹

DEBATING WHAT KIND OF CHANNEL IT SHOULD BE

All this was pretty much unimaginable when Behrouz Afagh, head of Asia for the BBC World Service, got the backing of first the BBC’s hierarchy and then the British Foreign Office to put 25 million dollars a year into a Persian-speaking TV channel for Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan. The fact that Behrouz is an Azeri-Iranian, brought up as a Baha’i, and now in exile for 25 years, adds to the myriad of conspiracy theories as to why the BBC should suddenly pluck the idea of a Persian channel from seemingly nowhere.

The Iranian Revolutionary Guards newspaper, *Javan*, actually gave over the day's leading op-ed column in early October to the "Machiavellian nature of Britain's public diplomacy purposes."¹² This followed (the previous month) several pages along the same lines on the website of *Tabnak*,¹³ a newspaper which by and large supports the Iranian government. Nothing appears in these newspapers by chance.

They are right in the sense that public diplomacy is a key element supporting all the main objectives for Britain's Foreign Office.¹⁴ Yet, the money is merely handed to the BBC to do as it sees fit. In my experience, most of the world finds it quite incredible that a government-funded operation can be that hands off. But believe me, it's true. The only caveats might be a degree of self censorship in extreme situations. It's difficult to imagine, for instance, the BBC putting British or American troops in harm's way in Iraq or Afghanistan. The editorial guidelines are lengthy, some 360 pages. First and foremost, though, we promise to be balanced and tell is as it is. Essentially, that is it.¹⁵

The BBC's global strategy was, and is, simply to be "the world's best known and most respected voice in international voice."¹⁶ Our collective world view matches the notion expressed by Nicholas Burns, now a Harvard professor and formerly America's most senior career diplomat — that the post-Cold War and 9/11 world has become less western and more focused on Asia and the broader Middle East.¹⁷ We therefore worked out that we couldn't achieve our aims in English alone. We had to be "there" — on TV, radio and online in the big languages of the world. The corporation already had 40 or so language services. The idea was to have fewer services — but doing everything.

First to be conceived was BBC Arabic TV, in 2004, though it was finally born four years later in 2008. That was to become a standard 24-hour news channel in the mold of Al Jazeera, its main competitor. But BBC Persian TV was down to “us.” — “us” being around 20 or so senior Iranian staff already within the BBC, or people like myself, TV professionals drafted in. We had a blank sheet of paper. We had to work out everything — what kind of programs, whom we’d recruit and from where, tone, target audience and so on.

WHAT WE GOT RIGHT

What was truly astonishing about the whole thing is that we finished up recruiting nearly a hundred Iranians directly from Iran, almost all in their mid to late twenties. All were media savvy, but hardly anyone had done TV. The BBC had never attempted anything like it before — to upgrade more than three-quarters of its staff in a few months from a base-knowledge level of nil to a sophisticated and nuanced level of competence.

“But,” says Karim Sadjadpour, at Carnegie, “the very fact that you employed almost all your journalists between the ages of 20 and 30 straight from Iran was the key masterstroke. They were suddenly much more in touch with what most of the population aspire to, believe in and dislike. “

And there is no doubt that when we established a series of brainstorming sessions on what kind of channel it should be and what programs we should devise they were instantly in touch with the audience in a way the likes of me could never be. They were also heavily involved with our marketing and audience team, setting the questionnaire for detailed research we did with Iranians living in Dubai —

Dubai is just across the Persian Gulf from Iran and around a million Iranians live, work or visit there regularly — indeed, in the spring festival of Norouz, it can be as many as three million.

The point is that the Iranian journalists supported the instincts of our Iranian regional head, Behrouz Afagh, that we should *not* follow the Arabic TV path, and instead make the eight hours of programming a 50/50 split between news and a whole array of other material, from interactive phone-ins simulcast on the Internet, radio and TV, to films and documentaries, to youth shows, travel, food, history and culture programs — deliberately aimed at 20 to 35 year olds, a much younger audience than mainstream TV everywhere else.

Considerable pressure was brought to bear to be much more news orientated, not least from the director of the World Service, Nigel Chapman, who'd been at that fateful meeting in the president's office. But the Iranians, thankfully, stuck to their guns — against him and people like me.

BBC professionals like myself needed a lot of persuading that this was the route to follow. I had been in BBC TV News for nearly 20 years. We were obsessed with breaking news. In my previous job, as the senior editor at BBC World (CNN's main international competitor), I had sat in front of a quad screen, showing our output against our three main competitors. One key measure of our success was to beat the opposition to breaking stories, often by seconds. If we were to make it a mixed channel this would alter everything. No longer could we really focus on breaking news because the threshold for breaking into scheduled programs has to be really high.

I and the other Brits on the leadership team conceded the point to our Iranian colleagues, but thankfully inserted three key red lines of our own. We absolutely insisted that in the event of an absolutely huge “Iranian” story, then we should roll as a news channel — if possible over 24 hours or more — and just ditch the schedule. We couldn’t possibly have foreseen what was to happen in June 2009. But at least we’d addressed the broad scenario, so when it did happen, we were ready.

Secondly, we insisted we put a huge effort in the training program to getting as many journalists as possible (even those deemed to be “in features”) up to speed in being news capable — and that we would do this through a long and repetitive practice schedule. As a result, this is how we managed to train so many staff in TV from a zero baseline. The old “practice makes perfect” adage.

Thirdly, and perhaps even more importantly, those practice days were spent getting the journalists to think for themselves — within the BBC’s key guidelines of balance, fairness and accuracy. We employed around 15 external BBC coaching staff to ensure this happened. This might sound old fashioned and patronising. But you have to take into account they’d all worked in Iran under a broad system of censorship. Sometimes this would involve a government employee being in a newsroom to stop potential violations. Sometimes it would simply be the knowledge that questioning the Islamic system or the country’s nuclear policy could lead to a jail sentence. I’d seen for myself in the early 90s in eastern Germany how adapting to new freedoms was not quite so easy as might have been supposed.

If I had to pick out one key element of all of this I'd say the one about thinking for yourself was *the* most important. The reason is straightforward. When push came to shove, and a few of the younger journalists were finding it extremely difficult to buy into the BBC's "balance is critical" standpoint, the quiet wisdom of the older sages struck home — precisely because we'd used the carrot rather than the stick.

The only "red line" issue I recall being tested was over the younger journalists' use of social media. One or two of them blogged regularly and felt free to include their own opinions on controversial topics. This was absolutely at variance with the BBC's policy overall. In the interests of coherence we take the view that everyone's entitled to their own opinion, but if employees buy into balance and fairness on air, we can't have it both ways. That means no private thoughts on Facebook, Twitter and alike, and frankly it's best to steer clear of private blogs completely. It took three e-mails from senior managers over a couple of months to finally nail that one. But it did enable us to re-inforce the concept of balance being at the very heart of what we do.

On air, of course, the younger journalists always had to go through script approval, and that meant having their words and pictures thoroughly checked by a senior producer or editor. Neither would they decide the choice of stories or running orders. That was all down to more experienced staff.

The pre-launch training only came together through desperately hard work and incremental coaching and mentoring. It really was a case of running an hour or two of dummy programs, then stopping and forensically examining everything — and a couple of bi-lingual senior staff minutely checking every word. It was

also a rather strange but fruitful alliance of cultures. Iranians (even on TV) are warm and naturally smile a lot, so we encouraged that. But their inclination to overwrite in a way which sounded “written” needed some Anglo-Saxon directness. The language suddenly became colloquial and engaging. On air everything was in Persian. Behind the scenes, especially technically, the lingua franca was English.

As you can see, we did not start with a Stalinistic image of “this is the way the channel is going to be.” Behrouz had an idea in his head that the channel needed to be much more than news. But having never worked in TV himself, that is about as far as his idea extended. It really was a work in progress. And yet that comprehensive debate was, I think, utterly critical in making the channel so appealing to an Iranian audience, and especially to a younger audience.

Roxanna Shapour, an American Iranian, who became the channel’s publicist, has no doubts, that “by doing less news, and appealing to all tastes, especially younger men and women, the channel became more attractive, found a new and wider audience, which then decided it also wanted to watch the channel’s news.”¹⁸

AND WHAT WE GOT WRONG, BUT EVENTUALLY RIGHT

Sometimes you just get lucky. No newsman or woman would ever vote for less news. But a bit less in this case did make a big difference. One other confession is how we fluked it on the critical point of recruitment. It was all done too slowly, too late, with too few people, and there are still too few journalists.

The catalyst for all this was money. “The accountants advised us to employ our staff as late as possible because the moment they started training would cost us hard cash,” says HR head, Clive Ahmed. “We’d not reckoned on just how slow Iranian bureaucracy can be. The visas seemingly took forever.”¹⁹

The plan was to bring in a total of 150 staff, two-thirds from Iran, to London between March and May 2008, with a view to a September launch. In the event, they started dribbling in from May and were still arriving in September.

The World Service director, Nigel Chapman, wanted to go as soon as possible thereafter and pressed us very hard to make it happen. The leadership team and I knew this to be ludicrous. The BBC doesn’t do knock-down drag-out rows. And Iranians certainly don’t do that kind of thing. But we came pretty close over the launch date.

The atmosphere at the top table became feverish and intense. One of our senior editors hit nervous exhaustion. The pressure to launch was wearing him down. He was working silly hours — against my advice — 18 hours a day. It all got too much, and he finished up stepping down.

In the end Nigel accepted the training time had been too short, that the whole thing was just too high risk to go so soon, that there was every chance a major error would creep in, and that the very credibility of the BBC was on the line.

He was still adamant we couldn’t miss Obama’s inauguration. We conceded. And that was why we launched five days before Barack Obama entered the White House. More conspiracy theories from Iran.

On the plus side we got the most important decisions right — not only what kind of channel it should be, but we employed absolutely the right kind of people, no matter how tortuous it proved to be. We'd assumed at the start that we might employ half our staff from Iran, if we were lucky. We advertised round the world for Persian-speaking TV journalists. We organised interviews in London, Washington, Los Angeles, Dubai — and Istanbul. We were inundated for Istanbul...you don't need a visa to travel there from Iran. Quite a lot came from opposition newspapers. But a significant number were from government-sponsored operations. They didn't "have TV," but they did have bags of energy, ideas, a willingness to learn, and huge dynamism...who cared about the TV experience?

COUNTDOWN TO LAUNCH CONTINUED

It got pretty intense for everyone, Iranian journalists as well as the leadership team. For the newcomers it must have felt like a boot camp. From my perspective I was pre-occupied that the tone would be balanced and fair to all sides in Iran, including the government. I almost blew a gasket when I overheard one of our young women reporters banging on about Israel-Palestine as she put together a package on the Middle East. Fortunately we'd employed a brilliant writer and chief sub editor in Kaveh Basmenji (a former head of the American-backed Radio Farda) to tell us who was or wasn't on the straight and narrow. A quiet word here and there. Which left us to emphasize the positive; what they could do rather than what they couldn't. We insisted they work hard, let them party hard (Basmenji's impersonation of Freddie Mercury was outstanding), and it worked.

As we approached launch date it was as if the cold war suddenly broke out between the BBC and the Iranian government. And they clearly knew quite a lot about our launch plans. We were leaking.

Our newsgathering was becoming a big concern. Not international news; we'd set up Persian bureaux in Kabul, Istanbul, Beirut, Jerusalem, Islamabad, Dushanbe and Washington. No, what to do about Iran? Ever since Mr. Kallur had said "no" to a Persian-speaking reporter in Iran, we'd felt confident we could rely on the 30 or so stringers employed by the BBC's Persian Radio to fill in. But the ante was now being upped so much we were obliged to reduce contact with them to nil. In the same vein, we were so worried that any connection with the BBC would prompt an immediate arrest, that we stopped the BBC World Service Trust's vacation teaching operations (in Turkey) for young Iranians. The last thing we wanted was the Iranians to arrest a "BBC spy" with a show trial just as we started.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE BBC

"But who needs official reporters when you can have tens of thousands courtesy of the new social media?" says Sadegh.²⁰ Our confidence grew when we used the BBC's Persian website to encourage people-to-phone, text, e-mail, send us pictures, etc. for our final round of pilot programs. It worked like a dream. In addition, the official Iranian news agency, IRNA, seemed to cover everything that moved politically and make the pictures available to all comers. The big international TV agencies, AP and Reuter, unlike the western written press, were still operating — as was the BBC's own English-speaking TV team in Tehran. And suddenly our prospects looked brighter.

In my opinion, the sheer numbers of those participating in citizen journalism made all the difference. Hamid Dabashi at Colombia is also absolutely sure, though he firmly believes it was the combination of the new media *and* the political crisis in June that made BBC Persian TV so influential at this particular point. "The technology of the new social media had existed before, of course. But the election crisis in June forced a complete re-constitution of the architecture of how news works, in Iran and for the likes of the BBC, Voice of America, CNN and so on."²¹

How right he is. I can only speak for the BBC, of course. Social media had been used extensively during the Burma crackdown or the occasional domestic issue, like an oil refinery explosion north of London. But Iran took the whole thing to a completely new level. It came of age.

So how *did* we decide which pictures to use? First, we picked only the very best pictures for further scrutiny; only a fraction of what came in. The rest was often down to common sense detective or intelligence work. Cross check against a variety of other sources and pictures. Are they all wearing the same clothes? Do the angles match up? Is it the same day and same time of day? It's amazing how much else has to go because you can't verify material. All non-BBC footage was broadcast with words on and off screen re-inforcing that the video had come in from the (Iranian) public and was not shot by BBC staff, and could not therefore be independently verified.

Social media usage is a very hot potato. We committed no major errors. But the BBC has used our experience to put together 190 pages no less for public consultation, as it tries to work out new guidelines on social media. In page

terms that's more than half the length of the guidelines for everything else put together.

SLOW BURN TO FAST-TRACK SUCCESS

Before we got to the disputed election of mid-June, BBC Persian TV was on a slow burn. An American TV survey in later February — around five weeks after launch — found Voice of America beating the BBC by three million viewers to two and a half million.²² By late April, however, the BBC audience had shot up to six million plus, according to figures from the son of the former Iranian president, Hashemi Rafsanjani. He runs a large polling organisation in Iran. He also predicted an eventual audience reach of 11 million.²³

According to Sadegh Saba the explanation of how a slow burn became fast-track progress was this: “We’d got lots of things right. We’d started to win over the trust of many Iranians by being balanced, telling it as it is, by painting a warts-and-all-image of the United States and Britain, and by doing a lot of programs which were very positive about Iranian culture — such as a series on how history and climate impacted Iranian cuisine, which had the blessing of Ershad (the wonderfully named Ministry of Islamic Guidance).

The head of newsgathering at the time, Daryoush Karimi, picks up the story: “We were doing quite well. The government then demonized us, which was the best possible marketing campaign. Word of mouth is also very powerful in Iranian culture, and that takes time. But most of all we were helped by the mere fact of the election. There was a much greater desire on behalf of the electorate to find out more.”²⁴

Sadegh again: “Ahmadinejad was supreme during the televised election debates, which began in early May. State TV was not going to give his opponents any real opportunities beyond those debates. They needed other outlets. The opposition was by now very aware of our audience. Rafsanjani was bankrolling Mousavi and his supporters. Around three to four weeks before the election they appeared to take the unprecedented step in Iranian politics of making themselves available for interviews on the BBC — like any western political party would want to play the media. The result is that we became part of the political process — highly unusual for any foreign channel anywhere.”

They were drawn to three programs in particular. *Hardtalk* was a half-hour one-on-one interview, probing and tough, but clearly a wonderful opportunity to pitch. There was the half-hour *Politics Show*. But the jewel in the Crown was *Nowbat e Shoma*, an anything-goes chance for all Iranians to have their say interactively on a whole spectrum of topics. This just didn’t happen anywhere else in Iran.

“*Nowbat* had a huge impact from the start,” says Saeed Barzin, the senior Iranian analyst for BBC Monitoring. His job is to check everything that moves in all Iranian media. “It encouraged debate in Iranian society by airing issues like disability or homosexuality or public executions, all of which were taboo anyway, but certainly weren’t being covered elsewhere.”²⁵

He continues: “It’s difficult to say whether BBC Persian TV helped drive up support for Ahmadinejad’s opponents. But the Iranian public suddenly had good access to what the government’s opponents were saying.”

THE ELECTION AND THE UPRISING

On June 13, Iran's leadership declared Ahmadinejad the winner by lunchtime (the day after the June 12 election) — with 63 percent of the vote. There are no official opinion polls in Iran. But on the face of it this seemed completely implausible, given the private and unofficial polls a few days earlier indicating a 50/50 split between Ahmadinejad and his opponents taken together. The middle class of the capital, Tehran, never a natural stronghold for the Ahmadinejad government, turned out to demonstrate in their tens of thousands. Everyone I have spoken to — Iranian students and academics, western journalists, diplomats and so forth, all agree with the assessment of Joe Klein: "BBC Persian TV and Voice of America did not create the election crisis — huge numbers of Iranians were already tired of the suppression of personal freedoms and continued economic crises — but the TV news in Persian did provide the oxygen of publicity to make the crisis much more difficult for the Iranian government."

On election day the Iranian government finally acted against BBC Persian TV. It shut down one of our two satellite channels for several hours. Behrouz Afagh takes up the story: "The BBC instantly made money available to pay for two more satellite channels. And we received the full support of the satellite provider, Eutelsat. In addition and very importantly, the European Broadcast Union, the EBU, a collection of all Europe's biggest broadcasting organisations, protested in the strongest possible terms to the Iranian government, not least because many other European channels were being blocked out as a result."²⁶

The Iranians now found themselves with four separate BBC Persian TV streams going into the country — making it almost impossible to stop. And Europe's

broadcasters were threatening to break off relations immediately. The Iranian government backed down and after a few days stopped the mainstream blocking completely. They did partial jamming for a few weeks, and latterly have resorted to some neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood jamming. But in general it has proved ineffective.

By June 14, and the demonstrations getting bigger and angrier by the minute, BBC Persian TV had expanded its schedule and was soon operating round the clock. “For a channel funded to provide just eight hours a day, to go up to 24/7 with no end in sight was an utterly Herculean task,” says launch director Rob Beynon. “Everyone was working double the hours. Many were living in hotel rooms next door to the BBC’s Broadcasting House headquarters. All non-news staff were drafted in to help alongside many new freelancers.”²⁷

“And most importantly at a personal level this was an extraordinarily difficult time. This was their country. It was their friends and family it was happening to. At work we were always confident — because of the exhaustive training — that our Iranian journalists would be fair and balanced. But the stress levels — as well as the physical exhaustion — were enormous. “

Most needed no reminding of what might happen. Sina Motalebi was that constant reminder in the newsroom. The softly spoken editor of the *Nowbat* debate program had spent three weeks in solitary confinement in 2003 and been exiled ever since. And that was during the so-called “Reformist Period.” The present regime was more hardline again.

“Most of us managed to get through unscathed at work, and I think we did a decent job of being fair to all sides,” says Daryoush Karimi, “but emotions were

running very high. We were all very worried for family back in Iran. People like myself, who'd been at the BBC 10 years or more, were able to deal with things reasonably easily. But for the newcomers, in their 20s, who hadn't seen anything remotely like this, it was very difficult at all sorts of levels."

As for Karimi's point about being fair, launch director Rob Beynon concedes it was a pretty close-run thing. He recalls going through the gallery (controlling the programs) a couple of days after the election as the uprising gathered pace, and hearing a young producer murmuring that we should not be using any clips from Ahmadinejad, as part of his speech was relayed on air.

"We overcame that," he said, "with a few of the wise old heads having a quiet word and saying it would be self defeating to ignore the government side. It stiffened resolve, and the point was quickly accepted by everyone. Getting the balance right was undoubtedly our biggest challenge, and I feel very proud of them."

The new World Service director, Peter Horrocks, was sufficiently worried to rush to the Persian newsroom to deliver a "we must be impartial" speech in Churchillian tones. Most commentators I spoke to think we succeeded in telling both sides. Though not everyone agrees we were balanced and certainly not impartial.

Mohsen Milani at South Florida University feels the channel tended (and still does) to align itself to the Green Opposition Movement by the way we choose stories and follow through on details: "It's a generational thing as much as anything," he said. "Most of the Green leaders are students under 30. The

western media now employs a lot of American or British Iranians under 30. They have similar aspirations and think along the same lines.”²⁸

Back with events — now moving at express train speed — the Iranian authorities did not in the end move against any BBC Persian TV family members. But they did expel the BBC’s English-speaking Tehran correspondent, Jon Leyne, and eventually forced the resignation of his Iranian cameraman by threatening his family.

That all happened soon after the shooting of Neda Soltan, at the age of just 26, on June 20. For five or six days beforehand the authorities had allowed the demonstrations to build against the “stolen election.” But on June 20 they allowed the Basiji, a government-sponsored militia, to join the law enforcement agencies and gave them free rein to shoot or beat up whomever they wanted to.

Iason Athanasiadis, a Greek photo journalist, fluent Persian speaker and resident of Tehran between 2004 and 2007, was holed up in the notorious Evin Prison. He’d been imprisoned just a day after the demonstrations flared up. “Even there,” he said, “the death of Neda was the main talking point for the Revolutionary Guards looking after me. They understood only too well what a critical thing had just happened and were at pains to explain to me how the bullet that killed Neda couldn’t possibly have been fired by a member of the Basiji. They used different bullets.”²⁹ The government is still protesting its innocence.

But not even many of Ahmadinejad’s own supporters seem to believe that. For example, four Iranian students I spoke to at Harvard, whose families include many who’d voted for Ahmadinejad, all confirm the view that this was a

significant turning point — and that everyone they knew saw the pictures — mostly on the BBC, but also elsewhere. They want to remain anonymous. They still fear the consequences. One works for *GlobalPost*, a new online operation covering the world agenda, produced from Boston. She reports for *GlobalPost* anonymously too. All four said their families had changed their view of the Iranian hierarchy after Neda. The general message was how “the shootings and beatings changed everything. The people no longer trusted the government.”

From a western perspective, of course, this seems almost unbelievable. Mehdi Khalaji explains it like this: “For most Iranians, even opponents of the government, there was a degree of believing that the government would hold to the values of Islam. They would not lie, and they would not brutalise their own people. Neda shattered that myth completely.”

BBC Persian TV not only showed the pictures to Iran but interviewed the doctor who tried to save her, her brother and finally her father. “Everyone (against the government) felt emboldened to talk to us now,” says Sadegh Saba.

Those extraordinary few days were to be the peak of the uprising. Four or five days after Neda’s death the government was firmly back in control. The hundreds of thousands on the streets across many cities in Iran had reduced to a trickle. A Reign of Terror had been launched — arrests, beatings, rape, torture and show trials. BBC Persian TV and Voice of America were still on air to broadcast what was happening, though by now the rest of the international press and media had either been expelled or their visas had expired.

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Six months after those tumultuous events Iran still seems a different place somehow. "Much of the opposition leadership was at the heart of the 1979 Islamic Revolution," says Hamid Dabashi, "so it is very difficult for the government to explain away. They really don't seem to know what to do. On the face of it the Islamic Republic is imploding from within. However, don't expect regime change tomorrow. The Green movement (the opposition) is rather like America's civil rights movement in the later 50s. That still had 10 years to run before major legislation, and I think you can expect something similar here. But I do think the country is moving inevitably to a system of recognisably democratic institutions."

It has to be said that most Iranian-American academics I spoke to would regard this as an optimistic scenario. Mehdi Khalaji, for instance, foresees no great waves being made by the opposition. "What do you mean by opposition? Most successful opponents of any authoritarian government rely on three great factors: ideology, leadership and organization. They have none of these things."

The clergy, he says, and he ought to know given his religious training, feel completely excluded by the present government, which is adopting a quasi military stance: "Its power base has moved from the clergy to the Revolutionary Guard."

So, given the unpredictability of present-day Iran, is there or can there be any enduring legacy of BBC Persian TV? "The BBC's Persian TV channel is filling a vacuum in civic society," says Saeed Barzin. "The Ahmadinejad government has managed to stymie just about every area of civic society — women's groups,

trade unions, dissident academics, even the Internet to a significant degree. But they've failed to control the international TV news in Persian."

There's agreement on this across the board. Karim Sadjadpour explains: "BBC Persian TV encourages and even creates debate and shows that it's a sign of a healthy society." Interestingly, one of the key demands of the coalition opposing the government is for a free and open media. "It's become part of the mainstream debate," says Behrouz Afagh, "and that is down to the BBC for the most part."

There's disagreement, however, on the influence BBC Persian TV and Voice of America exert on day-to-day politics. Everyone I spoke to in the realm of journalists, academics and general Iran watchers certainly supports the notion that the BBC and Voice of America were firmly at the centre of events in the middle of the hiatus. But the two camps broadly split thereafter. Camp one says the impact on day-to-day politics is nil. Camp two's view might be summarized like this: "The opposition is able to continue in a position of reasonable strength and cause considerable problems for the Iranian state, precisely because what they do and say is being reported."

Sadegh gives two examples. "The first," he says, "is the reporting of three big demonstrations in November and December alone — the last of which saw as many as 13 more opposition supporters killed on the streets. All this is being seen across the country and appears to make big waves."

"The second instance," says Sadegh, "is how Mehdi Karroubi became a pivotal figure in the opposition movement. His terrifying claims about rape, torture and murder to quell the opposition are being reported in full. And his position is

strong enough for the government to dither about what action to take against him, if any.”

The Iranian government itself is in no doubt about the political influence of VOA and BBC TV in Persian. This from Spiritual Leader Khamane’i himself, addressing the Assembly of Experts: “In today’s world the most effective international weapon against oppositions is propaganda...Media weapons are the strongest weapons. They are even worse than atomic bombs. You witnessed how the enemy used this weapon in the post-election riots.”³⁰

That was on September 24. Two weeks later, this op-ed in *Javan*, the newspaper of the Revolutionary Guards: “The establishment of BBC Persian TV last winter was an important event as far as the world of media was concerned. It seems that the Iranian officials at first did not pay close attention to the potential role that this TV channel could play, but gradually witnessed the impact of its programs on our society...We have a powerful rival in the media world today called BBC PTV, and it is not possible to snub it at all. This becomes very important when we know that the BBC has a long history of fighting Islam, the Islamic Revolution and Iranians. In such a situation, it is essential that Iranian officials keep away from radical strategies and be aware of the fact that our enemy is very powerful and professional.”³¹

Five days later, on October 11, the Iranian government convened 800 of its top brass to discuss, in the words of the spiritual leader as a guideline on the conference website: “Psychological operations are the lead element in the fight against Iran.”³² The BBC was specifically targeted as a leading foe in this perceived psy-ops war between Iran and the West.

The president turned up to make a keynote speech, alongside the joint chiefs of staff and among many others, including Mehdi Kallur, he of the spying accusations and Ahmadinejad's chief advisor. His daughter was by now in Germany, supporting the opposition Green movement and giving interviews to BBC Persian TV. One of the most prominent speakers was Haddad Adel, who warned how "the media have taken the place of advanced military hardware"³³ in global interaction. The conference called for a "counter-offensive" and major investment and expansion for the state run IRIB.

Just a few days later IRIB announced plans for five new channels.³⁴ It officially conceded that 40 percent of the Iranian population had satellite access to a total of 116 satellite channels (an enormous proportion of these are Iran exile-funded entertainment channels operating out of California) and were being watched for four-and-a-half hours each day by their regular audience.

All this has a coherence about it. "The Iranian leadership absolutely feel that BBC Persian TV and CNN especially exert a huge influence over the politically savvy middle class of Iran, and they are decidedly angered by it," says Mehdi Khalaji. "They're even more irritated precisely because it is so balanced."

CONCLUSIONS

So what overall conclusions can be drawn from the BBC Persian TV experience in Iran this year? No doubt we got lucky. But then CNN needed *Challenger* and the first Iraq War. We didn't cause the political crisis, but the pictures we showed helped shape events and prompted a domestic crisis of trust in the Iranian government, which continues. We've helped encourage debate in a country

where so little public discourse is possible, and that too will continue. Our very existence opened up the media significantly, and as a result media freedom (or not) is now at the very centre of the political debate in Iran. There's evidence too that IRIB is under considerable pressure to up its game and is doing so, to some degree.

The very youthfulness of our Iranian journalists proved to be our strongest point, and their inexperience and emotional involvement our greatest potential weakness. I believe we have been balanced, and the Iranian government's horror and tone against us underlines that.

The point here is not that we get everything right. It's very difficult to be balanced when the Iranian government and its supporters won't talk to us. We try to overcome this by using public speeches or news footage overlaid with an explanation of their viewpoint. We are actively trying our best, and that point has been accepted by the Iranian public, according to all the audience feedback we get. It's precisely this, together with a more engaging, warmer and "less arrogant tone" which has overturned decades of misunderstanding. The Iranian public still don't trust the British government, but they are sophisticated and understand the BBC is not the same thing. So, telling it as it is, with no pre-conceived agenda, is by far the greatest weapon in any broadcaster's armoury. Iranians say they hated past "preachiness." The message to all westerners planning foreign ventures is absolutely clear.

To those looking for any general media blueprint, wherever that may be, I'd say this: working out the demands of our core audience took an inordinate amount of time, arguably almost too much, but it did help us strip away everything that

didn't help that cause. It seems to me the media world is now so volatile that taking risks has to become part of our DNA. In the past the BBC has been a mega-cautious organization, and its reputation was certainly on the line here. But the BBC hierarchy above me did seem to understand this "new world order."

In a wider context, surely engaging with the *people* of any given country, not just the government, is utterly critical. At a recent Harvard forum on Iran,³⁵ it was noticeable that this was the only point that right- and left-wing observers agreed on. "Let's face it," says Nicholas Burns, who chaired that forum, "30 years of not engaging with the Iranians at any kind of consistent level, has got us nowhere. There are no U.S. business, academic or political links with Iran at the moment...and virtually no media links." The only engagement as such is this, broadcasting into Iran.

Finally, as the media world and indeed the rest of the real world gets increasingly obsessed by social media — the Facebooks, Twitters and so on — this is an excellent example of how television news is making by far the biggest impact. We shouldn't be too surprised. The influence of Internet social media was huge in disseminating pictures and messages round the world and has undoubtedly helped the Opposition contact other like-minded voices inside Iran. But the most impact making pictures and reports could only be seen by a wider public in Iran through Persian-speaking TV, because Internet activity is limited.

Remember, this is a country where Internet blocking works (from a government perspective).³⁶ And recent studies have suggested that the influence of CNN and BBC World News is much greater in the Arab world against its Arab competitors than might have been otherwise assumed.³⁷ Perhaps the biggest medium-term

impact will be how large mainstream TV news corporations learn to harness the social media within their professional framework. TV news is far from dead. Certainly not in Iran.

Endnotes

¹ Meeting was at the beginning of November 2007.

² BBC Monitoring, November 17. Reporting how the deputy head of IRIB, Ali Darabi, announced that 40 percent of Iranians had satellite TV access. Announcement first made on November 13.

Original source: <http://www.isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-1438151>

³ Massoumeh Torfeh of SOAS in London (The School of Oriental and Slavonic Studies) wrote in *The Guardian* newspaper on November 9, 2007, that international media as whole, on radio and the Internet, had an audience in Iran of less than one percent.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/organgrinder/2007/nov/09/theukgovernmentisto>

The BBC's own figures indicated an audience of 800,000 on short-wave radio and an Internet audience of perhaps half that. The BBC's reach had been 2.5 million. Voice of America's audience was around 3 million — so *The Guardian* was inaccurate.

⁴ Reported by Lindsey Hillsum on Channel 4 News on June 13, 2009.

⁵ Joe Klein, talking to me on October 14. Subsequent quotation also part of that conversation.

⁶ Off-the-record conversations had with a variety of people. Not verifiable as Iran has no "official" polls.

⁷ Iran's National Security Council held its own internal inquiry on the impact of the BBC on broadcasting in Iran. It first convened in the spring of 2009. Its report — not in the public domain — do, however, appear to have prompted the kind of thinking seen in op-ed columns in Iran in September/October of 2009 and subsequent changes to IRIB, publicly announced in the fall and looked at later in this paper.

⁸ I conducted several interviews with Iranians living or studying in the United States, between the end of September and end of November 2009. All wished to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals against their families.

⁹ Interview with Enayat Fani on December 10. Subsequent quotations also from that interview.

¹⁰ Interview with Karim Sadjadpour conducted on November 13. Subsequent quotations also from that interview.

¹¹ Interview with Mehdi Khallaji done over two separate days on December 7 and 9. Quotations later in the paper from that two-part interview.

¹² A direct quote on BBC Monitoring from October 6 of that morning's *Javan* newspaper.

¹³ Reported by BBC Monitoring on October 6, 2009, but actually first carried on the Tabnak website from September 7.

¹⁴ Britain's former minister for Europe, Jim Murphy, compiled a series of essays on this subject, *Engagement: Public Diplomacy in a Globalised World*, while he was in post 2007–2008.

<http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/about-us/publications-and-documents/publications1/pd-publication/>

The strategic aims of the British Foreign Office are on its website;

<http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/about-us/what-we-do/our-strategic-priorities/>

The most influential analyst on the whole issue of Public Diplomacy is Professor Joseph Nye of Harvard University. The most succinct and recent paper he has put together on Public Diplomacy and Soft Power was done for the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* in 2008 and is available online at

<http://ann.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/616/1/94>

¹⁵ Available on the web at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/edguide/>

¹⁶ Outlined in this link; http://www.bbc.co.uk/atw/gnd/globalnews_integration.shtml

¹⁷ Said to me in an interview on October 14. Subsequent quotations are from that interview. He repeated his view in a lecture to Kennedy School students at Harvard on November 19.

¹⁸ Interview conducted on October 23, 2009.

¹⁹ Interview conducted on December 9, 2009.

²⁰ Interview conducted on October 22, 2009. Subsequent quotations from that interview.

²¹ Interview conducted on November 16. Subsequent quotations from that interview.

²² According to internal figures from the BBC's audience research team.

²³ These were all conducted unofficially and are not verifiable. Most commentators I spoke to emphasise that any audience figures in Iran are never reliable. But most agreed that these figures "felt right."

²⁴ From an interview conducted on December 10, 2009. Subsequent quotations also from that interview.

²⁵ Interview conducted on October 9, 2009. Subsequent quotations also from that interview.

²⁶ Interview conducted on October 8, 2009. Subsequent quotations also from that interview.

²⁷ Interview conducted on December 5, 2009. Subsequent quotations from that interview.

²⁸ Interview conducted on December 7, 2009. Subsequent quotations from that interview.

²⁹ Interview conducted on October 2, 2009.

³⁰ Sourced from BBC Monitoring, reporting his speech on the same day, September 24, 2009.

³¹ Sourced from BBC Monitoring, quoting that day's *Javan* lead op-ed on October 6, 2009.

³² The conference took place on October 11 and was reported in detail by BBC Monitoring on October 12, 2009. Initial source: <http://www.psyop.ir/Portal/tabid/63/Default.aspx>

³³ At the same conference and reported again on October 12 by BBC Monitoring. Initial link: <http://www.isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-1417891>

³⁴ Announced on November 7 but the full analysis did not appear from BBC Monitoring until November 2009. Two links to original sources:

<http://www.isna.ir/ISNA/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-1414702>

<http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=959900>.

³⁵ Forum took place at the Harvard Kennedy School on September 16, 2009. The main speakers were Elliot Abrams of the Council on Foreign Relations, Mohsen Milani from South Florida University, and it was chaired by Professor Nicholas Burns. The quotation which follows, from Professor Burns, was from a separate interview conducted on October 14 and repeated at a Harvard lecture he gave.

³⁶ Berkman Center study on Internet usage in Iran (there are just 60 thousand bloggers) published in April 2008. It is available on

http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/publications/2008/Mapping_Irans_Online_Public

³⁷ See article by Charles Kenny in *Foreign Policy* magazine entitled "Revolution in a Box."

http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/10/19/revolution_in_a_box?page=full

See also detailed research by Gentkow and Shapiro in Chicago. They wrote *Media, Education and Anti-Americanism in the Muslim World* in 2004. See:

<http://faculty.chicagobooth.edu/matthew.gentzkow/research/AntiAm.pdf>

and they wrote *Media Bias and Reputation* in 2006. See:

<http://faculty.chicagobooth.edu/matthew.gentzkow/research/BiasReputation.pdf>