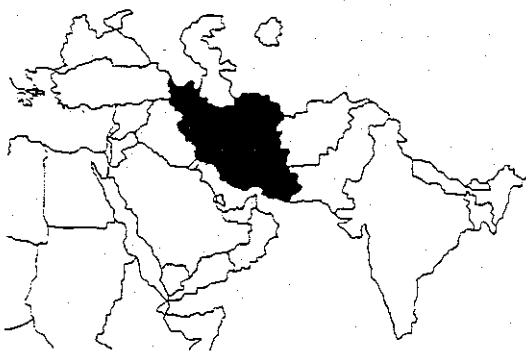


THE ISLAMIZATION OF IRANIAN TELEVISION

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In the West, particularly in the United States, television has been said to have a ritualistic function—comparable to religion. If 'television is religion' in the United States or Europe, in Iran since the Islamic Revolution it is religion that provides television.



1986 POPULATION: 49.76 million
RADIO RECEIVERS: 11,000,000 (240 per 1000)
TV RECEIVERS: 2,600,000 (57 per 1000)

Islamization of the mass media in Iran, in both content and operation, has been happening for the past decade, since the Islamic Revolution in 1978-79: its full impact on society and politics is only recently starting to be recognized. Nowhere is this more visible than in the institutionalization of the broadcast system, particularly television, within the framework of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

In its little more than three decades of volatile history, the Iranian television system has gone through many cycles. Beginning as a commercial and privately owned operation, it passed through the paternalistic apparatus of Shah Mahammad Reza Pahlavi's royal dictatorship. Then, after the monarchy was overthrown in one of the most popular uprisings of contemporary history, television became subsumed to Islamic tenets. 'The Voice and Profile of the Islamic Revolution', as the Iranian radio and television organization was named after the success of the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Imam Khomeini's revolution, is now one of the most formidable communication systems, covering the Persian Gulf and the Islamic countries. Iranian external radio broadcasting has increased from about 170 hours a week in 1978 to 323 hours in 1986, in 13 languages and ranking 18th in the world's top 20 major broadcasters. These include the United States (2368 hours), the Soviet Union (2259), China (1411), Taiwan (1098), West Germany (821) and Egypt—including Middle East radio (820). Iran's external Arabic-language programming exceeds any other initiated in the Arab world. In terms of weekly programme hours to the Middle East, Iran ranks fourth among major international broadcasters with 233 hours/8 languages, following Egypt (495 hours/3 languages), the Soviet Union (371 hours/11 languages) and the United Kingdom (250 hours/4 languages). The US *Voice of America* (VoA) ranked fifth with 168 hours/3 languages.¹

The Islamization of popular culture and communication is particularly obvious in the Iranian television system. Completely reorganized after the Shah's downfall and revitalized during the past 10 years, Iranian television, with an estimated audience of 20 million (in a country of 55 million), as well as its more usual role in information and education, has also established itself as a potent Islamic propagation medium. Its two major channels cover 628,000 square miles, more than three times the area of Spain and larger than the whole of Western Europe—or equal to more than one-fifth of the area of the United States. Its signals can also blanket the 1200-mile border with the Soviet Union to the north and almost the entire coastline of the Persian Gulf countries.

TELEVISION AND MEDIA ECOLOGY

Iran is the land link between the Middle East and the rest of Asia, the cultural highway between Arab and Indian history, and a land bridge connecting the bulk of Asia and Europe. With a 98 per cent Muslim population, it is the largest centre of Shia scholarship in the Islamic world. Because of Iran's strategic position and its vast oil and mineral resources, world empires—particularly in this country—have occupied themselves with seizing or defending it. In the 19th century,

the British regarded Iran as the bulwark protecting India; the Russians as a much-coveted outlet to the warm waters of the Persian Gulf. Today it is the centre of Shia Islamic resurgence and the only Islamic state defying both East and West with its ideology and religio-political will. This is why Iran has become the focal point of international interest.

The Shia branch of Islam has mostly flourished in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Kuwait and Syria (though there are considerable numbers in other Islamic regions—such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Soviet Union and India). The rest of the Islamic world is predominantly Sunni. A major difference between the two schools is the Shia belief that Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law, is the Prophet's rightful successor, the first legitimate leader of the Islamic community as the Imam. The Sunni branch of Islam, while not rejecting Ali, consider him only fourth in the first group of *khaliphs*, or leaders, chosen to lead the Islamic state after the Prophet's death. It is important politically (and leadership-wise) that Shia religious leaders, or *ullama*, could maintain their independence from the semi-secular or monarchical states that have come into power in the past centuries. In the Sunni tradition countries, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, religious

it is religion that provides television. This is by no means to minimize the importance of the conventional mass media, including Iranian television, but serves to point out that as a whole, it is the legitimacy of the media that depends on, and is subordinated to, the traditional channels, not the other way around.

Additionally, over the past 10 years, the revolutionary leaders in Iran, schooled in traditional communication, have in many cases consolidated the mass media channels in an integrative and convergent manner with the old, such as the mosque, Friday prayer, and hundreds of other traditional channels peculiar to Islam and Iran.

For example, Friday prayer ceremony, a forum for both religious and political topics attended by millions nationwide, is broadcast by radio and television and covered extensively in the press. Correspondingly, mass media contents are discussed in the bazaar and scores of other traditional institutions of social communication, such as *dorch* (group circles), *tekyeh* (religious centres for public speech and ceremonies) and *madrassah* (traditional education centres).

It is at this point that it becomes difficult to determine the effects of television without first tracing its sources and legitimacy to the input and output of the traditional means of communication at its roots.

Elsewhere, I have examined the role of traditional channels *vis-à-vis* the modern media in the process of political and religious mobilization in Iran.² Here I would just add that in recent (1988 and 1989) visits to Iran, and in close examination of Iranian television structure, operation and contents, it is possible to see a surprising blend of modern technology and tradition in the process of political and cultural change.³ The technological infrastructure of television has remained intact throughout the revolution and post-revolutionary years but its symbolic and cultural contexts have been altered institutionally. In a lecture I gave at the research department of the Iranian radio-television, I was asked sharp questions about media studies techniques and their social impact. I found many producers and researchers—many of whom had received their advanced degree or training in the United States or Europe—conducting nation-wide surveys on viewing patterns and audience predispositions.

'Television films depicting Eastern or Western products made young men and women stray from the normal course of their work, throwing life and industry into oblivion in respect of themselves and their personalities.'

Ayatollah Khomeini, 1989

leaders' power was consolidated within the existing political structure, leaving clergy, or *ullama*, little autonomy. It was precisely this power of checks and balances between the *ullama* and the monarchs or government heads in Iran that allowed the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini—and others before him—to be in the centre of power when disputes arose.

Television has acquired a prominent role in Iran's geopolitical, socio-economic and religious milieux. The technological determinist point of view, often cited in Western scholarly literature, that puts a high premium on television as a most powerful and pervasive means of modern communication affecting popular culture, does not hold much validity in Iran. Television is a potent medium in Iran not because of the technology, but because of long-standing cultural factors that give it legitimacy. In the West, particularly in the United States, television has been said to have a ritualistic function—comparable to religion. If 'television is religion' in the United States or Europe, in Iran

FROM MONARCHY TO THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION

The history of Iranian television is but a small window to that long-standing contradiction, and duality, between the imported sensate culture of commercialism, and the ideational culture rooted in Iran's indigenous religious and national tradition. Iran's first television system, consisting of a single network covering a few major cities—including Teheran—was established as a privately owned commercial venture in 1958 by Iraj Sabet, a wealthy, Harvard-trained Iranian entrepreneur. It was also Sabet who had brought Pepsi-Cola to the country a few years earlier and who later owned the franchise to sell RCA television sets. In fact, Iran and Thailand were the first 'developing' countries to experiment with the technology, tailoring it into hybrid

models of the US commercial networks. Blessed with the Shah's approval, the system continued to operate modestly, mainly on US imports.

Recognizing the informational—and political—potential of television, the Shah's government established a state-owned system as a second network in 1966. By 1971, Iraj Sabet's network was nationalized and incorporated into the state-owned Television Iran (ITV) to form a single organization called National Iranian Radio-Television (NIRT). Introducing colour TV was completed by 1975 and NIRT's budget increased by 20 per cent, making it technically one of the most well-developed television systems in the region. Additionally, the American Armed Services television station, operated for several years for US personnel living in Iran, was replaced by NIRT'S English-language channel, serving thousands of foreigners, including the 60,000 US Army and civilian personnel stationed throughout the country.

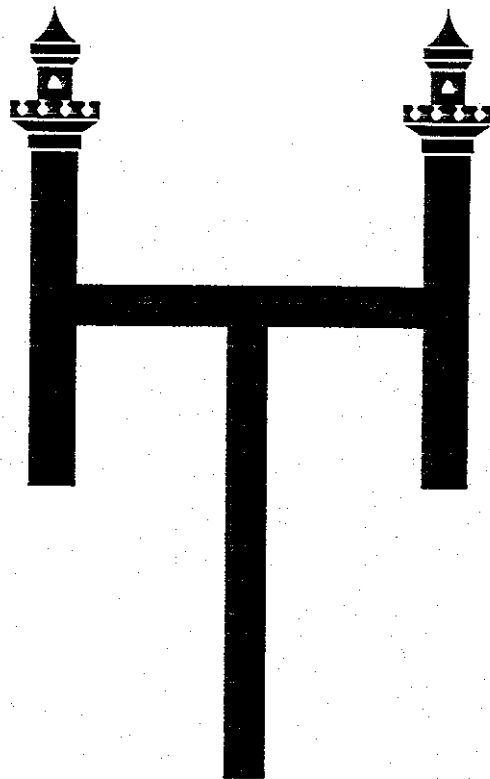
TELEVISION AND POPULAR CULTURE

It was a Persian poet who once pointed out that old wine may be poured into new bottles. The 'Americanization' of Iran in the 1960s and 1970s, before the Islamic Revolution, reflected this—particularly Iran's television. Where European culture once penetrated the upper class of Iranian society—Iran's so-called 'thousand families'—Americanizations were now being diffused and infused among a wider population, with TV playing a leading role. There were no religious programmes on television and the Shah's so-called 'White Revolution' was designed to make Iran a secular society modelled on Europe and the United States. His plan of 'modernization' included no political reforms to meet the rising demands of the increasingly aware participant population, whose culture was for centuries rooted in the Islamic tradition.

Until the Islamic Revolution in the 1970s, the Iranian television system was under the directorship of Reza Ghotbi, a member of the queen's family and trusted member of the Court. Ghotbi oversaw the entire work of NIRT and a few other organizations involved directly—or indirectly—with audience analysis, research and development, including the then-newly created Iran Communication and Development Institute.

NIRT had hired disc jockeys from Los Angeles and London for its language radio and television broadcasting. As Iranian film production decreased because of state censorship and rejection of trivial subjects (i.e., royal family, state ceremonies) by the viewers, a corresponding number of US, Italian, French and English programmes and films dominated cinemas and the television screen. And to find out what kind of mass media were needed by the Iranians, several multimillion-dollar contracts were awarded to US and UK universities and communication research institutes.

As US and European 'girlie' magazines flooded Teheran's newsstands, advertisements featured sensuous women on the TV and movie screens, as well as in print, which the advertising agencies had not even bothered to 'Iranianize'. In television entertainment programmes,



national secular and pre-Islamic items were emphasized, but not the traditional religious and cultural values. In short, Western culture met the indigenous values of Iran on television—but in a paradoxical and contradictory way. The barefoot *rayots* and native middle class could watch Wyatt Earp brandish his six-shooter and bang it out with big Chief Horse Face. Afterwards, there were Ed Sullivan, Jack Benny, Captain Kangaroo and Jerry Lewis, plus *What's My Line?*, followed by US-style beauty pageants. Iranian viewers marvelled how US forefathers of the American West found time to quell the Comanches, plough up Kansas and build the transcontinental railways while spending most of their time in the hay and the bars. One newspaper in Teheran wrote: 'The new Yank is part of a new breed ... He is two parts Gary Cooper and one part hero—that is to say, when things are going well. Otherwise, he becomes two parts Jerry Lewis and one part Boris Karloff.'

It was precisely this sort of programme that was contributing, among other things, to the alienation of the Iranians, thereby sowing the seeds of the revolution. The constant cloying and ingratiating tone of sycophantic adulation for the regime, especially on television, had brought forth a hybrid media—a weird organ of propaganda that was simultaneously a crude kind of cinematography depicting social schism.

Compared to other Islamic countries in the Middle East, where some religious traditions were maintained in the state-owned media, the Iranian system of monarchy had completely and speedily divorced itself from traditional

Islamic tenets to build a secular state. According to the Shah, Iran was supposed to be 'the Sweden of the Middle East', but without the political freedom associated with the modern nation-state system. Iran had already rejected full-scale Westernization in the past—once in the 1906 Constitutional Revolution and again in the 1930s during the physical modernization by Reza Shah, the founder of the Pahlavi dynasty.

It was at the height of these developments that the Islamic Revolution successfully overthrew the monarchy and attempted to restructure the country's mass media system.

'One thing is clear: Iran and its Islamic state have no intention of moving towards either the private capitalist model or the state-owned (completely or partly) television and broadcasting models that characterize the socialist countries. Creating a completely Islamic television model is Iran's future challenge.'

including television. In 1979, it ended up taking less than a year for events in Iran to go from the unthinkable to the inevitable. In February of that year, Ayatollah Khomeini set the seal on Iran's revolution by returning after 14 years of campaigns in exile. At a national referendum two months later, in April 1979, he laid the Pahlavi dynasty, which had ruled the country for over 50 years, to rest.

TELEVISION IN AN ISLAMIC CONTEXT

The importance attached to radio and television as a means of Islamic propagation and cultural transmission was well recognized and documented in Article 175 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. By proclaiming that 'Freedom of publicity and propaganda in the mass media—radio and television—shall be insured on the basis of Islamic principle', the new constitution gave it an independent organization outside any single ministry, placing it under the joint supervision of the Judiciary (High Judiciary Council), legislative and executive branches.⁴ According to the revised and supplementary constitution to be adopted this year, the radio and television organization will remain under the supervision of a council composed of two members from each of these branches and the power of the Leader of the Revolution (or members of the Leadership Council) to appoint the director of the organization for radio and television has been clearly stated.⁵

Iranian television's major role today, being under the complete control of the Islamic state, is the *tabligh*, or propagation, of Islamic culture.⁶ Programme content is checked for compatibility with Islamic tenets. Sovereignty

belongs to Allah (God) and not to the state or people; the Islamic state is a God-fearing (*muttaghi*), not political, state; nationalism is subordinated to the interest of the Islamic community, or *ummah*, which recognizes no racial, geographical or cultural boundaries. The powers of control in the media are exercised through a careful selection of material by the editors and producers to make sure that media content does not violate Islam's traditional ethical and legal codes. Thus special Islamic legal experts are appointed to the boards of the press and broadcasting organizations to advise the staff on Islamic law.

News, information and documentaries are prepared within the framework of Islamic interest. Commercial advertising is not allowed; entertainment and information are recognized as social items and not as neutral manufactured commodities. Gone are the US- and Western-style products. *Dynasty* and *Dallas* are unknown names to the Iranian audience; Hollywood products in general are scarce in the electronic media. With what result?

Serious educational and current affairs programmes get a large segment of television time. Also, newly created local historical series, *Bu Ali Sina* (the life and works of the 10th-century Iranian philosopher and physician known in the West as Avenicena), *Mirza Taghi Khan Amir Kabir* (the ideas and accomplishments of the progressive, reform-minded 19th-century prime minister killed at the hand of a Qajor king), and *Hezar Dastan* (portraying urban life in Iran during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi in the 1930s) all command large audiences.

Interestingly, Japanese features and films dubbed in Farsi are among the most prominently placed foreign products on Iranian TV. The popular Japanese series, *Oshin*, portraying Japanese social and cultural life in the 1930s, is now the most popular feature on Iranian TV, receiving the highest rating for films shown in the last several years. It should be noted that Japanese dress, conduct and film content codes are compatible with Iranian customs and do not offend the Islamic tradition.

There are two national channels: one devoted predominantly to light, popular programmes, the other to educational and cultural discussions and commentaries. Television broadcast hours generally run from 5 p.m. until about midnight, with children's programming getting an extra two hours on Friday—the Islamic weekend or holiday. There is also a daily two-hour programme of news, features and commentaries in Arabic, directed to the Arab population in the south and the Persian Gulf, as well as to the thousands of refugees—and perhaps prisoners—of the Iran-Iraq war.

Political, ideological and foreign policy dimensions of public affairs programmes are emphasized on television. During the Iran-Iraq war, all public communication or electronic media were placed in national defence and mobilization service, especially during city missile attacks.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In his last will and testament, made public immediately after his death, Ayatollah Khomeini wrote:

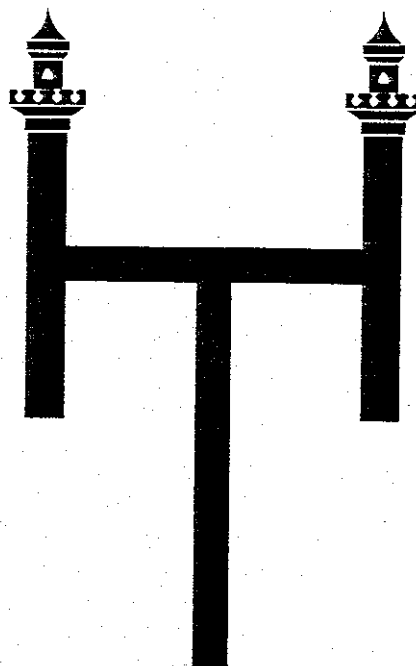
Television films depicting Eastern or Western products made young men and women stray from the normal course of their work, throwing life and industry into oblivion in respect of themselves and their personalities. It also produces pessimism *vis-à-vis* their own being, their country and culture, and about highly valuable works of art and literature, many of which found their way into the art galleries and libraries of the East and West through the treachery of the collectors ...

My advice to the Islamic Consultative Assembly [parliament], to the Guardianship Council, to the Supreme Judicial Council, and to the government, now and in the future, is to maintain the news agencies, the press and the magazines in the service to Islam and in the interest of the country. We must all know that the Western-style freedom degenerates the youth, is condemned in Islam's view and by reason and intellect.⁷

As a spiritual and political leader, as well as propagator of the Islamic Revolution, he always recognized the importance of *tabligh* (propagation). In fact, his will and testament emphasized its role through the media, including television, at least 15 times with regard to domestic and foreign policies.

As the Islamic Iran enters its second decade of revolution, there is no doubt that it has succeeded in the Islamization and institutionalization of many of its political, economic, military, educational, cultural and media sectors. Whether it has created sufficient organizational and managerial infrastructure to implement the policies articulated remains to be seen. Communications infrastructure, especially telecommunications, television and radio and broadcasting, will doubtless be given high priority, especially in the light of economic problems confronting Iran during the war. These post-revolutionary and post-war reconstruction years will be a crucial period of full-scale implementation of the Islamic policies.

In northern Teheran, a massive new television house is already under construction, to be completed by 1990. This complex building, the largest television and radio centre of its kind in the Middle East, is a mark of the Islamic Republic's commitment to modern and expanding systems of electronic and optical-digital media. However, Iran needs highly trained media specialists if this and other similar centres are to be properly and fully operational. Plans are already under way to train journalists, technicians and other mass media personnel through newly established schools of communication/propagation and the existing in-house training programmes. The post-war period should [ought to] also see the relaxed media control and self-censorship that characterized the early years of the revolution and not the eight years of the Iran-Iraq war. One thing is clear: Iran and its Islamic state have no intention of moving towards either the private capitalist model or the state-owned (completely or partly) television and broadcasting models that characterize the socialist countries. Creating a completely Islamic television model is Iran's future challenge.



NOTES

1. These statistics are compiled from a number of sources, including the BBC, *Voice of America* and Unesco.
2. Hamid Mowlana, 'Technology versus Tradition: Communication in the Iranian Revolution', in *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 29, No. 3, Summer 1979, pp. 107-112. See also Mowlana, 'Communication for Political Change: The Iranian Revolution', in *World Communication: A Handbook*, eds. George Gerbner and Marsha Siefert, Longman, New York, 1983.
3. Hamid Mowlana, 'Communication and Cultural Development: A Report from Iran', paper presented at the IIC's Annual Conference, Washington, DC, 12-16 September 1988. For a broader discussion of communication and social change, see Hamid Mowlana and Laurie J. Wilson, *The Passing of Modernity: Communication and the Transformation of Society*, Longman, White Plains, New York, 1989.
4. Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Islamic Propagation Organization, Teheran, no date, p. 77.
5. *Kayhan Havai*, No. 837, 19 July 1989, p. 11.
6. See Hamid Mowlana, 'Communication, Ethics and the Islamic Tradition', in *Communication Ethics and Global Change*, eds. Thomas W. Cooper with Clifford G. Christians, Frances Forde Plude, Robert A. White, Longman, White Plains, New York, 1989.
7. 'Imam Khomeini's Last Will and Testament', in *Kayhan International*, Vol. X, No. 2446, Teheran, 24 June 1989, p. 6.