



## **Satellite TV in Iran and the western cultural assault: From prohibition to conditional freedom**

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### **Abstract**

The Islamic Republic of Iran since 1979 has been rallying for support against the Western World usage of modern ways in a widespread "Cultural Assault". In 1990 Satellite TV was introduced and Iranian's got the chance to watch Western programs but soon The Islamic Republic of Iran declared satellite TV as a threat and prohibited its watching in 1994. Despite government's strong opposition, Iranian citizen's interest in satellite TV has increased over the last couple of decades and the use of satellite TV has become more common. Present article interprets the policies of Iran's system, especially Iran's broadcasting, in dealing with satellite TV while exploring its varying position through multiple religious regimes in Iran. It argues that this challenge will continue to be a pressing one in the eyes of the Iranian government.

**Keywords:** *Communication Policies, Cultural Assault, New Media, Satellite TV, Television, Broadcasting.*

### **Introduction**

Globalization has become a common phenomenon around the world and even Iran finds itself exposed to it. According to most scientists, the process of globalization has gained a lot of momentum in recent years with the help of new media technologies. According to Stevenson (2008, p. 301), in the years after 1980, the American culture spread throughout the world by way of new and improved media access with widespread availability. The result being that Western Culture and Lifestyle, based on ideologies such as Liberalism and Capitalism, has spread dramatically. The most important mediums which have helped to distribute the western culture are the cinema

and satellite TV.

The west could further distribute their culture by way of new media technology and the ever expanding market available for it. The present distribution has already affected the lifestyle of people across the world. According to Tomlinson (2004, p. 38) the cultural effect of globalization and the issues regarding it play an important role in people's lives.

According to some researchers, globalization has impressed on the culture of many governments and nations because of new media technologies developed over the last 30 years. In recent years, most old traditions and domestic values have been replaced with the cultural norms of the west. According to Mutlu (2005, p. 49) advanced media technologies like TV not only create a new identity for citizens, but also cooperate in creating a common global culture. This issue has resulted in most countries of the world trying to find a way to deal with the western culture's penetration. For The Islamic Republic of Iran's managers and authorities, globalization is not only the marker for distributing the system of Capitalism, but is also a western cultural assault on Muslims' beliefs and religious values.

In this article, after explaining the perspective of the Islamic Republic of Iran about their culture's globalization and new media technologies, the government's attempts at fending off the "Cultural Assault" of the west will also be considered.

Then the activity of the satellite TV in Iran from its start to the present day is explained. For this, different functioned researches done on satellite TV are used along with interviews with experts and communication policies mentioned by the government. Also, the

programs and Islamic Republic of Iran's activities which are in dealing with satellite TV are mentioned.

### **Islamic Republic of Iran and dealing with globalization of culture**

The main reason for the sensitivity of the Islamic Republic of Iran is a result of its ideological considerations (Shahin, p. 2013; Muftuoglu, p. 2013). According to Yurdakurban (2007, p. 10), Islamic Republic of Iran has a strong religious root because a "religious scholar" had leadership of their revolution and was able to unite people from the different walks of life against a common enemy, Mohammad Reza Shah. It should be added that, most of the people of Iran are religious; the sensitivity of these people regarding the subject is derived from the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini who has a thesis in Shia Islam and is counted as a credible reference (Chetirge, 1997, p. 40).

After the victory of the Islamic Revolution, through the 400-day period (Milani, 2004, p. 41), Ayatollah Khomeini gained control as the Charismatic leader of the revolution (Farhangi, 2002; Defronzo, 2000; Beshiriye, 2009; Zibakalam, 2008; Cottam, 1989 and Dehgan 1998). Since that time, in keeping with the considerations of Imam Khomeini, who maintained popularity among the people, the country's mold formed according to the Islamic figure. Since he was against the secular system, he introduced strict policies promoting Islamic upbringing in all executive pillars of the country (Dastani, 2003, p. 39). The Islamic shariah was also consulted in the editing of the constitution of Iran and the Islamic Republic's issuance was written in the constitution (Defronzo, 2000, p. 86). According to Cleveland (2008, 480), the governing system of Iran was changed and

it formed a basis of Islamic rule.

The Islamic Government of Iran started a short time after the revolution of 1979 and continued in the leadership of Khomeini. This confederation's government in the country's executive pillars made Iran sensitive to the western globalization process and the distribution of the western culture.

This all was followed by Iran's government adopting new policies, some of which were, the broadcasting organization's expanded activity and the developing of its programs, creating research and studying centers in broadcasting & programming and planning mediums in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. These types of communication policies led to new rules associated with the dealing of modern media technologies. Some of the rules made, with the prevention of cultural assault in mind, were, the prohibiting of the use of satellite equipment (1995), the management and supervision of the ISPs (2004) and the rules regarding cybercrimes (2009).

### **The Scheme of "Cultural Assault" and Its Impacts in Communication Policies**

The phrase "Cultural Assault" was used for the first time by the leader of the revolution on 11<sup>th</sup> June 1992 (Yusefvand, 1998, p. 11). The main focus of Ayatollah Khamenei regarding the "Cultural Assault" was the distribution of western culture throughout the world and its lone-riding through the international field. He asked the authorities to prevent the spreading of western culture in his country. In keeping with this, the country's media activities were

planned and the programs of The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting organization were formed. According to Farhangi (2002, p. 219), cultural assault tries to ruin the values, worth, customs and culture of the masses in a systematic manner. For this, the youth are the target with the goal being to separate them from their Islamic roots. Fakhar Tosi (2010, p. 41) believes that, the western cultural influence is a new form of invasion which unlike military action controls the thought rather than occupying the land.

Herbert Schiller introduced new media technologies for the first time in the 1960's. According to Schiller, the distribution of western culture through new media technologies is unfair as it creates "cultural domination" (Adakli, 2006, p. 34-35). Ruhani (1997, p. 103-104) states that the president of Iran commented on the western cultural invasion in the book "Islamic Republic: challenges and bases" as quoted, *'The West, with its secular system, in fact wants to separate the religious presence in people's personal lives, while the founder of Islamic Republic of Iran believed that religion is not separate from politic. After the revolution, Iran was formed by this confederation and it solved their existing cultural problems. The main goal of the cultural assault was to negate the impact of this confederation and to reestablish the cultural dominance of the west'*

Ayatollah Khamenei also believed that the weakness shown by the Islamic Revolution while dealing with the spread of the western culture was a disappointment. According to him, an Islamic county like Iran shouldn't compromise on the Islamic code of conduct and should be able to manage itself without the allies' help (Nasri, 2000, p. 61). The western world has used its advancement in media to unify a

global culture thereby overshadowing the individual cultures of society. To achieve this they used humanistic sciences and produced products such as new media services, advertisements and communication technologies like social networking. According to Ruhani (1997, p. 20)<sup>1</sup>, in the past, colonialism was in military form, but these days it has acquired the form of victory by cultural dominance with the weapons being replaced by social influence through advanced media technologies such as satellite TV and internet. Therefore, dealing with the cultural assault of the west is an important issue for the Islamic Republic of Iran. So much is the importance of this issue that 322 formal sessions from the third period to the seventh period of the Islamic Parliament from 1988 to 2008 discussed the impact of the western cultural assault.

Following the Leaders statement the governing authorities and especially the clergy attempted widely to reinforce his concept. With the victory of the Islamic Revolution the country had fallen in the hands of the clergy and thus they formed a new level of government in Iran. With this background, naturally and as Shahin (2013, p. 18) emphasized, the primary goal of the clergies became, to preserve the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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<sup>1</sup>Ruhani (1997, p. 20-24) summarized the modern colonialism's characteristics as followed: 1- removing the borders among countries by utilizing the satellite TV 2- the power leans back on science, technology, advertisement and media 3- occupying the thought has been replaced by occupying the lands 4- by increasing the importance of satellite TV, the local mediums have lost their values, 5- reinforcing the international organizations 6- for controlling the countries, they are divided to small countries and 7- codifying the new rules in different countries depending on western countries' willing.

**Satellite TV in Iran**

Satellite TV historically started to work in the 1960's. These satellites were used for the first time by U.S.A. and The Soviet Union, but satellite TV in its comprehensible form became active in the 1980s (Yangin, 1987, p. 22).

In Iran, satellite TV started being watched in 1990. This delay was due to the Islamic Revolution in 1979 followed by the war between Iran and Iraq which continued till 1989. The initial use of the Satellite TV was by the rich elite as it was too expensive for the average citizen to afford. In the years to follow, by attracting people's attention, use of satellite TV became more common. In that period supply was increased, with the product costing around \$500. Today the price at average is one-fifth of that at \$100.

In the primary years, the programs of satellite TV, films and shows were recorded in video cassettes and distributed among the interested buyers. According to Mohsenianrad (2005, p. 1679), most of the shows recorded at that time were programs of Turkish cinema, such as SHOW and STAR, catering to popular demand. After several years of development and the reduced cost of equipment, Satellite TV took the video sets' place and in 1993 through Tehran's Sixth Book Fair, people had become familiar with direct broadcasting of the satellite (Huseyni, 2009, p. 19). After that, because of an increase in demand of satellite equipment, these instruments began entering the country from both the southern and western borders. In 1995, 12-million-people in Tehran (estimated 20% of population) had access to Satellite TV and this included over 500 satellite antennas. Barraclough (2001) mentions regarding the watching of satellite TV in Iran that:

*what is most striking about the popularity of satellite television is the fact that so little of the programming is linguistically compatible with Iranian audiences. While the Turkish speaking Azeri minority and the Arab speaking minority in Khuzestan may have appreciated satellite programming in their respective languages, the Persian speaking majority were largely left out, with just two hours a week from the Voice of America` ( p. 30).*

In a short period of time the interest in satellite TV became widely spread. This rapidly spreading technology got the authorities concerned as the lobbying against it became more and more severe, especially in the Parliament. In January 1995 a law prohibiting the use of satellite equipment was passed. Following this the government took responsibility for the execution of the Law, banning the buying and selling of satellite equipment. This Law was cemented through 11 Articles and 4 Notes with strict implementation. The main purpose of the Law was to deal with the western cultural assault against the Islamic Revolution and the values of the citizens of the Islamic State. It can be said that the goal for the Iranian Government was to reinforce an Islamic Lifestyle and prevent the rapid spread of the western culture. Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidency saw this Law firmly abided by, but after him through the presidency of Khatami some flexibility was created in the execution of this law.

In Iran, by paying attention to the political structure and presidential authority through changing governments, we see a drift in the execution of policies. During the initial period of satellite TV three presidents came and therefore from a practical point of view, we see three different applications of the Law prohibiting the use of



the Satellite. During Rafsanjani's period, the law was established and implemented strictly. After that during the period of Khahtmani the execution was softened. The police were not allowed to enter a house to search without a warrant issued by a judge. This was a practical change as people were given the right to their privacy. These changes inevitably resulted in an increase in the use of Satellite TV

In the first period of Ahmadinejad's presidency, action was taken to implement the law. The police started searching and gathering satellites from apartments. These raids were infrequent and normally prompted by political reasons (Bordbar, 2011, p. 58), for example when the Islamic leader would address the issue of Satellite TV, raids would become more frequent.

According to Mehmet Fuat, by the increase in availability of media in the globalization decade, the limitations among countries is reduced and a form of cultural exchange has become common with the interest in satellite TV being spread all across the globe. Therefore, with the powerful stature at which the western media industry stands, the entire world has an interaction with the western culture. A major share of this interaction is through western TV shows which depict the norms of their society (Dogon, 2008, p.192). According to McQuail, TV has increased our educational capacity and distributed structure and information equally around the world (Mutlu, 2005, p.92). Friedman believes that TV could accomplish the process of globalization and the distribution of western culture around the world (Dogon, 2008, p.194). Stevenson (2008, p. 283) emphasizes on the power of travelling through the screen of a TV while sitting at home.

The satellite TV had interested buyers in most of the big cities in Iran. According to Ahmadkhani (2011, p. 19-20), the main reason for this is the luxurious lifestyle prevalent in the big cities coupled with the cheap, readily available nature of satellite TV equipment. The receiver which is an essential part of the satellite was smuggled into the country, coming from Dubai and Iraq to Iran. A complete set of satellite tools was available for \$100. So, cheap cost was certainly one of the major factors attracting people to this product.

Upon interaction with the citizens in possession of Satellite TV, one can see that they believe it is their right and social freedom to have satellite access. In this regard the opinion of the masses greatly differs from that of the government. A Functioned research shows that between 60 to 90% of the residents of the big cities use satellite TV (Nazari, 2011). Other researches show that in large cities 77% while in small cities and villages 24% have access to satellite TV (Rabyi & Ahmadzade Namvar 2008, p. 65-66).

### **"Cultural Assault" and Developing the Activity IRIB**

It is possible to find a connection between Cultural Assault and Satellite TV. In the 1990s the use of satellite TV technology made the authorities of the Islamic State of Iran rise in opposition of western media. 2 years later the term "Cultural Assault" was coined and this issue developed throughout the country (Yusefvand, 1998, p. 11). All decisions made in the country in the following years were in attempt to prevent the Western Cultural Invasion.

After the statement "Cultural Assault" proliferated all across the country, the authorities, managers and clergy started to interpret and explain the different dimensions of cultural assault present on

various levels of society. Important examples of this statement are the speeches against Satellite TV published in the Keyhan newspaper. Eventually, towards the end of 1994, the law prohibiting the use of satellite TV was passed and the government made special bodies with the purpose of ensuring the law's implementation.

Iran, after obtaining new satellite TV technology and ending its ban on western media started a new era for The Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (2012). As said by Akinci (2005) the media policy of Iran after the revolution in 1979 was to defend against the western culture, but by developing the use of satellite TV, broadcasting in Iran started using latest media technology. An important event regarding this is the decision in Khatami's period to sign a 10 year contract with CNN and BBC (Khaibani, 2007, p. 495).

Another important decision for Iran Broadcasting was the buying of a satellite, as proposed on 11<sup>th</sup> of June 2006 by the Iranian Parliament. The certificate was signed by the parliament on 29<sup>th</sup> June 2008 and a budget of \$250 million was set for this purpose. After this policy all radio and TV channels in Iran were transferred to satellite in 2010. Further, by renting the Hotbird and Arapsat satellites, Iran's own TV channels finally got the chance to be broadcast. In February, 2012, the number of Iranian TV channels available on satellite TV reached 56 (Yegin, 2013, p. 75-76)<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Channel 1 of Iran's TV includes the public programs, channel 2 includes social network, channel 3 includes sport and youth channel 4 includes the scientific network, channel 5 includes Tehran Channel. Moreover, a 24-hour news network- education network, Quran, Documentary, Bazar, and Movie, Namayesh, Shoma and Puya are being broadcasted nationally. Moreover in all 31 provinces, there is a special channel for that province.

Iran TV channels for citizens who live abroad are Jamejam 1, 2, 3- El-

Zargami (2010) the head of Iran Broadcasting emphasized the need for unthreaded channels of satellite in Iran. In his speech, he introduced Iran Broadcasting as a high potential department and added that Iran's TV channels and programs have the capacity to compete against satellite TV channels. In spite of the authorities' considerations, fans of satellite TV in Iran kept increasing.

### **Satellite TV in Iran: From Prohibition to Conditional Freedom**

As it was mentioned before, in spite of the government's efforts to reduce the spread of satellite TV's influence, the number of fans in Iran continues to increase. Functioned researches show that a minimum of 60% to a maximum of 85% of people watching satellite TV are situated in larger, more developed cities. The most important center for the collection of statistics regarding the use of satellite TV is the Iran Broadcasting Research center. In April, 2010, a conversation with an official at this center revealed, that based on existing statistics about 60% of people in large cities have satellite access. Also, based on statistics presented by Bicheranlu, more than 60% of people in cities have satellite TV for watching.

Ali Jannati, the current prime minister of the Islamic Guidance and Culture Organization believes that prohibiting the watching of satellite TV is neither suitable, nor profitable. Jannati said in a discussion that: by paying attention to the recent development and improvement of the latest media technologies we can see that preventing or prohibiting their use is a very difficult task. According

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Alam news network, El-Koser religious network, Seher foreign language networks 1, 2, 3- English language news network Press TV, Arabic Film, I Film, and Spanish Language network Hispan.

to him, based on latest statistics 70% of the citizens of Tehran have access to satellite TV and this number is only going to increase in the time to come (IRNA News Agency, 2013). Other researches show different figures, with one suggesting that 77% to 85% of people in large cities watch satellite provided television (Nazari, 2011).

In relation to the reason for the Iranian citizen's interest in satellite TV, we find a variety of issues for the local population. Based on research conducted in Tehran by the Iran Broadcasting Research Centre (2012) in 2009, the main reason for the interest in satellite TV is the unsatisfactory quality of local Iranian television. 77% of all repliers in the survey cited this reason, stating Iranian television programs as being monotonous and boring.

According to Alikhah (2012, p. 2), in spite of the applications of the Iranian system, such as the promoting of local TV programs by Iran Broadcasting and prohibiting the use of satellite TV, the public interest in satellite TV has only increased. Regarding this issue, it is necessary to mention the role of minorities in the spreading of satellite TV. As it was mentioned before Iran is a multi-cultural country where Turks, Persians, Kurds, Arabs, Lors and Baluch all live together. The minorities are naturally more interested in programs depicting their cultures, in their languages which are not available on local television. A research conducted (Rasoli, Marofi & Khanchesephehr, 2013: p. 73) showed that the lack of local television programs suitable for ethnic cultures make members of those cultural groups more inclined to watch Satellite TV. Also, according to findings of the Iran Broadcasting Research Center, the lack of leisure and entertainment in locally produced television programs is an

important factor in the increase of the audience for western TV programs.

As we know, one of the main applications of television is to provide entertaining programs for the amusement of the audience (Mutlu, 2008, p. 28). According to Postman (2012, p. 36), the main purpose of television in our daily lives is entertainment. Tabatabayi (2010, p. 83) also believes that the entertainment programs of new media like satellite TV caused the closing and convergence of culture internationally as well as in Iran and many researches support this claim (Afkhami, 2007; Tabatabayi, 2010; Dindar & Heyderbeygi, 2011; Nazari, 2011; Rasoli, Marofi & Khançesepehr, 2013).

People, interested in accessing latest information and news nowadays, refer to satellite TV. According to Ahmadkhani (2011, p. 118), Iranian citizens don't trust the news broadcasted by The Iranian Broadcasting and know it to be single dimensional and biased. Therefore to access real and accurate information people refer to proper news networks such as the BBC. According to some journalists such as Kianiand Sadegi (2013) by using new connecting technologies, we can access news and information from around the world. According to Tomlinson (2004, 18), new media technologies provide access to news and information readily from our homes. Also Gerbner (2005, p. 94) emphasized on presenting the news and vital information by new mediums on a large scale to different social groups of addressees.

One of the other reasons for the watching of satellite TV by the Iranian citizens is the satisfaction obtained from watching it. The link between Satellite TV and the satisfaction of the Iranian citizens was

proven by some researchers like Nazari (2011), Dindar & Heydarbeygi (2011), Metani, Hasanzade, & Farhangi (2012).

According to Afkhami (2007, p. 20), young people and adults have different preferences while watching satellite channels. According to him, the younger audience is more inclined to watch entertaining programs, whereas the elders prefer news and documentary programs. Throughout this research, the reasons for the spread of satellite TV can be summarized into four points. Entertainment of the audience, transmission of vital information, providing a platform for news broadcasting and finally connection of social and cultural identities. As the level of intellect and education of the audience increases they are able to better take advantage of the information available (Metani, Hasanzade, & Farhangi, 2012: p. 197-198).

In summation, most of the citizens mentioned their reason for watching satellite TV as being entertainment, which is a need not normally satisfied, as the country's policies are governed by an ideological system.

### **Conclusion**

The satellite TV in Iran has 20 years of history, which in spite of the opposition from the governing system saw a rise in the people's interest on a daily basis. Iran's political system prohibited the use of satellite technology as well as the watching of satellite TV by Iranian citizens. As mentioned by the researcher, despite the prohibition, the popularity continued to increase, the reason being that satellite TV happens to be a great source of entertainment, as well as knowledge and information.

The vast amount of exposure carried by television coupled with the rapidly increasing number of viewers, affects the customs and cultural norms of society having a huge effect on the lives of the citizens. It is natural that the entertainment is limited to within the house, so using the basis of Mabudi's reaserch (2012, p. 122-123), the method of life of the citizens is divided into two separate phases, the life at home and the life in public. The public life, in the outdoors, is formal and follows the basis of the Islamic Regime's laws and norms. At home the method is formed by the influence of satellite TV. The difference between the two is, quite simply, the difference between the norms of society of the west and Iran, be it dress code/fashion, relationships, style or food.

According to Yangin (1987, p. 17), new media technologies have the ability to effect societies and create changes to its very roots. Amongst most new media technology the Television is regarded as the most powerful tool for spread of culture, news, information etc. The reason for its success is its sturdiness, variety and minimal cost (Kuchuk 2005, p. 308).

Other reasons for watching satellite TV in Iran can be explained by the theory of Uses and gratifications which the researcher pointed out. Elihu Katz explained the mentioned theory as follows (Yaylgu, 2006):

‘Humans include social and emotional needs. According to this theory, users solve some part of their needs. This solving is related directly to humans' freedom in selecting’ (p. 62).

One of the other attractions of satellite TV is its modernity. This



issue can be defined as the development of modernity by communication technologies. The theory was stated for the first time by Daniel Lerner during 1950. According to Lerner (2005, p. 653-654), modern communication technologies include the ability to change the thoughts and beliefs of traditional societies with regard to new issues. In Iran, the effects of this theory can be seen, especially among the youth who are more acquainted with modern technologies such as satellite TV and Internet (Garib, p. 2004, 5).

As mentioned before, satellite TV is becoming more and more common among the citizens of Iran. Regardless of this, the government continues its defense against the western cultural assault, implementing policies in keeping with basis set by the Islamic Republic System. The conclusion, therefore, can be drawn that this challenge will persist, although preventing the spread of new media technology is almost certainly impossible, the battle against Cultural Assault will continue in Iran.

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