

Public Diplomacy Council, courtesy of Alan Heil

FACT SHEET ON INTERNATIONAL BROADCASTING TO IRAN

June 25, 2009

“The winner (in reporting) of the Iranian protests was neither old media nor new media, but a hybrid of the two.” ---*The Economist*, June 18, 2009

“Iranian authorities are seeking to exercise a stranglehold on press coverage of massive unrest after the disputed election results there, but they’re having trouble stopping a combination of old-fashioned, shoe-leather journalism and new social media platforms.” --David Folkenflik, NPR’s All Things Considered, June 20, 2009

“We are getting hundreds of videos, thousands of calls, probably tens of thousands of emails. It’s the most incredible thing I have ever experienced.” ---Alex Belida, Acting Director, VOA’s Persian News Network

The major actors:

VOA’s Persian News Network (PNN). On TV eight original hours a day, including a new morning program. These are repeated around the clock and streamed on line. Five hours are simulcast on radio and there is a one hour radio only program. PNN is the leading international broadcaster to Iran. In a 2009 survey conducted by InterMedia Survey Inc., the Voice’s Persian TV service reached at least 29.5 percent of adults in Iran each week (more than 15 million.) These numbers undoubtedly have increased considerably since the Iranian presidential election June 13 and protests in its aftermath. Direct visits to PNN’s website (<http://www.voanews.com/persian/>) have increased 800 percent since early June. VOA has been inundated with videos, pictures, emails, and telephone calls from inside Iran. It has created a dedicated Twitter account and posted material on other sites, including You Tube (<http://youtube.com/user/PNNVideo>).

BBC World Service TV in Persian. The service, launched in January, expanded its schedule to 13 hours a day during the recent crisis. BBC estimates its audience in Iran at seven million, but Iran threatened on June 24 to downgrade relations with Britain and the two countries have expelled pairs of diplomats. An Iranian government spokesman accused BBC and VOA of “creating and intensifying ethnic tensions and dividing the country” and warned against any email to these channels, “the control rooms of the recent uprising.” According to an analysis by BBC World Service monitoring, Iranian state TV has covered events almost exclusively based on statements and rallies of the government or of President Ahmedinijad. The views of the three defeated presidential candidates have received little or no coverage.

RFE/RL’s Radio Farda. This around the clock network has greatly expanded its shortwave frequencies since the present crisis began. At some peak hours, it is on ten frequencies simultaneously. Ninety nine percent of Iranian households have television, and only 25 percent listen to radio. In the February survey, Radio Farda reached 2.5 percent of Iranian adults weekly (around a million and a third listeners).

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Despite Iranian jamming, that total is believed to be somewhat greater today. Radio Farda reported a doubling in the use of proxy servers and web censorship circumvention software over last weekend.

Impact. Iranian official attacks against Western media, particularly the VOA and BBC, have intensified greatly this week. Iran has jammed PNN and BBC Persian TV as well as Radio Farda intermittently. But the U.S. broadcasters have beamed PNN through five different satellites, and six channels. Radio Farda, since jamming began June 14, has added five to ten frequencies at prime listening hours. VOA's full service coverage of events has encompassed exclusive videos of protest marches in Iran and the government's violent crackdown as well as reactions from the United States and other countries to the evidence of fissures in Tehran's clerical leadership.

There was the stunning video of the agonizing death on June 22 of Neda Agha-Soltan, the young woman murdered in a Tehran plaza by a bystander deployed by the regime. Within a few hours, Neda became a symbol of popular resistance to a flawed election. Hundreds of thousands of channels and delivery systems --- digital, print, websites, TV and radio --- relayed the images of her last moments. Juan Mercado of the Philippines *Daily Inquirer* reported that the Agha-Soltan video was transmitted from Tehran through server proxies to evade government censors. "An Iranian," he wrote, "slipped copies to *The Guardian* in London, to the Voice of America, and to five contacts in Europe. CNN broadcast the film. In less than 24 hours, Neda was transformed, on the web, from a nameless victim into an icon of the Iranian protest movement."

The Khamenei regime struck back. Iran expelled the BBC's Tehran bureau chief, and accused Britain and the United States of fomenting the country's most explosive uprising in Iran in 30 years. It accused the BBC and VOA of orchestrating the uprising and seeking to divide Iranians. On June 25, VOA Director Danforth W. Austin responded. In an interview with *News Talk*, one of several PNN daily public affairs programs, he denied Iran's allegations that international broadcasters, including VOA, worked to threaten the country's territorial integrity. "That's simply not true," he said.

The VOA Director added that the Voice would continue to give Iranians a full and balanced view of events inside their country and around the world. "That is our promise to the people of Iran," Austin said. "The access to free and credible information is very important... Right now, the VOA is the only way many people in Iran can find out what is going on in their own country. A free flow of information is a fundamental human value regardless of religion or background."

Many other media have focused on the role of international broadcasters, and particularly VOA, in meeting this challenge. Among them: the Associated Press, United Press International, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, the *Times* of London, Agence France Presse, CNN, NBC Nightly News, National Public Radio, the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*. In an editorial, that paper concluded: "U.S. cable news channels are carrying first person reports from inside Iran, too. But what distinguishes VOA is its long experience in reaching foreign audiences living under regimes that prohibit the free flow of information. That's an especially valuable capacity right now in regard to Iran -- one that should not be overlooked or underestimated in debate about how the U.S. government is dealing with events there."