

Date: Thu, 20 Jan 2011 12:45:14 -0500

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From: Lloyd Etheredge <lloyd.etheredge@policyscience.net>

Subject: 207. Red Team: Rethinking Political Change - The Daily Show model. Fwd: Parazit and "VOA program enthralls Iranians, irks their government"

Dear Dr. Fischhoff and Colleagues:

It could be very interesting for a Red Team project to rethink political change and to use The Daily Show as a model of creative, progressive ideas that might be combined with new communications technology.

Stewart and his writers have created a form of humor that makes people laugh and (also) care, that creates a wider network of intelligence and decency. It makes the case for human rights and sanity in a new way especially (but not exclusively) with young people. What can we learn? What are the possibilities beyond the water's edge? Might the new model eventually be part of world politics/international relations textbooks?

The Parazit Example

May I bring to your attention the enclosed story that appeared in The Washington Post over the holidays? It adds to the case for thinking that a Red Team project would be worthwhile. "Parazit" is a low-budget Voice of America show, in a similar spirit, that engages Iranian audiences. And whose Facebook numbers also send messages.

The project may be uniquely suited to Iran ("Islam, the religion about which nothing is funny" - Stephen Colbert) but could the innovation be used somehow to move the peace process forward in Israel? To nurture a healthier political culture in Russia? Or (gingerly)

by South Korean humorists [do they exist?] to engage North Korean audiences? To encourage human dignity and rights in China and (in a Confucian spirit) to support genuine authenticity and sincerity by government officials?

Interesting questions about human psychology, political change, wisdom, and new ways of thinking about a better and more secure world . . .

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Expats' 'Daily Show'-style VOA program enthralles Iranians, irks their government

By Tara Bahrapour

Washington Post Staff Writer

Friday, December 31, 2010; 10:48 PM

For the past 30 years, state-approved television in Iran has consisted largely of Islamic prayers, interviews with government ministers, melodramatic soap operas and talk shows in which mullahs expound on the depravities of the West and the righteousness of their own society.

Iranians responded by jury-rigging satellite dishes to spice up their entertainment choices with offerings from abroad. "[Baywatch](#)" was a longtime favorite.

But lately, a couple of irreverent expats in Washington have captivated Iranians with a show that pokes fun at the absurdities of life in the Islamic republic.

Operating out of Voice of America's Persian News Network, Kambiz Hosseini and Saman Arbabi have started a weekly program, "Parazit," that has drawn comparisons to Jon Stewart's "Daily Show" for its satiric take on [Iran's](#) news of the day.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is a favorite target.

"His bloopers are fantastic," said Arbabi, 37, as he and Hosseini, 35, cozied up to pints of Guinness in a District bar. "The same way Bush was - he says a lot of dumb things without thinking about it, and at the same time he's president of one of the most important countries in the region. And they have nukes."

Hosseini grinned. In one segment, he said, "Saman and I sort of reenacted how when his family's asleep, he goes under the blanket and has a flashlight and goes on Facebook," which is blocked in Iran.

To the dismay of Ahmadinejad's government, the show has struck a chord in Iran. "Their following is incredible," said Steve Redisch, VOA's executive editor.

Although VOA doesn't know how many people watch "Parazit" via their forbidden satellite dishes, posts from ["Parazit's" Facebook page](#) have been viewed more than 17 million times in the past month - a staggering number compared with other VOA programming. The show's YouTube channel generates another 45,000 hits each week.

Iranians have coined a new term: "Paraziti," or "like 'Parazit,' " with fans dressing as Arbabi or sending in images of their families watching the show.

"You'll see 18 Iranians of all ages - from an old bald man to teenage girls - all sitting quietly, watching 'Parazit,' " Arbabi said.

It is a scene that couldn't have taken place if the two had not joined the exodus of Iranians who left the country after the 1979 revolution.

The making of a hit

The show's creators met in 2007, after Arbabi, a VOA videographer, had an [Iranian-style music video](#) accepted by the Tribeca Film Festival and Hosseini interviewed him for Radio Free Europe, where he was working at the time.

Both were born in Iran, but their lives had taken starkly different paths after the revolution that ended the reign of the shah and brought the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to power.

Arbabi, who was 6 at the time, quickly learned to lead a double life, lying at his Tehran school about the fact that his family owned a VCR, played cards, drank liquor and listened to VOA radio.

He left in 1985 at age 12, when 13-year-old boys were being drafted to fight in Iran's war against [Iraq](#). His family eventually settled in Rockville, where Arbabi embraced American culture, playing varsity football, dating girls, playing drums and listening to Led Zeppelin.

Hosseini, an actor, writer and stage director who grew up in the cities of Rasht and Mashhad, didn't leave Iran until he was much older. He immigrated to the United States a decade ago to follow a girlfriend and wound up at VOA as an art critic and the host of a cultural show.

Both Hosseini and Arbabi became U.S. citizens, and neither has returned to Iran. But they also haven't left it behind. "We used to hang out and just vent," said Arbabi, who got his satirical bent from his late father, a chemist-turned-architect who loved dark comedy and biting political cartoons.

Combining their frustration with Iran's status quo with their love for high-energy clowning around, Arbabi and Hosseini came up with an idea to satirize the Iranian news.

It was a far cry from regular VOA fare, which is funded by the U.S. government. But they were given a 10-minute segment on another VOA show. They called it "Parazit," which means "static," a reference to the Iranian government's repeated attempts to jam foreign satellite programming.

It launched shortly before the June 2009 presidential election in Iran. At first, their treatment of the election was lighthearted.

Arbabi, who with his knit hat and fingerless gloves looks more like a grunge rocker than a world leader, declared his candidacy.

But when the disputed election resulted in the largest and most violent anti-government protests since the 1979 Islamic revolution, "Parazit" took on a grimmer, more urgent cast. As stories came out of Iran of young people shot on the streets and raped and tortured in prisons, Hosseini and Arbabi tapped into their countrymen's growing cynicism and anger.

"Those were my brother, my sister, my friends in the street," Hosseini said of [the Green Movement](#), as it came to be called.

Satire amid sadness

"Parazit" "has been compared to 'The Daily Show,' but there's a lot of darkness to it. There's a lot of sad news," said Arbabi, who lives in Southwest Washington. "We have to walk a fine line. We come from that generation of kids who got up in Iran and protested the government. We share their politics, so we echo their voice."

By 2010, the show was so popular that the duo were given their own half-hour slot. With about 200 employees, the Persian News Network is VOA's largest foreign-language service, reaching an estimated 19.5 percent of adults in Iran, according to VOA. (Those who don't have satellite dishes can view "Parazit" online or watch it on bootlegged DVDs.)

Most Persian News Network programming is made up of straight news and commentary. The hosts are older than Hosseini and Arbabi and generally don't go on camera in Sex Pistols T-shirts, nose rings, and green-and-black-painted fingernails. "I don't know if VOA has ever done anything like this," said Redisch, who has been thrilled with the results.

"Parazit" has more than 200,000 Facebook fans. Many of them write in to praise it, criticize it or offer up the latest unintentionally funny material from inside Iran.

"We have 70 million correspondents," said Arbabi, referring to Iran's population. "They

show us what the priorities are in Iran."

It was viewers who urged them to cover a story in which the Iranian government promised to give a free apartment to any athlete who brought home a gold medal from the Asian Games in November. But when a woman won the gold for wushu, a Chinese martial art, they reneged, saying she had to be married to get the apartment.

The announcement was not popular with Iranians, or with the show's hosts, who frequently dress down Iranian government ministers by name.

"We were like, 'Dude, give her her house,' " said Hosseini, who lives in Shirlington. The government relented, though it is unclear how much "Parazit" was a factor.

Fascinated and amused

The duo's Western-style forthrightness, combined with their innate understanding of the East, mirrors the schizophrenic relationship many young Iranians have with their society.

Sometimes it is enough to simply repeat the news from Iran, as Hosseini did in one segment: "The representative of the supreme leader at the University of Yazd said that since the skin of one's elbow is similar to the skin of a man's testicles, people should refrain from wearing short-sleeved shirts."

Hosseini paused, a tiny smile tugging at his lips.

"This is really real news," he said. "This guy really said that."

For Hosseini, growing up in post-revolution Iran provides insight into what will connect with viewers. "I know the taboos," he said. "I went to school. I worked at newspapers. I was in theater. And honestly I was sick and tired of the lack of transparency of journalism in Iran."

Persian culture, with its elaborate politeness rituals, is, after all, the furthest thing from

the directness of Jon Stewart.

"You have a half-hour [interview] with these people and the whole time the journalist is going, 'Oh, I'm sorry. . . . Can I get you something? . . . If you don't mind, I want to ask you this.' . . . No - I just sit in front of people and say, 'What the [expletive]?' "

In Iran, his willingness to do that has fascinated and amused many.

"I try to watch it every week, and if I miss it for any reason I download it from YouTube," said a 27-year-old army officer stationed in Tehran.

A 29-year-old mechanical engineer in Karaj, a small city near the capital, was more critical, saying, "It doesn't add anything to one's knowledge, so it's only good for a laugh." Still, if he happens to be home when it's on, he watches.

The format is not one that would work in all VOA markets, Redisch said.

"Satire has got to find its audience," he said. "I don't know whether something like 'Parazit' would go over with an Afghan audience or a Pakistani audience or an Indonesian audience."

But in Iran, he said, "it's almost a perfect program for a perfect audience. They're very skeptical, they ask a lot of questions, and they don't always take at face value what's being said."

Iranian officialdom has been less gushing. The government has described Hosseini and Arbabi as "deceitful, belligerent spies who are enemies to the people of Iran," a line the show has gleefully incorporated into its teaser.

Hosseini and Arbabi said officials also launched an anti-"Parazit" show. "The guy talks just like 'Parazit,' " Arbabi said. But, he added, "he's not funny."

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