

Taming the Persians: US Public Diplomacy and Iran

Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman & Saimum Parvez*

Public diplomacy is going through perplexing changes and challenges due to technological innovations and renewed interest in the 'soft power' approach. This article analyses the methods and tactics of US public diplomacy regarding Iran. It discusses the close relationship between propaganda and public diplomacy and how different tactics and initiatives have been employed by the US in order to assist pro-democracy campaigns within Iran. The history of US broadcasting in Iran is also discussed to shed light on the changing dimensions of public diplomacy. However, the article argues that the intricacies of contemporary methods of communications and the diversities of the audiences in Iran can offset American propaganda techniques. It suggests from contemporary history that Cold War-style public diplomacy may not work in the case of Iran, since younger Persians have access to alternative viewpoints that neutralise or refract the effects of Western propaganda.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, Iran has been making headlines for its defiant stand against the Western powers on a number of issues. These powers suspect that Iran is running a clandestine nuclear programme for military purpose. However, the US and its allies have yet to find any solution to deter a nuclear Iran. They have tried to bully the current conservative regime, spent millions of dollars to bring about a moderate government, and yet, all these steps brought anything but success. Many hoped that imposing

* Mohammad Sajjadur Rahman is currently teaching as an Assistant Professor of International Relations at the University of Chittagong, Bangladesh. Mr. Rahman's areas of interest include international terrorism, political Islam, South Asian affairs, nationalism, refugee studies, etc. His email address issajjadur.rahman.ir@gmail.com. Saimum Parvez joined the department of International Relations of University of Chittagong as a Lecturer in 2010. He currently researches globalisation and its impact on the media. Apart from academic engagements, Mr. Saimum is involved in script writing, documentary making and short film production. He can be reached at saimumparvez@gmail.com.

sanctions through the UN Security Council may encourage Iran to discard its nuclear program. But the reality is that Security Council members like China and Russia are now more dependent on Iranian energy than ever. So, for the time being, Iran can sleep well on its expensive and lucrative 'energy' pillow.

Apart from the politics of sanctions, military action against Iran was preferred by many strategic analysts. But the kind of Iranian regime and unique Persian culture make it obvious that any kind of military adventure would be an expensive affair. Whether it is surgical or otherwise, an air strike will inflame Iranian nationalism and people will rally around the existing regime. It seems that it is not the Generals but the propagandists who are fighting a new kind of war against Iran. The United States is funding billions of dollars for radio, television, internet and satellite based broadcasting – popular among the tech-loving youth of Iran. These programmes aim to assist pro-democracy groups through public diplomacy initiatives such as limited cultural and educational fellowships.

Of late, using soft power has become a preferable choice in order to topple the existing Islamic Republic through popular uprisings. This article analyses the US' efforts in three parts. The first part seeks to understand the nature of public diplomacy, with particular emphasis on the history and development of propaganda. The second section provides a background of bilateral tensions between Iran and the US and describes how international broadcasting operates in Iran. Finally, the article raises questions about the credibility and effectiveness of American propaganda and public diplomacy initiatives regarding Iran.

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: NEW IMPORTANCE AND CHANGING DIMENSIONS

The term 'Public Diplomacy' has been in use within the US since 1965 to describe transnational cultural propaganda and press management activities. According to the State Department, "public diplomacy seeks to promote the national interest of the United States through understanding, informing and influencing foreign audience."¹ Public diplomacy includes efforts by the government of one state to influence public or elite opinion of another state for the purpose of persuading these foreign entities to

1 Cull J. Nicholas, Culbert David and David Welch, *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion, A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present*, p.327

support its policies, ideals and ideas.² This type of diplomacy operates in three dimensions. The first is, to communicate on day-to-day issues and to align diplomacy with the news cycle. The second dimension is strategic communication, managing overall perceptions regarding one's country. The third is long-term development of lasting relationships with key individuals through scholarships, exchanges, seminars etc.³

The practice of diplomacy is also influenced by the development of new technologies and transportation systems. For example, the mobility of the diplomats increased greatly after the invention of steamship and railways in the nineteenth century. Another important invention was the telegraph, which enabled direct and speedy communications between governments as well as between embassies. The 20th century saw further advancement in science and technology, thus making air travel possible. Information technology has made the world smaller by effective communication techniques. The Internet and new media have emerged as powerful mediums for worldwide dissemination of information to an audience of highly educated and influential members.⁴ Even before the inception of this new media, television had been considered as a significant tool affecting diplomatic manoeuvres. In the age of television, the importance of appearance and gesture increased. Television effectively changed the old conventions of diplomatic protocol. Because of television, it became possible to analyse and understand diplomacy in terms of a theatre metaphor.⁵ Like the theatre, diplomats have to appear before a large audience where their performance depends not only on what they speak but also their body language and movement. Therefore, television intensifies the visual aspects of the diplomatic theatre. As an ideal medium for conveying nonverbal messages, television therefore accentuated the symbolic aspects of diplomatic signalling.⁶

Nowadays, however, it is not easy to make distinctions among the audience. Classical diplomacy relied on communications targeted for an exclusive and clearly defined audience. But the television and new media tend to engage public opinion and do not allow differentiated messages.

2 Potter E.H., "Canada and the New Public Diplomacy," *Discussion Papers in Diplomacy*, no. 81, Netherlands Institute of International Relations "Clingendael," 2002, p. 3.

3 Leonard M., "Diplomacy by Other Means," *Foreign Policy*, 132, 2002, p.50

4 Kurbalija J., "Diplomacy in the Age of Information Technology," in J. Melissen (ed.), *Innovations in Diplomatic Practice* (London: Macmillan and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 185.

5 Cohen R., *Theatre of Power: The Art of Diplomatic Signaling* (London and New York: Longman, 1987)

6 Jonsson Christer and Hall Martin, *Essence of Diplomacy*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, p.94

The trouble is that in the modern world, with close press surveillance and instant communication, the wind carries two voices in both directions; adversary and constituency listens on each other's opinion.⁷

This has a deep impact on the diplomatic negotiations that tend Western powers, especially USA, to engage more in public diplomacy and to exploit the positive sides of media. For that reason, diplomats are increasingly becoming engaged with "media diplomacy."⁸ Apart from this, "news management" by the governments is perhaps greatest in the realm of foreign affairs. Journalists often have to rely on officials who are 'primary definers'. References to alleged national security threats are frequently invoked to keep the media compliant. This is particularly evident where strong domestic constituencies contesting official sources are relatively rare.⁹

According to the present day advocates of public diplomacy, diplomats need to transform themselves from being reporters and lobbyists on reactive issues to "shapers of public debates around the world."¹⁰ In order to shape this public debate and exploit the new media in her own interest, the US has initiated various measures to strengthen public diplomacy with Iran. Iranian people have a complicated relationship with the US. The older generation had personal and professional links and sometimes positive memories of the United States, as many of them were educated at American universities.

There is a possibility that these positive memories have trickled down to Iranian youth, though official media routinely denounces America as "The Great Satan."¹¹ As almost half of Iran's population has been born since the 1979 revolution, it is very significant for American public diplomacy to maintain an active engagement with this segment. Without any formal diplomatic relations with Iran, the only option for the US is to engage in people-to-people diplomacy. Sports, however, played an important role in engaging people of the two countries. The basketball, ping pong and wrestling teams of America and Iran have been competing internationally,

7 Eban A., *The New Diplomacy* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1983), p. 356

8 "Diplomacy in the Media Age: Three Models of Uses and Effects," *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 12 (2001) p.1-28

9 Herman E.S., "The Media's Role in US Foreign Policy," *Journal of International Affairs*, 47 (1993) p.23

10 Leonard M., with Stead C. and Smewing C., '*Public Diplomacy*' London, The Foreign Policy Centre, 2002, p. 6.

11 See "Iran's Love Affair With America," <http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0119/p09s02-coop.html>

participating in tournaments in each other's country from 2006.¹² However, since 2009, four similar sports exchanges were planned but later cancelled by the Iranian foreign ministry. Similarly, American universities have begun to initiate small-scale efforts to try to bring Iranian students to the US for long-term studies. Additionally, from 2006-8, eighteen Iranian university students were part of a US government program that brought them to American universities to study English, and they served as Persian language teaching assistants in US classrooms.¹³

Along with these small-scale sports and educational exchange programs, the US is using its strong broadcasting team to engage in people-to-people diplomacy. American officials are now more interested in harnessing new media, social networks like Facebook, Twitter, blogs, group e-mail, websites and You Tube, as tools of propaganda to win hearts and minds of the Iranian population, especially of the younger tech-loving generation. Following the 9/11 attacks, US government broadcasters (Radio, Television and social media) received a considerable boost in terms of funding to reach Muslim audiences. A coalition information centre was also established under the auspices of the White House to oversee public diplomacy right after the incident. This coalition now coordinates a wider public diplomacy campaign against anti-Americanism worldwide, and Iran is one of the main targets of this initiative.

PROPAGANDA: AN ESSENTIAL BUT 'BAD' WORD?

Though contemporary authors set public diplomacy apart from propaganda, both concepts, in contrast to direct government-to-government communication, rely on indirect communication. Propaganda is perhaps the most crucial part of the US' contemporary public diplomacy. It is because of the fact that propaganda is seen as an essential tool to win support from the population of an enemy country and can sensitise them to be united for an uprising. This support of the people has been always crucial, both in wartime military operations and in shaping government policies. Winning hearts and minds has become critical in achieving total

12 See <http://www.america.gov/st/sports-english/2008/July/200807241441550pnative0.19125.html> ; <http://www.payvand.com/news/08/jul/1240.html>; <http://www.america.gov/st/washfileenglish/2007/January/20070125154816attocnich0.453747.html>

13 US International Broadcasting: Is anybody listening?- Keeping the US Connected, Report of Committee on Foreign Relations, US Senate, 111th Congress, 2nd Session, June 09, 2010, Washington, p. 21

victory and it is not wrong to say that ‘public opinion wins war’.¹⁴ Therefore, psychological operations or *psyops* seek to convey selected information to targeted audience in order to influence their behaviour and government policy.¹⁵

Among the various psychological operations, propaganda is one of the most common and extensively used techniques. Basically, the word ‘propaganda’ was neutral, but the way it was used for notorious purposes during the Second World War, by both the axis and allied powers, has given it a permanent negative connotation. The word ‘propaganda’ originated with the Roman Catholic Commission of Cardinals set up by the Pope in 1622 for the propagation of Catholic faith against the protestant movement.¹⁶ Though propaganda is only a tool, it can be either positive or negative. In the course of 20th century, propaganda became associated with words such as ‘lies’, ‘deceit’ or ‘brainwashing’. Modern political propaganda can be defined as the deliberate attempt to influence the opinions of an audience through the transmission of ideas and values for the specific purpose, consciously designed to serve the interest of the propagandists and their political masters, either directly or indirectly.¹⁷ In other words, propaganda is “the systemic propagation of information or ideas by an interested party, especially in a tendentious way in order to encourage or instil a particular attitude or response.”¹⁸

Propaganda can also be defined as “the use of any form of communication to spread or reinforce certain beliefs for political purposes.”¹⁹

Entertainment, education and persuasion are the three most important elements of propaganda. A successful propaganda campaign will combine all three of these. The entertainment elements attract the audience, while the educational aspect decreases the perception that the message is propaganda. Unlike education, which seeks to present an objective view, propaganda is biased through the selective use of facts, although the bias

14 Knightley, P. *The First Casualty: From the Crimea to Vietnam, the War Correspondents as Hero, Propagandist, and Myth Maker*, New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich. 1975, p. 315

15 Scot Macdonald, *Propaganda and Information Warfare in the Twenty-first Century: Altered Images and Deception Operations*, Routledge 2007, p.32

16 Nicholas Cull J., David Culbert and Welch David, *Propaganda and Mass Persuasion, A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present*, ABC-CLIO Inc. 2003, p. 327

17 Welch David, ‘Powers of Persuasion’, *History Today* 49 , August 1999, p. 24

18 H. Qualter Terrence, *Opinion Control in the Democracies*, London: Macmillan, 1985, p. 124

19 Scot Macdonald, *Propaganda and Information warfare in the Twenty-first century, altered images and deception operations*, Routledge 2007, p. 32

is usually subtle.²⁰ The difference between propaganda and education is very interesting. If a persuasion attempt fails, it is called propaganda; if it succeeds, it is called education.

Propaganda has been a powerful weapon throughout history. At the close of First World War, many Germans concluded that British propaganda had contributed significantly to their defeat.²¹ In the Second World War, both the Nazis and Allied forces used propaganda as a tool to win the war. Before starting the war, Nazis poisoned the minds of Germans to allow the extermination of the Jews. Perhaps one of the most conspicuous examples of the power of broadcasting propaganda is the usage of radio to instigate genocide in Rwanda in 1994. The international community did little to counter the propaganda, while the Hutu extremists used mobile radio to incite people to participate in the mass killings of the Tutsis. Even when the Hutus were in camps in neighbouring countries, the same Hutu leaders who had incited the killing of the Tutsis used radio to order Hutu refugees to remain in the cholera-infested camps and not to return to Rwanda for fear of Tutsi retaliation. The Hutus stayed in the camps and some 3,000 people died from waterborne diseases.²² Also in Bosnia and Croatia in the 1990s, radio stations broadcasted propaganda that aroused ethnic animosities and hatreds. More recently, the 9/11 Commission Report recognised the power of propaganda in 2004 when it recommended the use of various types of psychological warfare to improve America's image overseas.

US- IRAN RELATIONS: TENSION AND ANIMOSITY

Since the Islamic revolution of 1979, relations between Iran and US have been worsening and a fear of direct confrontation also looms from time to time. Except the short tenure of reformist Mohammad Khatami in late 1990s, worries and animosities characterised bilateral relations. It is very clear that both sides are responsible for deteriorating relations due to their rigidity and lack of trust towards each other. On one hand, Western governments, particularly the US, always accuse the Iranian regime for extending support to terrorist groups which attack against pro-Western or pro-Israeli interests. Another accusation is that Iran is trying to destabilise

20 Ibid, p. 32

21 Ibid, p. 1

22 Adams, J. *The Next World War: Computers are the Weapons and the Front Line is Everywhere*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998, pp. 272-3

pro-Americans regimes in the Middle-East by using its regional influence and supporting subversive groups through direct or indirect intervention. Finally and most importantly, Western governments are gravely concerned about Iran's clandestine nuclear weapon programme.

On the other hand, the top leaders of Iranian regime, both politicians and religious figures, make abusive comments about Western governments. Their vow to wipe out Israel from the map of the Middle East and their rhetoric to bring about a change in the existing international system worsen relations with the Western world. The foreign policy of this theocratic regime advocates and encourages the overthrow of the pro-American regional regimes and has accused Western countries of interfering in its internal affairs, supporting separatist groups based in neighbouring countries, and denying Iran technological advancement through imposition of sanctions.²³ However, the key reason behind the animosity between the West and Iran lies in the radically altered nature of Iranian world view after the 1979 revolution. The Islamic revolution helped Iran to come out of the influence of US and since then, Iran has been trying to establish itself as an independent and significant regional power.

US BROADCASTING IN IRAN: HOW IT WORKS

International broadcasting is one of the vital parts of US public diplomacy. For spreading the American message to global audience, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) was created by the US Congress in 1994. BBG was formed to oversee the operations of Voice of America, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, Middle East Broadcasting Network and the Office of Cuba Broadcasting, which as a whole broadcast in some 60 languages through radio, TV and the Internet.²⁴ VOA is intended to provide its listeners with news and information about the United States, the world and the particular region to which it is broadcasting. The remaining four are intended to focus reporting on news from inside the countries they are broadcasting to.

For the last two decades, funding for US broadcasting has seen a steady increase. The BBG has been the biggest beneficiary, with its annual budget

23 Hooman, Peimani, *Challenging power to the West: Iran's raising as a regional power*, Perspective 008, Middle East Institute, NUS, June 2010, p. 6

24 Ibid, p. 7

rising from roughly \$425 million to over \$750 million since 2001.²⁵ During this time, the BBG claims its global audiences have mounted some 70%, from 100 million weekly to over 170 million. In the fiscal year 2010, the US provided \$207 million for VOA, \$113 million for Middle East Broadcasting Networks and \$96 million for Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty.²⁶ In the post 9/11 period, the increase in the funding for media services, which are effective tools for propaganda, indicates that international broadcasting has gained considerable priority in the US' public diplomacy.

With this handsome funding and active media services, Western powers have been trying to infiltrate Iran's local media for years. It is not an easy task, as Iran's domestic media is heavily fortified by censorship. Even satellite dishes are illegal there. To tackle these adverse steps of the regime of Iran, US agencies broadcast their programmes from outside Iranian soil. The US government is now running two broadcast services that are not located in Iran: Voice of America's Persian News Network (PNN) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Radio Farda.²⁷

The US Congress approved new funding for VOA to start Persian language television programming in 2003, and the Persian News Network (TV) was launched in 2007. During that period, the newly created Radio Farda and PNN received a boost for their well-maintained websites with extensive contents, in addition to their core TV and radio services.²⁸ US media services also transmit local, international and US-focused programming via blogs, Twitter feeds and news alerts to mobile phones; upload videos to YouTube; and manage dynamic Facebook pages. As of May 2010, both PNN and Radio Farda seem to be using social media more effectively than other Persian-language sites.²⁹

Younger generation Iranians spend time browsing social media. Besides Twitter and Facebook users, there are many active bloggers in Iran, making Tehran one of the world's most active blogospheres. Iranian government estimates place internet users at 23 million, while more than 53 million cell

25 *US International Broadcasting*, Op cit., p. 13

26 See: <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d09127.pdf> and <http://foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/56157.pdf>

27 Bruno Greg, *'The Media Landscape in Iran'*, Council On Foreign Relations, July 22, 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/iran/media-landscape-iran/p19889>, retrieved on April 25, 2011

28 McMahon Robert, *'US-funded media and the "soft war" in Iran'*, Foreign Service Journal, October 2010, Volume 87, No.10, p. 27

29 *US International Broadcasting*, Op cit. p. 22

phones are in use.³⁰ Iranians' love of technology and the internet made them lucrative targets for the US to campaign to build a good image for itself. To reach the Iranians, Persian News Network (PNN) launched a new application for Apple's iPhone and the Android/Google phone that provides news updates and allows users to send links to VOA stories through Facebook, Twitter and e-mail in Persian language. Using this application, users can also upload videos from their phones directly to VOA's Persian News Network (PNN).³¹ It allows any one to upload videos of demonstration, protests or any other incidents that the Iranian regime may possibly hide. With this device any Iranian can be a contributor of PNN.

However, ensuring authenticity and neutrality are the major challenges for this type of 'crowd source' journalism. Unlike most of VOA's other stations, PNN focuses heavily on TV broadcasts, given that in Iran, some 94% of the population say they get their news from television, while only 35% prefer radio for news.³² PNN broadcasts to Iran are currently carried on seven Frequencies on six different satellites in order to avoid complete jamming by the Iranian authorities. Its 24-hour coverage is entirely live from 6 pm local time to midnight. These programs are then repeated from midnight to 6 pm the next day, except for an additional live hour of morning news from 6-7 am.³³

In these programs, US media services try to bring the debated issues related to the Iranian regime. For example, to mark the one-year anniversary of the June 2009 disputed presidential elections, PNN, in conjunction with HBO, showed the documentary "For Neda" about Neda Agha-Soltan, the young Iranian who became a symbol of Iran's post-election protests when images of her dying moments were captured on cell phones and shown around the world. The film was also made available on its website. During this upheaval, some 400,000 visitors viewed web pages of PNN on a daily basis. Also Radio Farda broadcasted a program on the case of Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani, who was sentenced to death by stoning for committing alleged adultery. After this radio program, the current

30 McMahon Robert, 'US-funded media and the "soft war" in Iran', *Foreign Service Journal*, October 2010, Volume 87, No.10, p. 27

31 See PNN's iPhone app here: <http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/voa-pnn/id348178315?mt=8>

32 PNN broadcasts 35 hours of radio a week – one hour original in the morning, then four hours of audio stream of PNN TV in the evening and a total of 168 hours of TV a week

33 US International Broadcasting, *Op cit.*, p. 22

regime of Iran decided to take a tougher position on the foreign based broadcasting stations.

Not surprisingly, the Iran government is not sitting idly, knowing of all these initiatives and the huge funding of the US' international broadcasting. In February 2010, the regime arrested seven Iranian journalists on suspicion of working for a "counter-revolutionary Zionist satellite station."³⁴ It has taken several steps to blockades psyops from the US by jamming broadcasts, firewalling websites and infiltrating social network accounts. The Iranian administration is also spending a considerable amount of money to train people for monitoring various websites and for writing pro-regime comments in social media and blogs.

The use of various technologies by the US authorities and the Iranian efforts to neutralise those attempts has become an interesting 'cat and mouse' game to observe. After the upheaval of Iran's presidential election in June 2009, the government enforced control on the major domestic media. It is alleged that 40 journalists were arrested within the first month of the election.³⁵ Moreover, BBC and VOA were included on a list of 'subversive' organisations and Iranians were banned from contacting them.

CREDIBILITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF PROPAGANDA: HOW SUCCESSFUL IS THE US IN IRAN?

In order to make an impact on people's hearts and minds, it is very significant to make propaganda credible and effective. To measure the credibility and effectiveness, it is important to analyse the typology of propaganda. Propaganda can be termed as white, black or grey, depending on the source. In white propaganda, the source is known and is usually official. In black propaganda, it is concealed and a false source is suggested. In grey propaganda, the source is obscured.³⁶ Black propaganda is more difficult to create than white propaganda because white propaganda can contain mistakes and still be effective since it is known to be from a foreign source, whereas black propaganda cannot contain certain types of errors.

34 See "Iran widens journalist crackdown before demonstrations" in <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2010/0210/Iran-widens-journalist-crackdown-before-demonstrations>

35 Bruno Greg, 'The Media Landscape in Iran', Council On Foreign Relations, July 22, 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/iran/media-landscape-iran/p19889>, retrieved on April 25, 2011

36 Ibid, p. 1

The US already produces vast amounts of white and grey propaganda that is created by the military and all the civilian branches of government. Washington probably also produces black propaganda, but only a few know about it. US propaganda, however, often lacks focus and is general, not specific to a particular crisis. During crises, the US was often hesitant to use its psychological operations capabilities, which took a back seat to diplomacy, economic measures or military solutions based on the use of force. But after the atrocities of 9/11, it seems that the US realised the importance of psychological operations, of which propaganda is a crucial part, and surged funding to activate proper propaganda by its international broadcasting and new media.

The effectiveness of propaganda is influenced by the intention of a source, more accurately the perceived intention of the source. If an audience can understand that they are manipulated by a source which is perceived to be a propagandist, then effectiveness drops drastically. In the case of US broadcasting in Iran, one-sided news or programmes of Radio Farda or PNN television lessens its effectiveness and most of the time makes little impact on the Iranian population. It is necessary to make the audience understand that the source of broadcasting is accurate, objective and not manipulated. Sometimes a source can be more effective if the target audience appears to be an unintended and indirect recipient of information. In this case, information can be directed as if it is for a different audience. This indirect approach can make the broadcasting more credible as the audience would think that this information is shared by others also. In such a situation, the source does not appear to be seeking to persuade the target audience and appears to be more credible. The broadcasting agencies of the US that are trying to infiltrate Iran are not so eager to take this type of indirect approach, as all of their programmes and news are intended to attract Iranians directly.

Also, a source that is similar to the target audience can increase the rate of credibility and, therefore, the effectiveness of propaganda. For example, 'cooperative' prisoners of war (POWs) are often found to be useful in order to persuade their former mates to surrender during war. Though the US is using this strategy by running its broadcasting by Iranians in exile, they are often blamed to be advocates of monarchists.

To reach to the heart of Iranian people, particularly the younger generation, it is necessary to demonstrate similarity with their interest. For example,

the US used the marketing firm of McCann-Erickson to develop a \$15 million propaganda programme called “Shared Values”, that was shown in Pakistan, Kuwait, Malaysia and on Pan-Arab stations in 2004. The program featured documentary style interviews with Muslims in America who described the United States as tolerant. Unfortunately, these programs became futile to build a positive image of the US. Instead, the initiatives confronted opposition from the governments of Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan, and were eventually suspended.³⁷ Some experts believe that the plan was good in theory, but an Arab public relations firm should have been used to create the programmes. Others suggest that the US could also use its vast foreign-born and educated population to create more effective propaganda for foreign audiences, which will also be effective for Muslim audiences.

Successful propaganda must also be entertaining, so that target audiences choose to watch it. In a way, the US is already winning the war for attention around the world, as demonstrated by the dominance of its popular culture. The US should use this powerful advantage to subtly portray the benefits of peace and cooperation with it. Hollywood movies and celebrities can also be effective propaganda tools for USA to shape its image to the Iranian population. Exposure, however, can also increase liking, which forms the basis for the propaganda emphasis on repetition of a message. In fact, even if people are shown something as simple as a pen several times, their liking for the pen will increase the more often they see it.³⁸

The influence of the source, however, decreases over time. In what is called a sleeper effect, as time passes, people forget the source, regardless of its credibility, and just remember the message. Even if information is received and not believed because the source lacks credibility, the person who received the information may later relate that information to a friend as if it is true, having forgotten the source.³⁹ For example, video footage recorded in a cell phone of the killing of Neda Agha Soltan after the last controversial presidential election of Iran was broadcasted several times in the Western media. Though the footage was shaky, blurred and the source was unknown, people remember the incident in spite of poor quality or lack of proper source of the footage.

37 Murphy, J. “US propaganda pitch halted,” CBSnews.com, available at www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/01/16/world/main536756.shtml (accessed April 25, 2011)

38 Tesser, A. *Advanced Social Psychology*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995, p. 223

39 Myers, D. *Social Psychology*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996, p. 277

Many think that there is a close connection between lie, deception and propaganda. But it is a misconception to think that a superb propagandist should be an expert fraudster. In contrast to that, the most effective means of appearing credible is to tell the facts. It is necessary to shape the credibility and authenticity of propaganda and persuade the enemy to trust. “The art of propaganda is not telling lies, but rather selecting the required truth and giving it mixed up with some truths the audience wants to hear.”⁴⁰ Nowadays, audiences often have access to newspapers, magazines, radio, television, internet websites, e-mails, faxes and cheap international telephone service, all of which facilitate the rapid spread and checking of information. For that reason there is a paramount importance of being accurate, as audiences have the options to compare and check any information.

If part of a message can be checked against other sources and is found to be wrong, credibility will suffer. Conversely, if part of a message can be checked and found to be accurate, the audience is more likely to believe the entire message. Furthermore, if the audience receives the same message from multiple sources, they are then more likely to believe the message. In order for American broadcasts to gain and retain audiences, the US set the Broadcasting Standards and Principles.⁴¹ According to this law, news should be “consistently reliable and authoritative, accurate, objective, and comprehensive and it should broadcast a balanced and comprehensive projection of United States thought and institutions, reflecting the diversity of United States culture and society.” “Objective” news must, by definition, offer both sides of an issue, even if the other side runs contrary to US policy. The law is even more specific for VOA:

“To be effective, the Voice of America must win the attention and respect of listeners. These principles will therefore govern Voice of America (VOA) broadcasts: (1) VOA will serve as a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news. VOA news will be accurate, objective, and comprehensive. (2) VOA will represent America, not any single segment of American society, and will therefore present a balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions. (3) VOA will present the policies of the

40 Daugherty, W. “The creed of a modern propagandist” in Daugherty, W. and Janowitz, M. (eds) *A Psychological Warfare Casebook*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1958, p.39

41 See 22 USC. 6202 – <http://vlex.com/vid/sec-standards-and-principles-19202272>

*United States clearly and effectively, and will also present responsible discussions and opinion on these policies.*⁴²

The BBG also claims that it does not try to send biased messages directly to the audience of Iran. It also claims that Radio Farda and PNN try to sensitise people with unbiased, objective, accurate and reliable news and programmes to earn credibility and to reach the heart and mind of their audience.⁴³ Despite the set standards and claims of the BBG, at the end of the day, these agencies have sympathies to reach Iranians excluded or persecuted by the existing regime. Even the broadcasting agencies themselves claim that although the reporting is accurate and reliable, it does have a compass and those parts of Iranian society that feel voiceless are natural allies. PNN, Radio Farda, and other US stations are also accused to be simply classic “émigré media”, staffed by those forced out of their homeland, and therefore incapable and unwilling to portray anything but the worst aspects of their native lands – with the consequence, the critics argue, that listeners will quickly turn them off for being viewed as “mouthpieces” of the US government.⁴⁴ In contrast, some believe that these broadcasting agencies permit anti-American views to be broadcast on the network. Another criticism of these broadcasting agencies is that they give too much airtime to monarchists in exile.⁴⁵

CONCLUSION

Though many are optimistic about US-funded international broadcasting, it is really a big question whether Iranians will be influenced by these motivated initiatives. It is true that similar programmes were successful in the former USSR and in other socialist societies in inspiring civil societies

42 See <http://vlex.com/vid/sec-standards-and-principles-19202272>

43 BBG Governor Jeffrey Hirschberg responded in an October 15, 2009 hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee when asked about the value of US Broadcasting in terms of creating positive trends towards the United States and its foreign policies: “The BBG does not do messaging. So if you are asking for a one-to-one correlation as to whether or not for every dollar we spend we can change hearts and minds, we cannot do that for you. We cannot give you that. But what is available to us is that we know we have an impact. So from that standpoint, we think that indirectly we do have that kind of impact that you are looking for.” Full testimony and video of the Hearing available here: <http://foreign.senate.gov/hearings/hearing/?id=673071c8-9c31-1adf-c848-9eef0ff7ca92>

44 US International Broadcasting, *Op cit*, p. 24

45 PNN has had to confront allegations by Senator Tom Coburn from Oklahoma, that it permits anti American views to be broadcast on the network. It has also heard charges from other critics that it gives too much air time to Iranian monarchists in exile. Also VOA executive editor Steve Redisch- “there are people who believe we should be in the business of regime change; there are those who believe we should restore the monarchy.” See Robert McMahon ‘US-funded media and the “soft war” in Iran’, *Foreign Service Journal*, October 2010, Volume 87, No.10, p. 27

to welcome Western democracy. But contemporary Iran is a different case altogether. None can convincingly suggest that the Iranian people do really want to hear from the Western world, whereas in the former USSR of the late 1980s, it was evident that an eager audience was willing to follow the capitalist path.

In 1950, VOA was transmitting 30 programme hours daily, in 23 different languages around the world, especially to the targeted audience of Soviet Union.⁴⁶ By 1955, VOA was broadcasting about 850 hours per week as part of an all-embracing international propaganda campaign. The VOA had the clear objective to multiply and intensify psychological deterrents to “communist aggression.”⁴⁷ The US used its popular movie making industry, Hollywood, to make anti-communist films. ‘I Married a Communist’(1949), ‘I Was a Communist for the FBI’ (1951), ‘High Noon’ (1952), ‘On the Waterfront’(1954) and ‘The Invasion of the Body Snatchers’ (1953) are some of the films which reflected the concerns of the Cold War by showing fears of hostile aggression and invasion.⁴⁸

However, propaganda pundits think that the United States should not follow the same Cold War model, which provided news to the media-starved people of Eastern Europe. It should, instead, produce quality programmes with implicit pro-Western themes to attract an audience and provide the programmes to existing Arab television stations for free or at a nominal cost.⁴⁹ It is very difficult for the US to understand the cultural and psychological impact of its broadcasting on the Iranian audience.

In contrast to the conventional wisdom that Iranian bloggers are mainly young democrats critical of the regime, the reality is much more complex. Research findings indicate that the Persian blogosphere is indeed a large discussion space of approximately 60,000 routinely updated blogs featuring a rich and varied mix of bloggers with mixed opinions.⁵⁰ Whether the US can win this battle of propaganda or not, one thing is very clear. In this era of Web 2.0 technology, it is really impossible to control the flow of information. Social networks and new media have turned everyone into

46 Taylor M. Philip, *Munitions of the Mind, A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Day*, Manchester University Press, 2003, Manchester, UK, p. 258

47 Ibid, p. 258

48 Ibid, pp. 260, 249

49 Lieven, A. and Chambers, D. (2006) “The limits of propaganda,” *Los Angeles Times*, 13 February, 2006, B13

50 Kelly John and Etling Bruce, *Mapping Iran's Online Public: Politics and Culture in the Persian Blogosphere*, April 2008, Berkman Center Research Publication No. 2008-01, Berkman Center for Internet and Society, Harvard University, p. 1

a 'media'. Though journalism experts say that the so-called new media cannot replace traditional forms of reporting, and only roughly one-third of Iranians have access to the Internet, it is true that flow of information and connection with the outer world cannot be blocked effectively. Now, by using new media, Iranian population can get access to various options. The decision to choose is up to them. And the success of American public diplomacy will depend much on the level of its influence over this decision-making process.