

Iran, Afghanistan: US broadcasting initiatives
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Media in

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Reaching Iran and elsewhere: new Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) initiatives.

“You cannot imagine what a big impact you had during recent events with your timely news,” an Iranian e-mailed to Radio Farda in June 2003 as students and pro-democracy activists protested across Iran. “I really thank you.”

Radio Farda (“Tomorrow”), the newest 24/7 station launched by the Broadcasting Board of Governors, went on the air six months ago. Modeled after Radio Sawa (“Together”), the widely successful Arabic-language station for the Middle East, Radio Farda is youth-oriented – a major plus in a country where 70% of the 77 million people are under the age of 30.

Both stations – along with other US international broadcasting products targeted at key markets – reflect changes underway in the manner in

which the BBG does business: targeting distinct markets, gaining audience and using modern communications techniques to promote freedom and democracy by broadcasting accurate news about the United States and the world. The BBG supervises all US non-military international broadcasting, including the Voice of America (VOA), Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), Radio Free Asia (RFA), Radio/TV Martí, Radio Sawa and Radio Farda.

Iran

In fact, BBG’s broadcasting to Iran – of which Radio Farda is just one element – embodies the BBG’s five-year strategic plan, “Marrying the Mission to the Market”. A one-size-fits-all approach no longer works in the media marketplace of the 21st century. US international broad-

casting must tailor content to the audience, accelerate multimedia development, adopt principles of modern radio and control distribution – all the while staying true to our mission of promoting freedom and democracy.

As Kenneth Y. Tomlinson, the BBG’s chairman, said recently: “We need to keep in mind that no media market is monolithic. We have to make choices about which parts of that market we most want to reach. In some cases, we may need to use more than one channel to do so.”

So in Iran, we have Radio Farda as well as Voice of America Persian. Since 90% of Iranians also say they get news from television, we have two weekly VOA-TV programmes, *Next Chapter*, a news magazine aimed at youth, and *Roundtable with You*, a call-in show. On 6 July we also launched *News and Views*, a daily 30-minute news and analysis programme. [Jamming of VOA-TV’s daily and weekly satellite transmissions to Iran started the same day, from Cuba, according to the BBG.]

Radio Farda is an ambitious product. “A year ago, we saw how important it was going to be in promoting

Initiatives

Iran – Afghanistan

democracy in Iran to have a station that could reach student masses,” said Norman J. Pattiz, chairman of the BBG’s Middle East Committee.

The station, which broadcasts news, information, entertainment, culture and a mix of Western and Persian contemporary music, is found on AM frequencies (1593 and 1539 kHz) 24 hours a day. It is broadcast on shortwave for 21 hours a day, and also via digital audio satellite and on the Internet (www.radiofarda.com). So popular is the Internet site that an estimated 40,000 visitors a day make use of the site’s RealAudio feature to listen to the station.

Each day, Radio Farda provides newscasts of 15 minutes at the top of the hour, with 90 seconds at the bottom. It also has four daily original 30-minute news magazine shows and produces three weekly 30-minute news roundtables on weekends that are repeated once. *This Week in Iran* and *Democracy and Human Rights Roundtable* explore political and social topics while *The Youth Scene* addresses health, social and political issues.

Because the BBG controls distribution, Radio Farda can add

news as the situation warrants. After 10 June, for instance, Radio Farda provided extensive, on-the-spot coverage of student demonstrations that began in Tehran and spread across the country. Using mobile phones, stringers reported from cities across Iran, giving key details such as the size of the demonstrations and the mood of the demonstrators. Student leaders, lawyers, reformers, demonstrators, Iranian exiles and diplomats have been interviewed as part of the in-depth coverage.

All told, Radio Farda was providing between 16 minutes to 18 minutes of news each hour, with up to 10.5 hours of news each weekend day.

The conservative Iranian regime obviously doesn’t like what it hears on Radio Farda. The government has intermittently jammed the station and tried to block Internet sites. But, the tech-savvy young people in Iran have found ways to listen to the fair and accurate news they have craved for so long.

The BBG created Radio Farda by combining the resources of VOA and RFE/RL. All in all, the station, which broadcasts both from Prague, the home of RFE/RL, and Washington

costs about \$8m, including some \$4m for transmission.

Meantime, VOA Persian and VOA-TV are also covering events aggressively with call-in shows, discussions and analyses. The TV shows apparently have wide followings in Iran. When they’re on the air, callers and viewers scramble to be heard.

Iran is not the only place the BBG is changing the way US international broadcasting does business. Much has been written about Radio Sawa, with its millions of listeners in the Middle East. And the station continues to dominate among its target audience in cities like Amman, Jordan. Since the war in Iraq, we’ve started broadcasting via FM in Baghdad, Erbil and Sulaymaniyeh.

Afghanistan

Afghanistan, trying to establish itself as a democracy after two decades of war, is a place where radio plays a huge role in providing information about issues such as civil society, politics, education, health, human rights and women’s rights.

VOA, which long broadcast to Afghanistan in Dari and Pashto, was



joined in January 2002 by Radio Free Afghanistan, operated by RFE/RL. Together, the stations form a continuous, 24/7 stream of news and information to Afghans.

Although shortwave was the only medium available in the past, the BBG has installed huge AM transmitters in Kabul to give the programmes a nationwide reach. We've put FM in Kabul, and plan to add additional FM transmitters. The BBG has installed two transmitters in each location: one for the Afghan government, the other for US international broadcasting. The cost for new transmission adds up to about \$10m.

Training is another component of our Afghan initiatives. So far, more than two dozen journalists have been coached on how to cover events involving politics, health and

education. The BBG is helping to build a cadre of journalists with the skills needed to impart information to their fellow countrymen.

Projects

The BBG won't stop there. Exciting projects are in the works: a new Arabic-language television network is in the planning stage. If given the final green light, the station will be the first 24/7 Arabic language Western network in the region.

US international broadcasting is constantly re-evaluating its products in light of foreign policy priorities to make sure it is doing its job as effectively as possible. In Iran, our anecdotal information indicates it is. "God bless you," one Iranian e-mailed us. "This will be the most effective tool to combat the repressive mullahs."

The BBG in brief:

Budget (FY 2004): \$563.5m (include \$30m for start-up costs for a proposed new 24/7 Arabic TV network). BBG services broadcast in 65 languages to over 100 million people around the world.

The Voice of America, launched in 1942, broadcasts around the world in 53 languages to an estimated weekly audience of 91 million.

VOA broadcasts to all regions of the world, with the exception of Western Europe and the United States.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), principal US surrogate broadcaster to the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.



Radio Farda broadcaster

With the addition of two new services, **Radio Free Iraq** and the **RFE/RL Persian Service**, RFE/RL broadcasts in 26 languages to an estimated audience of 20 million.

Radio Free Asia, (RFA) principal US surrogate broadcaster in Asia. RFA broadcasts in 10 languages to China, Tibet, Burma, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and North Korea.

Radio Sawa, a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week Arabic-language network, broadcasts six regional streams of a mix of Western and Arabic pop music along with up-to-the-minute news, news analysis, interviews, opinion pieces, sports and features.

Radio Farda, a joint effort of RFE/RL and VOA. Broadcasts news and information, as well as a combination of popular Persian and Western music, to Iran.

The **Office of Cuba Broadcasting** directs the operations of **Radio and TV Martí**: two services that broadcast Spanish-language news, features and entertainment programmes to Cuba.

Worldnet Television and Film Service broadcasts news and public affairs reports, programmes that reflect American life, and discussions on US foreign and domestic policies. Worldnet is available seven days a week by satellite through broadcast outlets, cable systems and direct-to-home satellite receivers.

