

Nov 04, 2016 by *Alvin Snyder*

Likely Winners and Losers in TV Satellite Information War ^[1]

The Bush administration has a new public diplomacy game plan to promote democracy within Iran. The idea is to build public support for democratic reform there and to pressure Iran's new hard line leadership into becoming more enlightened, especially where their nuclear aspirations are concerned.

The State Department's plan includes a Farsi-language television service beamed to Iran. But there are at least two problems with that public information concept.

Problem number one is that the Voice of America already has a Farsi-language TV service to Iran. It has, in fact, been operational for 9 years. Former VOA deputy director Alan Heil advises that the Farsi-language TV service is now on the air 10 ½ hours weekly, with a presence of 7 days per week.

The second problem is the false notion that an all-news satellite TV channel will attract a substantial number of viewers and be influential in promoting American values and U.S. foreign policy objectives. This is wishful thinking, given today's cluttered and highly competitive international satellite channel marketplace.

Of course, a good case can be made for the VOA's entry as a satellite program provider to Iran. It and other U.S. government broadcasters succeeded in breaching the Iron Curtain with news and information, and are battle hardened, albeit from another era.

At the dawn of international broadcasting, when scientists discovered in 1924 that radio signals could be reflected for great distances by bouncing them up and down between Earth's surface and its upper layer of atmosphere in giant steps thousands of miles long, governments began their missionary work.

The Netherlands was the first European country to use short-wave radio to maintain contact with its Dutch colonies abroad. Britain, France, Portugal, and Belgium followed soon after: they also wanted to strengthen ties with their overseas possessions.

State-of-the-art technology back then consisted of powerful short wave transmitters costing tens of millions of dollars each and weighing hundreds of tons, arrayed side-by-side on acres of land, transmitting radio signals that would be received as scratchy, fading signals.

Today's TV satellites in stationary positions above Earth can be accessed quickly and efficiently by those who wish to reach home satellite dishes practically anywhere on the planet with pristine quality video signals. The process may soon be as easy as making a cell phone call. British Broadcasting Corporation journalists are in fact experimenting with a hybrid cell phone that can reach a TV satellite with video, which can then be transmitted to targeted

areas globally.

With such easy access, almost daily there is word of yet another government TV satellite news channel preparing to enter the fray.

Here are but a few of the most recent hopefuls.

The government of France is preparing to launch a 24-hour news channel in French, English and Arabic. A new government channel from Moscow called "Russia Today," is scheduled to air by the first of the year to the United States, Europe, and Asia. The Arabic channel al-Jazeera is readying its English language service to the United States that will feature a breakfast program with British talk show star Sir David Frost.

And the BBC wants to launch an Arabic news channel to challenge the controversial al-Jazeera. Even the tiny Islamic sultanate of Brunei plans to extend its satellite programs worldwide.

Of course, the plug can be pulled on those who break the rules of acceptable conduct. An example of this is Al-Manar, the Lebanese Hezbollah satellite channel, whose stories have gone way over the top. One of its videos encourages children to blow themselves up as martyrs, while another claims that Jews slaughter Christian children to drink their blood at Passover.

As a result, the French and British government satellite authority Eutelsat has banned Al-Manar from being carried to European countries for violating the laws of racial hatred, and the U.S., on grounds that Al-Manar incites terrorist activity, has banned its programs from being carried on Intelsat, which beams programs to North America.

However, Arabsat continues to transmit Al-Manar's programs to the Middle East.

What about the rest, who enjoy easy access to communication satellites?

The new satellite channel most likely to succeed is the entry from the Seoul, Korea Broadcasting Service that will be available on DirectTV in the U.S. It will carry drama, sports, news, and comedy programs, specifically tailored for Korean-American viewers. It has a clearly defined audience, and programs to satisfy viewer tastes and expectations.

Least likely to succeed is Al-Jazeera America. The Arabic channel's basic Middle East service has gained a following by pandering to its audience with fallacious news reports such as the fabrication that Israel was tipped off in advance of the London terrorist bombings.

Al-Jazeera can be expected to lose its contentious, controversial edge in its new English language service to America, so as not to alienate the potential U.S. commercial sponsors that it seeks, and a mainstream American audience.

And then there is the VOA's Farsi TV service to Iran, which has been going about its business seriously but quietly for most of the past decade, acquiring new skills for its current communication mission. Provided with sufficient support, chances are that VOA professionals will find a way to win in Iran, as they did during the Cold War.
