



A professional perspective on the news in Iran

Friday, April 20, 2018

DONATE

All of sudden, or at least so it seemed, a mass protest took place in Iran at the end of last year. In the months that followed we witnessed all the demonstrations and campaigns carried out by women in regard to head scarves. International media organisations did their very best to explain the motivation of the masses of protesters taking to the streets of Tehran, Qom and Shiraz. They attempted to do the same when Iranian women who took to the streets flying their head scarves on sticks. Radio Zamaneh is an example of succesful media development and acts as a source with insight in Iran for other media. Radio Zamaneh is an example of succesful media development and acts as a source with insight in Iran for other media.

Almost no one noticed that a small Iranian radio station, in exile in Amsterdam, had predicted the very first protests quite precisely, two days before they happened. Radio Zamaneh is housed in a building, whose exact location is kept secret for security reasons. 'The only reason we're here is because we can't have our editorial team in Tehran', says Rieneke van Zanten, director of the radio station. The station has held a unique position in the media landscape of Iran for more than ten years. Zamaneh was founded on the initiative of Iranian refugees in the Netherlands, with the professional support of Press Now (now Free Press Unlimited) and funds from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Clarification

The streets of Iranian cities were filled with demonstrators and Dutch media outlets, such as RTL Nieuws, NPO Radio 1 and Eenvandaag asked Zamaneh for clarification. So did the Wall Street Journal. Zamaneh was able to provide it like no other. Editor-in-chief Mohammad Reza Nikfar: 'We have been aware of an undercurrent for some time, a passive revolution in Iran, which foreign media cannot recognize. We have so much contact with people in every area of Iran, with researchers, trade unions, activists for human rights and minorities that the current developments come as no surprise to us'.

Counterweight to 'spin'

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'It does sting a bit that so many international media organisations have so much to say in their analyses of the demonstrations, while they can't even understand Farsi, the language', says Rieneke van Zanten, 'this is also true of the new generation of Iranians, for example, who dominate the debate in the United States'. Nikfar adds: 'Of course a spin is put on events by all interested parties. We, however, continue to provide independent, professional information in the midst of all those voices, all those interests from mujahedins, royalists, clergymen, former president Ahmadinejad, mullahs and Kurds'.

Discord and hatred

And that's not all: 'For about a year now we have witnessed the rise of a circle of Iranian agitators—working out of Paris, New York and other places—who spread an enormous amount of misinformation, primarily online', says Nikfar. 'This includes the sexual orientation of Ayatollah Khamenei and the dissemination of hateful messages about LGTB- activists, trade unionists and Kurds. A clear attempt has been made to sow discord among Persians, Turkmen, Arabs, and Kurds. All kinds of conspiracy theories are being used for the same purpose. It is not inconceivable that all this hatred could culminate in a situation such as in Syria'.

Platform for citizens

Zamaneh opposes those attempts as well. In addition to providing independent, reliable information to Iranians from Iranians, Zamaneh also endeavours to debunk fake news. Iranian citizens also benefit from being able to express their opinions safely on Zamaneh's channels. Everyone is free to share their own news, vision, and opinion under the heading 'Tribune'. In these troubled times more and more Iranians are availing themselves of that opportunity. They do not have many other options for expressing their opinions, especially if they are not in line with the regime.

Success

It's not surprising that the numbers of listeners and visitors to Zamaneh's website are rapidly increasing in these times of tension. On a good day, eighty thousand unique visitors visit Zamaneh's website. Because Zamaneh is able to bypass censorship, Iranians can also continue to visit the website. This traffic does however leads to an extreme work overload for the website editors, in

particular, to moderate and manage the 'Tribune' platform. Free Press Unlimited founded Radio Zamaneh in cooperation with a number of Iranian journalists in 2005. Zamaneh has been entirely independent since 2015. The radio station is a good example of a successful media development project for a country that does not have a free press, and we are proud of that.

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