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Contradicting Realities, déjà vu in Tehran

P. Horsfield

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There has been an increase in the number of international conferences held in the area of media and religion in recent years. I've been privileged as a scholar to attend a number of them. The Conference on Media and Religion, held in Tehran on November 13–15, 2005, was, to my knowledge, the first held in a Muslim-majority country, so it was of great interest to receive an invitation to be one of the international participants. Looking back on the experiences, in the myriad of insights gained, a number stand out for me particularly.

One was an awareness of the construction of Iran in western consciousness. Contradictions between my initial expectations and my firsthand experience in going to and participating in the conference made me aware that I carried a number of unconscious, unquestioned presumptions as a result of simply growing up and living in the West. I found myself on several occasions being “surprised” at a number of things I encountered, but wondering afterwards why they should have surprised me.

One of those was the personal security issue. My first reaction on getting the invitation was one of suspicion—uncertainty about whether the invitation was a genuine one, whether the conference was legitimate, and uncertainty about whether it was safe for me to accept and go. These concerns were widely held. The Australian Government Smart Traveler Web site at the time was advising Australians traveling to Iran to exercise extreme caution. A number of colleagues questioned the safety and reasons for going to Iran—one even hugged me when I left as if I wouldn't be coming back! There was late confusion over ticketing, resulting in my receiving at first just a one-way ticket, further raising my anxieties about whether something underhanded was going on, something I wouldn't have thought about a similar conference in the West. It was only after I had received strong encouragement from a number of international colleagues who had better knowledge and contact with the country than I did, that I accepted.

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The reality was quite different. We were graciously hosted. We found a diversity of political perspectives and enjoyed generally warm and friendly collegial interactions with a wide variety of people. Apart from attempting to cross the street in the face of the Tehran traffic, I have felt less secure in some parts of New York or San Francisco than I did in Tehran. In conversations, people frequently distinguished between individuals from countries with whom Iran had political differences, and the formal political policies of those countries, inviting also the recognition that not all Iranians necessarily agreed with the national policies of their own government. The political rhetoric that has characterized Iran-Western relations since last year seems to me to work to suppress this political diversity and opposition within the country, and encourage the building of a more united front within the country against a common external enemy.

I was surprised by the international nature of the faculty at the university, and found myself wondering why I found that surprising. Most of the faculty at the conference had doctorates, many of them from Western universities, were aware of latest developments in critical and cultural studies of the media, and reflected that in their teaching. Further discussions identified that Iran has followed a national policy of supporting scholars in gaining overseas credentials and being exposed to international thinking and developments.

I was surprised by Iran's pride and preservation of its distinctive cultural identity and found the exploration of that one of the productive insights of the visit. Though a Muslim-majority country, they distinguish themselves through history, language, and culture as Persian, not Arab. I should have known that, and in becoming aware of not knowing I became conscious of how little of that cultural difference and its political and international implications are communicated through Western media and education.

I was confronted by different aspects of the political and religious containment of women, and the efforts of many women to resist that containment. A large proportion of participants in the conference were women, dressed predominantly in black dress, cape, and scarf that covered all but their eyes, nose, cheeks, mouth, and chin. However, women are challenging this containment in different ways. One could see scattered among the women students with colored scarves worn back from the forehead in a way that met the rule while obviously pushing its boundaries. Discussions with faculty members indicated that the rate of marriage is declining, divorce is on the rise, and women are demanding greater negotiation before entering marriage as they challenge the cultural restrictions imposed on them through the exercise of personal resistance with the tools that are in their power. Comments by Lynn Schofield Clark in this issue identify other aspects of the dynamics working in the conference.

The valuable aspect of being one of just eight Western international participants in such a conference in a Muslim-majority country was that of being able to listen in on the conversations Muslims were having among themselves about the interaction of media and religion, a conversation that

doesn't often happen in the West. The conference was jointly organised by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) and Tehran University. IRIB broadcasts several hours of religious programs a day on its different channels, has its own university to train broadcasters and broadcast technicians, and was keen to focus the agenda on questions around religious programming. A number of faculty people wanted the agenda expanded to consider also the broader movements of media and religion in Iranian culture and society within the wider global media context.

Religious programming featured heavily in the agenda. The presentations raised perspectives and issues that I found familiar from my studies of religious broadcasting in the 1950s in Australia and the United States—suitability of particular formats, studies of production, audiences, and authorization of content and effects. Of particular concern in the discussions was the declining audiences of young people, provoking the question of how a national broadcaster commissioned with the propagation of religion among the young could program in order to attract and hold viewers when there were more attractive and engaging alternatives available to those younger audiences. A number of these questions were raised in discussions of questions of globalization, western cultural imperialism, and the preservation of national identity. They were followed quite vigorously by discussions I had out of sessions with groups of students, with some advocating the value of having greater access to global media and participating more openly in the global market, others advancing a defence of cultural integrity and arguing for restrictions, even censorship, to preserve Islam as they know it from the religious and cultural atrophy they see in western consumerism.

For me, this was one of the more interesting and significant issues coming out of the conference and one that unfortunately wasn't pursued actively on the agenda: What happens when an "official" religion attempts to propagate itself on a medium that places both consumption and interpretation control in the hands of the viewer, in a wider global context that supports diversity and "consumer" autonomy? Can Islam do it differently than Christianity in the latter part of the 20th century as "official" religious broadcasting has given way to competitive religion that has aligned itself with wider cultural commodification? Research on Islam and new media suggest that the growth of new media presents a wider palette of Islamic expressions and authorities for viewers that bypass or challenge established local or even national expressions.

Formal presentations at the conference tended to assume a relative homogeneity in what is understood by Islamic religion and practice. Out of sessions conversations reflected a much greater diversity. On my last day in Iran, I had an extended relaxed conversation with a younger person, who had been with us for much of the week. I asked him about the issue of young people and religion. Young people are much more global in their media orientation and practice, he said. Do *you* go the Mosque, I asked. Our religion doesn't require us to go to the Mosque, we can pray on our own, he answered.

So do you pray on your own, I asked. No, I have my own spirituality. What is that, I asked. On my days off I go to the hills, walk, and breathe in the fresh air.

This would be a good discussion to have. Whether in the process of changing communication practices that have undergirded past structures of Islam and the adoption of new media technologies in general practice, the re-mediatisation of Islam is producing new forms, new sensibilities, and new alignments of Islam, and these, as much as Westernisation, is what is challenging current Islamic cultures and power structures.