

The Night Sky, The Forgotten Nature: Uncovering the Impact of One Television Programme on Astronomy Communication in Iran

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In 2001, two brothers known as the Saffarianpour brothers started a television programme on Iranian state television called *Aseman-e-shab* (*The Night Sky*). The programme, which explores astronomy and space science, became one of the longest-running television shows in the history of Iranian television and played a major role in the public communication of science and astronomy. It inspired many of the next generation of Iranian scientists and astronomers and played a key role in the advancement of science journalism and science communication in Iranian media. This article outlines a brief history of the show and its producer and describes the role they played in Iranian society.

Introduction

On 5 May 2017, channel four of Iranian state television broadcast a special programme. On a huge video wall in the background were images of the night sky and behind a V-shaped desk a group of science and astronomy communicators gathered and waited for the show to air.

As the lights went up, the presenter announced: “Ladies and gentlemen welcome to the 16th birthday of *The Night Sky*.” This is the story of the sixteen years that preceded that moment and of how a live television show changed the path of astronomy and television science journalism in Iran.

The weekly show airs on channel four of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting network (IRIB-4) and aims to popularise science, inspire a new generation of astronomers and science journalists, rediscover the heritage of Iranian science and redefine the production of science programmes in Iran. With an ever-growing audience the show has spent sixteen years working towards these aims. It is the only programme specialising in astronomy in Iran and remains the longest-running scientific programme in the history of Iranian television, as well as one of the most popular shows on television.



Figure 1. Siavash (right) and Foad (left) Saffarianpour, founders of the show, at the 16th birthday live broadcast in May 2017. Credit: Sepideh Faalkhah/Aseman-e-Shab

Beginning a long journey

The story of *Aseman-e-shab* began when teenager Siavash Saffarianpour and his twin brother Foad Saffarianpour, went to the IRIB offices to pitch an idea for a television show that would explore the world of astronomy. Successfully hiding their real age the brothers were given permis-

sion to produce a selection of segments for children’s programmes to gain the producers’ trust.

Next, with trust earned, Siavash began producing special television reports about science and astronomy events. One of the most memorable of those reports was the live coverage of the 1999 solar eclipse



Figure 2. Behind the scenes.
Credit: Aseman-e-Shab/S. Saffarianpour

for which Siavash was co-producer and adviser. The success of this coverage led to another special program about the Mars missions late in 1999 and, as more content was signed off, Siavash moved through the roles of presenter, director and producer, gaining influence so that more astronomy content could be made.

Astronomy Day 2001: the beginning of Aseman-e-shab

In 2001 a group of young Iranian amateur astronomers decided to celebrate Astronomy Day in Iran. The idea came from Babak Amin Tafreshi, senior editor of *Nojum Magazine*, a monthly magazine that has been covering astronomy in the Persian language since 1991.

Siavash pitched the idea to IRIB-4 of producing a live TV show to celebrate Astronomy Day. It was to be a one-off one-night live show where people could call in and ask questions about astronomy and space.

“We called the first programme The Night Sky, The Forgotten Nature, because we wanted people to start thinking about the night sky as a part of their natural environment, but a part they may have forgotten to look at,” explained Siavash Saffarianpour.



Figure 3. The Aseman-e-Shab set. Credit: Aseman-e-Shab/S. Saffarianpour

The number of phone calls the show received during and after its airing was overwhelming and suddenly astronomy was being talked about around the country. The IRIB management asked Siavash to continue the programme and, inspired by the BBC’s *The Sky At Night* with Sir Patrick Moore, he pitched a weekly live show. IRIB-4, however, decided they wanted the programme to air every night of the week.

Episodes brought groups of presenters and panelists together to discuss astronomy in front of screens of impressive graphics, had reporters visiting astronomical events like Messier marathons and astronomy day celebrations, and brought professional astronomers and science managers on air to introduce their work to the public and ask questions about opportunities and challenges in the field in Iran. A daily show, although only fifteen minutes per episode, was overwhelming for the production team. Each episode had to be packed with graphics, interviews and reports, and all on an almost non-existent budget.

After the first series, the show became weekly and, with more time and resource, started to invite astronomers and space activists from outside of Iran to tell their stories directly to Iranian audiences.

Advancement of science journalism in Iran

Aseman-e-Shab’s use of primary sources to tell a story, like *Nojum Magazine* before it, marked a new age of science journalism in Iran which had previously relied on translation and secondary sources.

Guests during the last sixteen years of the show have included Anousheh Ansari (the first female space tourist), Firouz Naderi (former NASA Mars programme manager), Carolyn Porco (NASA’s *Cassini* Mission), Cumrun Vafa (winner of the Breakthrough Prize in Fundamental Physics) and almost all of the Iranian astronomers, cosmologists and science historians. The show also moved beyond pure astronomy, crossing boundaries to look at the history of astronomy, art, philosophy, and even science fiction, and how they interact with science and astronomy.

The show also provided a platform to showcase special astronomical or space events. It broadcast both Venus transits live, aired a live report with an expedition team at the South Pole to observe the solar eclipse, and covered the *Huygens* landing on Titan.



Figure 4. Slavash Saffarianpour (right) talking with Kazem Kookaram, amateur astronomer and specialist on observing sky events. Credit: Aseman-e-Shab/S. Saffarianpour



Figure 5. Sivash Saffarianpour, founder, producer and presenter of Aseman-e-Shab. Credit: Sepideh Faalkhah/Aseman-e-Shab



Figure 6. The Aseman-e-Shab set. Credit: Sepideh Faalkhah/Aseman-e-Shab

On the scientific policy side, presidents of Iran, members of the parliament, ministers of science, managers of the Iranian Space Agency and others at the heart of Iranian policy making have been guests on the show and faced tough questions from its audience. Investigative reporting on Iranian science, such as the story of the Iranian National Observatory project and Iranian space programme, has also engaged with the politics behind science.

However, if this programme will be remembered for only one thing it will be the role it has played in changing the conception of science and astronomy amongst the general public. It has shown the people that science is not something boring and out of reach, and that astronomers and scientists are not untouchable people living in ivory towers. *Aseman-e-Shab* has inspired a new generation of Iranian Scientists.

"The Night Sky played an important role in popularising science in Iran," said Dr. Reza Mansouri, the former Research Deputy of the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Research. Dr Mansouri is a cosmologist at Sharif University, former manager of the Iranian National Observatory project and one of the Iranian scientists who has worked for years in the field of scientific development in Iran. *"But more importantly, I think this programme played a major role in introducing and popularising the idea of scientific thinking and scientific method in society. This is much more valuable than just talking about information."*

Inspiring a new generation of science enthusiasts

In 2017 *Forbes* magazine published its *30 under 30*, a list of 600 of the brightest young entrepreneurs, innovators and game-changers in the world. Payam Banazadeh, the co-founder of Capella Space and former JPL engineer is one of the people mentioned on that list. Long before he became a rising star in the space industry, Payam was a young teenager in Tehran and a huge fan of *Aseman-e-Shab*:

"I remember coming home from school and being so excited to sit in front of the TV and watch the show. I would gather my entire family and almost force them to watch the show with me. The show gave

me motivation, excited me about science, and put perspective behind all the concepts that I was learning in school. Most people struggle to find the purpose behind physics, math, and learning equations in school, and the show did a fantastic job of indirectly teaching the meanings to all those concepts and why they are important. It is because of such shows that I have stayed inspired and motivated to remain in this field."

The show not only helped people become interested in science and astronomy but also increased general knowledge about science and created a more supportive environment for those enthusiastic about science to follow it as a career path.

Azadeh Keivani, a Postdoctoral Scholar in particle astrophysics at Penn State University, was interested in astronomy before *Aseman-e-Shab* began but for her it was refreshing and encouraging to see state television broadcast a programme in her own field of interest:

"Aseman-e-shab started not long after I got involved in astronomy. It was a great show, talking about the beauties of the night sky, the planets, the stars, space, and the Universe. On top of all the great things in this programme was the amazing eloquence of its host and the panel. Since the start of the show, the first reaction I get from people when I talk about my interest in astronomy is reference to the show. "Ah, yeah, Aseman-e-shab! We watch it every week!" Thanks to the show a love for astronomy was gradually becoming normal."

The effect of the show was not limited to the big cities in Iran either. In many remote and less developed villages of Iran, some teachers recorded the show and played it in their classrooms for students who did not have access to television. It became a source of education for many students.

Challenges are still ahead

Now, after sixteen years, 22 seasons and more than 900 episodes, Siavash is still working to produce an inspiring and informative show. The show is still broadcast once a week, on Friday night for one hour, and contains interviews, sky events, educational information and in-depth discussion about the world of astronomy.

Running a television show for such a long time, under different management systems and in the framework of Iranian state television, is challenging. Even sixteen years running successfully does not bring any guarantee for the future of the show and there is a constant fight to keep the show running and to keep its standards high.

The other challenge is competing with online media. The Internet enables new content to be produced and published with fewer boundaries and limitations. But because of this show the story of stars and the night sky is less forgotten in Iran and Siavash will continue to persevere: *"My philosophy has not changed. I want to talk about science and astronomy, inspire people to consider science and remind them that we all are living on this pale blue dot together."*

Biography

Pouria Nazemi is an Iranian-Canadian science journalist and an amateur astronomer. He graduated from the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad in pure mathematics. For more than ten years he was senior editor and head of the science desk at *Jam-e-Jam* daily newspaper in Iran and a member of the *Nojum (Persian Astronomy) Magazine* editorial board. He was a member of the Iranian Astronomy Society on the Amateur Committee and participated in organising outreach and public events in astronomy and science. He has translated books on science and journalism into Farsi and also produces a weekly Persian-language science videocast — *IT Nights*.