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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Effective Media Solutions for Addressing Marginalization in Mashhad: A Case Study of Khorasan Razavi Radio and Television

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction:

Marginalization constitutes one of the most persistent and structurally rooted urban crises in Iran, with Mashhad representing a particularly acute case. According to figures published by 'Khorasan' newspaper in 2020, more than 1.3 million people-over one-third of the city's population-reside in marginal neighborhoods, and this proportion continues to expand under pressure from economic hardship, rising housing costs, and rural-to-urban migration. As Iran's second largest metropolis and the site of the holy shrine of Imam Reza (PBUH)-one of the most significant religious destinations in the Islamic world-the social consequences of marginalization in Mashhad extend well beyond local urban management, acquiring national and transnational significance. The crisis cannot be reduced to a question of population numbers; it encompasses cultural, identity-related, security, and welfare dimensions that interact with the city's symbolic status.

A central premise of this study is that social crises do not respond to uniform, decontextualized prescriptions. Marginalization in Mashhad is shaped by demographic, geographical, economic, religious, and cultural conditions specific to the city; effective intervention therefore requires localized, context-sensitive solutions. Given this premise, the study focuses on the role of provincial broadcasting-specifically Khorasan Razavi Radio and

Television-as a key actor who's programming directly shapes how the crisis is perceived, framed, and addressed. The research aims to identify effective media strategies for confronting the marginalization crisis in Mashhad, examine the current performance of the provincial broadcaster, and articulate the expectations of experts and field practitioners regarding the broadcaster's role in crisis management.

Method:

The study employed an applied qualitative design. The research population consisted of experts and officials directly engaged with the marginalization crisis in Mashhad. Purposeful sampling at the organizational level was combined with snowball sampling at the individual level to ensure that both institutional and field-based perspectives were represented. Eight relevant sectors were identified at the outset: the education system, Khorasan Razavi Radio and Television, the armed forces, Astan Quds Razavi, the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, charitable organizations, grassroots and jihadi groups active in marginal neighborhoods, and local mosque clergy.

A total of sixteen participants were selected, including school administrators in marginal districts, charity and relief-center managers, media activists, military officials, employees of Khorasan Razavi broadcasting, volunteer activists, staff working on marginalization-related affairs, local mosque leaders, personnel affiliated with Astan Quds Razavi, and university students residing in marginal neighborhoods. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and supplemented by documentary and library research, which informed the theoretical framework and the conceptualization of marginalization, crisis, crisis management, local media, and the role of media before, during, and after crises.

Interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Open coding decomposed the transcripts into meaningful units, after which axial coding linked related categories into broader conceptual structures. The analysis ultimately produced 57 initial codes organized into 19 categories and synthesized into three core conceptual themes: (1) content-related deficiencies in current programming by Khorasan Razavi television, (2) reasons for the lack of effective programming on marginalization, and (3) expectations and proposed media solutions for addressing the crisis.

Findings:

The first theme comprised 14 codes in 2 categories and offered a systematic diagnosis of how Khorasan Razavi television currently represents marginal neighborhoods. The dominant pattern was a threat-oriented perspective: marginal areas were portrayed primarily as sources of danger, reinforcing class-based fear and an adversarial relationship between the city center and its periphery. Interviewees also pointed to a normalization of the crisis, in which marginalization is depicted as an inevitable urban condition rather than as a solvable structural problem, and to a symbolic separation of marginal areas from the urban body, with the periphery framed as a categorically distinct "other." Further damages identified included the inaccurate definition of geographical boundaries of marginal areas, identity erasure that strips these neighborhoods of their historical and cultural depth, an excessive focus on crime-exemplified by programs such as 'Gozaresh 5' - and overall negativism that fosters stigma and may even encourage outward migration. Together, these patterns indicate that current programming does not merely fail to manage the crisis but actively reproduces stigma, polarization, and symbolic exclusion.

The second theme explained the structural reasons behind the broadcaster's limited engagement with marginalization, comprising 12 codes in 4 categories. Managerial conservatism emerged as a central factor: reluctance to produce two-sided programs involving critics and officials, the existence of extra-organizational red lines, and an avoidance of root-cause analysis when treating sensitive social issues. A second factor was insufficient familiarity among media personnel with communication theories relevant to crisis representation-particularly agenda-setting, the spiral of silence, and framing-which limits the broadcaster's ability to intervene strategically. Additional structural barriers included organizational silence and disregard for staff proposals, weak coordination with relevant institutions and the absence of a broadcasting representative in Mashhad's marginalization crisis committee, the absence of an explicit media strategy in this area, severe budgetary constraints, and low staff compensation. These factors collectively describe an institutional environment in which managerial, professional, financial, and inter-organizational obstacles converge to prevent sustained, effective programming.

The third theme captured the constructive vision articulated by participants and was the broadest, comprising 31 codes in 13 categories. A central proposal was positive identity-building for marginal neighborhoods through documentaries on local history, architecture, customs, and prominent cultural, scientific, and social figures originating from these areas. Participants emphasized the need for specialized and continuous programming addressing the social, cultural, economic, religious, educational, health, migration, and addiction-related

dimensions of the crisis, replacing episodic or sensational coverage with sustained engagement. Specific recommendations included programming on low-cost entrepreneurship, women's employment, family financial management, anger control, demands for qualified teachers in peripheral schools, advocacy for cultural and recreational infrastructure such as libraries, and coverage of housing, transportation, and healthcare inequalities. Participants also called for highlighting residents' capacities and success stories, structured dialogue between marginal communities and city officials, diversified formats (documentary, talk show, educational, and purposeful entertainment), the formation of expert production teams, media-driven accountability vis-à-vis policymakers, an emphasis on social responsibility, and a deliberate move away from criminalizing and negativist representations toward hope-oriented content.

Conclusions:

The findings demonstrate that effective media management of the marginalization crisis in Mashhad requires a fundamental transformation in both content and institutional strategy. At the content level, Khorasan Razavi television must discontinue programming that reproduces stigma, fear, urban discrimination, and symbolic separation between the city center and its marginal neighborhoods, and instead adopt a realistic yet identity-affirming approach that represents these areas through their history, social capacities, and recoverable potentials. At the institutional level, the broadcaster needs to move beyond managerial conservatism, strengthen staff knowledge of media theory and crisis communication, improve coordination with relevant organizations-including formal representation in Mashhad's marginalization crisis committee-and allocate sustained financial resources to this domain. Strategically, the results support a transition from a passive or reactive media posture to a proactive and even hyperactive one, characterized by predictive, preventive, and preparatory functions across the three phases of crisis. Only through this combined revision of content, institutional capacity, and strategic orientation can the provincial broadcaster move beyond merely reporting the crisis and contribute meaningfully to reducing its social, symbolic, and practical consequences in Mashhad.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the authors.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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