

# How *Parts Unknown* Challenged the American Narrative

By Tara Yazdan Panah

Celebrity chef and documentarian Anthony Bourdain's passing in 2018 troubled me and many other Iranians. To many of us, he was an ally of misrepresented peoples. His travel show *Parts Unknown* was one of my favorite ways to spend an afternoon. Each episode centered around a city or country where Bourdain sat down with locals, shared meals with them, and learned about their personal and political struggles.

I was first introduced to Bourdain in 2014, when my sister showed me an episode of *Parts Unknown* in which Bourdain traveled to Iran. An American traveling with a *CNN* documentary crew in Iran? I was extremely curious to find out how my family's homeland would be portrayed. Knowing how Western media typically depicts the Middle East, I wasn't expecting much.

It didn't take long for me to breathe a sigh of relief.

"I am so confused. It wasn't supposed to be like this," Bourdain said in the first minute of the episode. "Of all the places, of all the countries, of all the years of traveling, it is here, in Iran, I am greeted most warmly by total strangers."

Bourdain spends the next 40 minutes eating kabobs and stews, bowling with young Iranians, speaking with journalists, and street racing with locals.

To this day, I rewatch that episode whenever I'm homesick.

Hearing someone dispel common misconceptions about Iran in front of their large American audience was an empowering experience for me. I've lost track of the number of times I've had to explain to my peers that I feel perfectly safe whenever I visit Iran—in many cases, safer than I have felt in the United States.

Far too often, I've clarified that Iran is not a country of America-hating bigots, but rather a country of people who rightfully reject the U.S. government's interference in their domestic affairs. My freshman year, I even had to explain to someone in my hall that Iran and Iraq are not the same country.

That being said, *Parts Unknown* wasn't a perfect depiction of any country and their struggles against American influence and intervention. After all, *CNN* isn't known for its progressive foreign policy positions. At the very least, however, it gave many Americans their first taste of what life is like in non-Western countries.

And it didn't speak of communities' stories in isolation—it dealt with hard-to-swallow pills about American imperialism. Bourdain famously said in one episode, "Once you've been to Cambodia, you'll never stop wanting to beat Henry Kissinger to death with your bare hands."<sup>1</sup> You seldom see this type of criticism in American media, and so-called "liberal" outlets don't challenge pro-American narratives, either.



P.C. Annie Spratt via Unsplash

Don't get me wrong, I don't think a few travel documentaries are going to "save" the Middle East from western villainization. Linguist, political theorist, and Penn alumnus Noam Chomsky has said that any dictator would admire the uniformity and obedience of the U.S. media.<sup>2</sup> Our mainstream media outlets, much like the rest of the population, buy into the idea that America's actions toward the rest of the world are often justified. The media will tell viewers what they want to hear, and the average American viewer probably does not want to hear about the many atrocities their tax dollars fund (i.e. Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan—and that's just in the Middle East).

When journalists and celebrities expose viewers to another country's culture, it does have a real, material effect on people's lives. It's tiring to hear the same questions rooted in stereotypes and ignorance. If Americans only hear the limited perspectives that typically come from *MSNBC*, *CNN*, and *The New York Times*, they limit their own understanding of different cultures, people, and places. Looking past superficial reporting can hold significant value in strengthening your relationships with people of other cultures.

The problem is that many Americans don't put in effort to learn outside of the mainstream, and our Eurocentric education system is no help. Shows like *Parts Unknown* brought an inkling of reality into American homes, beyond

the purview of Western societies. I'm grateful for a high-quality production that portrayed humanity in the Middle East. But really, I shouldn't be grateful at all—such portrayals should be the standard across all media and they shouldn't be limited to "foodie" audiences.

Plenty of Penn students will come to hold significant positions of power, and many will find themselves as executives in media conglomerates and production companies. It's our duty to use our

education to promote perspectives and concerns that are voiced by affected communities, rather than uphold an agenda that pumps out the most profit and downplays the harms of Western imperialism and capitalism.

Unfortunately, many Penn students grad-

uate with the harmful mindset of profit over people, and President Trump's mishandling of COVID-19 and his increasing militaristic policies globally are prime examples of that. Nevertheless, when I see my peers fighting for social justice and educating others on their backgrounds, it gives me hope that Penn students will challenge narrow-mindedness about other cultures in their future careers and amplify marginalized voices from communities around the world.

Until then, I'll summon Anthony Bourdain's legacy, share a traditional Persian meal with friends, and explain all the intricacies of my culture and people to those willing to listen.

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