

Don't blame non-readers, rethink book engageability: **Podcaster**

Farhad Arkani



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INTERVIEW EXCLUSIVE

science-fiction short stories, before he turned 18. He studied civil engineering at university but soon realized he needed to pursue what his restless mind had always been drawn to: literature, history, physics, cosmology and biology. His father was a veteran radio producer, and after graduating in the early 2000s, Arkani entered broadcasting himself, beginning as a writer and editor-in-chief before eventually becoming a presenter and producer. "Around then, I met Sara Sefati who would later become my wife. She was new to translation, just getting started. We worked on a few popular books that did well. From there, we built a life together," he recalls.

Throughout those years, as he puts it, he "wrote whenever he could, and kept translating and editing".

Nearly eight years have now passed since he launched the Telegram channel and podcast platforms that introduced his work to a wider audience. The project began with his audio reading of "Sapiens" by Yuval Noah Harari, an undertaking that opened the door to the world of podcasting.

One of Arkani's most striking qualities is his voice and his ability to turn written words into compelling audio. He reads as though he were the author himself. His tone, rhythm and delivery shift naturally with the text, drawing listeners into the language and ideas of a book and carrying them forward, step by step, without ever allowing the performance itself to overshadow the work. Along the way, Arkani met Professor Hamed Vahdati-Nasab, a leading archaeologist who earned his PhD in prehistoric anthropology from Arizona State University in Phoenix and now teaches at Tarbiat Modares University in Tehran. Together with their friend Bahar Katouzi, they launched "Banafsh" (literally meaning purple in Persian), a podcast devoted to promoting science and, to some extent, pushing back against pseudoscience. Arkani considers Banafsh one of the proudest achievements of his life, citing its massive hits and the extraordinary responses it has received.

"If you asked me today what my profession is, I probably wouldn't have a precise answer," Arkani says. "But if you asked what I love doing most, the answer is simple: learning, telling stories and inviting others on a journey that never truly ends."

Iran Daily sat down with Arkani for an exclusive interview that follows.

IRAN DAILY: It has been about eight years since you launched "Reading Books for Sapiens" on Telegram, a channel whose name was inspired by one of the world's best-known books. A quick look through the channel reveals audiobooks on prehistoric humans, evolution, evolutionary psychology, cosmology, astrophysics, the human brain, artificial intelligence and many other subjects. What motivated you to start this cultural campaign, especially in today's fast-paced world and without any expectation of making money?

ARKANI: When I launched the channel, my goal wasn't simply to produce audiobooks. I felt our society needed better tools for "thinking better" more than ever before. Every day we're bombarded with an overwhelming amount of information, rumors, misconceptions and unfounded claims. To me, the best vaccine against that chaos is familiarizing oneself with the scientific way of thinking.

That's why I've mostly chosen books that do more than present scientific facts. They change the way we look at the world. Whether they're about evolution, the cosmos, cognitive science, AI, biology or human history, these books remind us how our species arrived where it is today, how our brains work, why we fall into cognitive traps and where we fit in the vast universe. In a sense, they're lessons in intellectual humility and realistic thinking.

There was another reason as well. Not everyone has the time or patience to read a thick book, but almost everyone can listen while driving, walking or getting through everyday routines.

And no, this has never been a commercial venture, and it still isn't. The greatest reward comes from messages I receive from listeners who tell me that after hearing a book or even a single episode, they've started looking at the world, humanity or even themselves differently. If my work has played even a small part in helping people become more curious, more critical and



Author and translator Farhad Arkani (R) and his colleagues, leading archaeologist Hamed Vahdati-Nasab (L) and writer and actress Bahar Katouzi, are seen at a studio in Tehran, Iran, where they produce Banafsh, a podcast that promotes science and fights pseudoscience.

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more committed to seeking the truth, then I feel my years have not been wasted.

How do you decide which books to turn into audiobooks? What draws you to this

particular type of work?

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Choosing a book has never been a random process for me. The first question I ask myself is, "Can this book change the way someone thinks?" If the answer is yes, there's a good chance I'll choose it. I always ask myself whether a listener will come away seeing the world just a little differently. My own interests inevitably play a role too. I honestly believe that if I don't genuinely love a text or know it inside out, I shouldn't, and probably can't, bring it to life in audio form.

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I say "edit and narrate" because I almost always revise the text before recording it. That alone is an incredibly time-consuming process.

My own interests inevitably play a role too. I honestly believe that if I don't genuinely love a text or know it inside out, I shouldn't, and probably can't, bring it to life in audio form. That's something I constantly tell students in my voice and presentation workshops: Know the text so well that it feels as if you wrote it yourself. Otherwise, the recording will sound flat and be difficult to follow.

Many people wonder what practical value there is in studying evolution. How does learning about a primate that lived two million years ago, or Homo sapiens wandering in mountains and plains 50,000 years ago, help people living today?

At first glance, studying creatures that lived millions of years ago may seem far removed from everyday life. But in fact, understanding our evolutionary past is one of the most practical ways to understand who we are today. We are the product of billions of years of biological history, and many traits we still see in ourselves have their roots in that past, from the way fear and anger arise to our tendency toward tribalism, pattern-seeking, credulity, competition and cooperation.

Evolutionary psychology helps explain why the human mind, despite all the extraordinary advances in science and technology, remains vulnerable to cognitive biases, prejudice and erroneous beliefs. Once we recognize that our brains evolved to solve the problems of an ancient world, we become better equipped to understand their