Chapter 22

Radio in Afghanistan: socially useful communications in wartime

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This case study examines the experience of radio broadcasting aimed at bringing about developmental change in Afghanistan over the past twenty-five years. One particular project is examined –the radio soap opera *New Home New Life* which has been broadcasting since 1994. Alongside other examples of radio, it is analysed in terms of methodology and the constraints involved in broadcasting to a conflict area. It examines *New Home New Life*'s impact and pulls together some lessons learned for future media interventions of this kind.

Preamble: the social communication process

In 1930, the German writer Bertolt Brecht suggested that:

> radio could be the most wonderful public communication system imaginable, a gigantic system of channels –could be, that is, if it were capable not only of transmitting but of receiving, of making listeners hear but also speak, not of isolating them but connecting them (Lewis and Booth, 1989).

What Brecht did not understand –because radio at that time was a top-down medium– was how in later decades technological advances have worked with programme innovation to transform radio into an interactive medium which can connect people and enable communication between governments and populations and vice versa. The phone-in programme, for example, and the increasing use of text messaging, have both allowed listeners to have their say. This inclusiveness has created a degree of "ownership" by listeners over programmes. In many countries,

this helps programme producers broadcast on issues relevant to the audience, who then listen with greater interest and loyalty. Developing countries are catching up, as mobile telephony and deregulation of the media lead to new programming initiatives. Where there is no easy access to phones, this "feedback loop" requires more pro-active work by the broadcasters –going to villages, consulting listeners on priority issues, recording their reactions to programmes etc. In conflict areas this process of "socially useful" programming is often driven by broadcasters, as the government either does not exist, is very weak, or preoccupied with pressing military issues. Afghanistan is a particularly interesting example because of the size and loyalty of its radio audience, which gave credible broadcasters a remarkable opportunity to influence social and behaviour change over the past twenty-five years. In this case study, I am avoiding the academic debate over "social" or "behaviour" change by taking the view that one cannot happen without the other. Thus, when an Afghan decides to allow his wife to be vaccinated because of hearing a radio programme, he does so after consulting his peers and after social norms have adjusted, making this an acceptable action. His behaviour change is an integral part of a wider social change.

From news to "intended outcomes" programmes

In the mid 1980s, BBC broadcasters were faced with a set of opportunities, as well as a number of difficulties, in developing "socially useful" radio programs in Afghanistan –in other words, programs that are designed to have an "intended outcome". It should be stressed that in wartime, impartial radio news programmes from respected broadcasters are "socially useful" in that they are often the only reliable means for people to learn about security and political issues on which their lives may depend. The respected American broadcaster and correspondent during the Second World War, Ed Murrow, explained this succinctly: "To be persuasive we must be believable; to be believable we must be credible; to be credible we must be truthful".

In the context of this case study, "socially useful" is interpreted to cover programmes aimed at some kind of social or behaviour change in the fields of health, awareness of landmines, social issues relating to the family and gender relationships, drug addiction and a host of other topics. On the positive side, the BBC had an unrivalled reputation for fair reporting and analysis of a vicious and largely secret war between the Soviet occupiers with their Afghan government allies against the various bands of *mujahedin* (holy warriors) and their supporters during the 1980s. In wartime, travel is difficult and dangerous, people are isolated and often afraid, and the radio is all-important as a source of reliable news and comment[1]. Evidence from the time indicates that Afghans were voracious radio listeners to every station broadcasting in Pashto and Persian, particularly the BBC, VOA (Voice of America), Deutschewelle, Radio Iran, Radio Pakistan and All India

1 For more discussion see Skuse (2002).

Radio. They listened to Radio Afghanistan as well, most of them with deep scepticism, though there were some socially useful programmes, particularly a daily one on family life. In Pakistan, 82% of male Afghan Pashto speakers and 42% of women listened to the BBC Pashto Service in 1988[2]. Many made real sacrifices to buy batteries, and those without radios often listened with their neighbours.

In the 1980s, the BBC had a large, loyal audience both inside Afghanistan and amongst the five to six million Afghan refugees in Pakistan, Iran, the Gulf States and further a field. This was fertile ground for extending programmes to socially useful issues, and for providing advice on everyday survival from health to mines-awareness. The rationale was compelling: in rural areas of Afghanistan people's lives had been turned upside down; most schools and health centres had been destroyed and they had to face the hazards from millions of anti-personnel mines sprayed from aircraft. Farmers faced new challenges in cultivating crops and keeping their animals alive. There was a need for basic services supplied by NGOs to be supported by information about coping with the burning issues of everyday life. Radio Afghanistan was not fulfilling these information needs, particularly those related to rural areas and the refugee camps where most people lived.

The biggest problem for the BBC Pashto and Persian services was that they broadcast from London, some 5,000 kms away. Programmes which set out to provide useful advice on health, farming and social issues had to research the specific issues with great care –difficult at such a distance. The BBC's Audience Research department was geared almost exclusively to finding out how many people were listening, not what their broadcasting needs were. Another problem was that effective social communication is participatory and interactive, again made very difficult by distances and dangers of travel inside the country. There were hardly any phones available to listeners, and cell and satellite phones had yet to be invented. Also, programmes aimed at social change were very new to the BBC, and many people within the corporation were hostile to the concept. It was, they believed, akin to propaganda.

Then there was cost: programmes aimed at social or behaviour change are comparatively expensive to research and produce. Even BBC foreign news was poorly resourced twenty years ago: there was a single international news reporter in Pakistan tasked with covering the Afghan war as well as Pakistan, and a couple of London based analysts who wrote on political and military developments. Donors were slow to understand the potential impact of broadcasting socially useful programmes despite the well-known popularity of the BBC amongst Afghans. The British Overseas Development Administration (now Department for International Development, DFID), quickly rejected a funding query on the grounds that this would be "double funding" the BBC World Service (which is funded by a government grant-in-aid). Despite increased suffer-

2 International Broadcasting and Audience Research Report, Pashto Service listening, BBC, 1988.

ing by the population in the face of an increasingly destructive civil war, it took eighteen months to find funds from United Nations agencies (UNDP and UNICEF) and the International Committee of the Red Cross to launch *New Home New Life,* the BBC radio soap opera which went on the air in April 1994 and has been broadcast three times weekly in Pashto and Dari (Persian) ever since.

New Home New Life

Although there had been several educational series beforehand, including a drama called *Good Health, New Home New Life* was the most significant BBC radio programme aimed at bringing about social change in Afghanistan. It was produced in the region –Peshawar in Pakistan– as Afghan cities were either unsafe or too remote. This allowed participative research with listeners, and recruitment of some of the finest Afghan writers and broadcasters who had fled war-torn Kabul. A total of about one hundred and fifty staff were eventually involved –writers, radio producers, educationalists, an evaluation team and some fifty part-time actors. For the first time, a soap opera was broadcast in Dari as well as Pashto –the two major languages of the country. Evaluations of the previous radio soap *Good Health*[3] had confirmed that soap opera was a popular and effective genre amongst Afghans, especially women, whose numbers listening regularly to the Pashto Service doubled following its broadcast[4]. The audience soon became used to the multiple storylines, which could focus on specific themes for months on end without boring the audience or appearing to preach at them. This repetition is often essential if key issues are to become accepted and acted on by listeners.

The over-arching reason for *New Home New Life*'s popularity was its mix of fast moving, well-written topical storylines and fine acting. It was also the only topical radio drama available to a population which was isolated and starved of entertainment. The skills of Afghanistan's most talented writers and actors were rapidly honed into the genre of soap-opera. Major storylines ranged from the gently romantic saga of the heroine Gulalai, whose health worker activities were a role model for female listeners, to the escapades of the village chief Jabbar Khan and his clowning servant Nazir. The comic scenes struck a chord with the black humour that Afghans have found so popular throughout their dark years of conflict and oppression. The drama also tackled serious issues familiar to listeners –living with lawlessness, international humanitarian law, infant and child health, abuse of drugs, protecting livestock from disease, rural livelihoods, deforestation, mines awareness, education for girls, marrying young girls to much older men, and the practice of trading unmarried women in order to end family or tribal feuds. Despite the strong pro-women agenda, even the Taliban were avid listeners, caught up in the suspense of what would happen next to their favourite characters. There were popular outcries from listeners on

3 Unpublished focus group survey, 1990 (in possession of the author).

4 IBAR, 1984 and 1988, BBC, London.

a number of occasions, for instance when one popular character was 'killed' by a stray bullet in a feud, and when another tried to commit suicide rather than be married against her will.

There was no preconceived theoretical basis to this approach, but it approximated to the example of the long running radio soap in the UK, *The Archers,* and to the Mexican TV producer Manuel Sabido's use of *telenovela*, broadcast initially in support of a government literacy campaign. This use of soap opera or serial drama characters to promote social and behaviour change was later summed up by the American social psychologist, Albert Bandura:

> The format was creatively founded on the basic social cognitive principles in which efficacious modelling serves as the principle means to inform, motivate and enable people to make a better life for themselves (1997: 506).

However, Bandura warns:

> Social persuasion alone is not enough to promote adoptive behaviour. To increase receptivity one must also create optimal conditions for learning the new ways, provide the resources and positive incentives for adopting them, and build supports into the social system to sustain them (514).

In a war zone, this creates some difficulties: how can mass media interventions be supported by government programmes and incorporated into a social system when there is no meaningful government and little security? The response of the *New Home New Life* team, or BBC Afghan Education Projects (AEP) as it became known, was to make maximum use of radio –two repeats within a week, as well as other channels available to reinforce the key issues of the soap opera: series of radio educational feature programmes were produced, and a cartoon magazine in Dari and Pashto language versions, colourfully produced and using simple language, was distributed through the NGOs. These aid organisations working inside Afghanistan and in the refugee camps of Pakistan provided additional information, goods and services that formed the basis of the drama's educational content.

The absence of government was a mixed blessing: the major down side was the lack of nationwide service delivery and of Bandura's "positive incentives", but on the other hand there was a refreshing lack of bureaucracy and a "can-do" attitude from Pakistan based NGOs involved in health, education, farming, de-mining and other activities. Close collaboration with the NGOs was central to *New Home New Life:* they were invited to monthly consultative meetings so they could comment on draft storylines and ensure they were culturally appropriate and technically accurate. The listeners were also consulted through regular needs assessment surveys inside Afghanistan and amongst Afghan refugees.

At the same time, listeners were often quick to comment on the authenticity of the plots: in the case of one dramatised spot on the dangers of people returning to houses which had been booby-trapped, one listener wrote to

the BBC that the dialogue between family members delighting in seeing all their possessions again was wholly unrealistic. "If soldiers had been in the house, it would have been looted" was his comment. There were other instances where the advice given was not appropriate –inevitably so bearing in mind the size of the country and the diversity of the audience. Indeed, in order to be entertaining, *New Home New Life* had to portray a happier existence than was typical for most listeners. There is evidence that the audience realised this, but nevertheless they continued to listen and learn from the storylines, and even to internalise some of the more dramatic moments, such as holding condolence services in mosques for characters who had "died" (Skuse, 2002). This degree of identification with the drama led to a gradual assumption by many listeners that *New Home New Life* was "owned" by them rather than being imposed on them.

Editorial challenges

New Home New Life was high profile: the scheduling of the programme was prime time. The editorial stance was daring but not reckless. It was not overtly political, but many of its storylines were controversial in these volatile times of civil war, Taliban rule and social upheaval. Girls' education has been consistently championed by the drama, as have women working outside the home. Repressive customs such as forced marriages to end disputes were dramatised. Sterility amongst males –commonly blamed on women and used as an excuse for taking a second wife– was tackled. Despite the sensitivity of the topics, research conducted at the time concluded that *New Home New Life* successfully created a fictional "space" which allowed hitherto taboo social issues to be discussed and questioned within the family, the first stage of shifting social norms:

> the production does not mount a particularly vigorous challenge to patriarchal authority, since it is recognised that this would alienate more of the audience than it would win over; rather, it seeks to work within normative culture, eking out small spaces for manoeuvre in which change can be advanced from within the relative safety of soap opera gossip (Skuse, forthcoming)

The danger of landmines is a constant hazard to the inhabitants of Upper and Lower villages, the two fictional communities of the drama. Celebratory gun firing, and the use of weapons to settle disputes, the targeting of civilians in warfare, the extortion of money at roadblocks, were all subjected to scrutiny in *New Home New Life* storylines. These, and many others, all represented a challenge to common practices in Afghanistan during these unstable times. As the increasingly lawless mujahedin or Taliban were often the worst offenders, the potential for creating offence was there. Political assassination was common in Peshawar, and the BBC AEP staff were possible targets of violence, although there was nothing disgruntled Afghan authorities could do to disrupt the actual transmissions which were international and outside their control. This is one major advantage of

recruiting a major international broadcaster to focus on socially useful programmes in wartime or in a post-conflict situation. They have the transmission networks to reach populations through short and medium wave broadcasts that are beyond the control of hostile governments. As the current popularity of Radio Free Afghanistan –funded by the US Congress– shows, listeners in Afghanistan are able to make a distinction between the quality of programmes and the possible political agendas of those who fund the station.

In the event, there have been no serious threats against the BBC AEP, despite the controversial nature of many storylines. The main reason for this was the popularity of the programme. The quality of writing and acting was high, the issues which were raised were topical, relevant and well researched. Critically, they were also presented within the broad cultural parameters of Islam and Afghan society, and not imposed on Afghan listeners from a western standpoint, as some aid organisations tended to do with, for instance, issues involving women's rights[5].

Obtaining a successful balance was the prime responsibility of the first BBC AEP Project Manager, John Butt, an Englishman with incisive editorial judgement, but also a convert to Islam and fluent in Pashto and Dari. With his knowledge of the languages, Afghan culture and religion, he was personally able to edit the final scripts, avoid indiscretions and unintended ambiguities. He oversaw the use of simple Pashto and Dari in dialogue –a language which listeners could identify with as colloquial language in everyday use. This was not easy, as both languages are normally written in a more formal style. He also established the editorial standards for his Afghan successors, but his great achievement was steering AEP a steady course in the uncertain early days before success was assured, and when the whole project was vulnerable to pressure from the Afghan authorities, donors and even an initially sceptical BBC management.

When the Taliban came to power in 1995, they reportedly debated whether or not to ban radio listening at the same time as banning TV viewing. However, moderate voices prevailed, realizing the enormous resentment such an edict was to cause a people so devoted to their radios for news and –thanks to *New Home New Life*– entertainment and education. On a number of issues, the Taliban even issued edicts prohibiting practices that had been highlighted by the drama; one example was the story of Asghar, a student at a *madrassah* (religious school) who was sent to battle. Following the broadcast, the Taliban swiftly banned the practice of sending young students to the front, and providing *madrassahs* to accommodate them[6]. Whether this edict was always respected is another matter.

5 For an interesting analysis of NGOs and gender issues see "Afghanistan: Pride and Principle" in Vaux (2001).

6 Butt, John: personal communication to the author.

Impact

Despite the evidence of its popularity, the central test of *New Home New Life*'s usefulness –as that of any media intervention in any war zone where interpersonal support and reinforcement is very limited– is whether people are influenced in their behaviour through listening to it. This was monitored by quarterly missions carried out by the AEP evaluation team in different regions of Afghanistan. From the "before and after" surveys (see below), it is clear that people learned from the drama, and that they remembered what they learned. But there are two central problems to any evaluation of this kind: the first is separating what people *say* they do with this information from assessing what they *actually do*, and secondly, isolating the impact of the chosen media intervention from those of other media or interpersonal interventions. Regarding the latter constraint, Afghanistan at war presented an opportunity: there was so little development communication work going on, and BBC's popularity was so well documented, that it was possible to attribute impact on key issues to the soap opera. It was, however, more difficult to isolate *actual* from *reported* behaviour or social change.

However, the project benefited from expert assistance from two quarters: training from Dr. Astier Almedom, an expert in participatory rural appraisal from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, for the AEP Evaluation Team in techniques of participatory rural appraisal, and the work of Andrew Skuse, then an anthropology doctoral candidate from University College London. They both added qualitative anthropological data to help understand the communication process between broadcaster and listener and hence the true impact of the soap opera[7]. Finally, a large-scale survey conducted by CIET International gave some remarkable quantitative results on impact.

Examples of reported behaviour and social change

From the many unsolicited examples of behaviour and social change recorded since 1988, several stand out. One is a letter from a health worker in Kunar province from 1991 where he was undertaking a vaccination campaign. He wrote

> …unfortunately the women of the area were not prepared to be vaccinated by us. The next day, while sitting with elders of the area, we heard a BBC (health) message about the tetanus bacteria … and how important the vaccination programme was … we were happy and surprised to see that the next day the men of the area who had obviously listened to the BBC brought 300 of their women to be vaccinated[8].

Significantly, this re-think was probably prompted by the interpersonal reinforcement of the healthworkers –support for the Bandura thesis that mass media are

7 Both contributed to subsequent publications: Almedom, 1996 and Skuse, 2002 and forthcoming.
8 BBC World Service Press Release, 15th August 1991.

most effective if backed up by 'incentives'– in this case vaccinations, and health workers on hand to answer questions. This extract from a diary kept by a village woman in a different part of Afghanistan indicates a similar impact five years later:

> 28/11/96: A team of vaccinators came to our village […] I asked them if the elders of the families tried to stop them vaccinating people. They replied that a few years back there were some people in families who were against vaccination; they allowed the children to come but not the ladies. Now that they have listened to the drama most people know that they should be vaccinated and they let women go too[9].

The diary writer went on to describe a conversation with a woman at a wedding ceremony who confided that she feared for the health of her children because:

> I heard from the drama that the disease is caused by mosquitoes. I will try and get nets for the windows and doors and I am sure the children won't get this disease if I can find nets.

The BBC AEP's evaluation team uncovered a similar story some 500 km north in the city of Mazar-e-Sharif, though significantly there was no reinforcement by health workers:

> In Mrs Wazir's house in Mazar-e-Sharif, the first thing we noticed was a bright white mosquito net covering the bed … showing us the mosquito net, she said she made it herself with netting cloth because nets are not available in Mazar. She laughed and said the BBC told her to do it[10].

And another anecdote from the BBC AEP team on the impact of one of the soap opera's strongest themes –the dangers of dealing in scrap metal, particularly to the children who forage for it on old battlefields:

> I have a friend named Abdul Ghani. He used to have a scrap metal shop. When an explosion took place in Painda's [character from *New Home New Life*] scrap shop, killing some and wounding others, Abdul Ghani gave up his scrap business and opened a cloth shop instead[11].

And this was recorded by a journalist during Taliban rule in 1998:

> One woman, who gave her name as Imam Jam's wife said that the example of Gulalai [female healthworker from *New Home New Life*] had persuaded her to let her daughters work outside the house. Her daughter, cradling a 10 days old baby, said she had even taken off her *burqa* (veil) once or twice. Her mother clicked her tongue in disapproval[12].

9 "Three Day Diary", Skuse, Andrew, BBC AED Evaluation Newsletter Vol. 1 No. 1, 1997.

10 Project Report for WHO 1996-7, BBC AEP, Peshawar.

11 Annual Report for DFID 1997-8, BBC AEP, Peshawar.

12 "The BBC sends a Message" in Soap, Independent, 25 July 1998, p. 16.

These few extracts indicate the power of credible radio drama characters to model behaviour which listeners can later recall. The next section examines the more difficult question as to whether they act on what they have heard.

Examples of actual change

From the earliest BBC educational broadcasts, it was clear that Afghans were quick to learn and remember facts from radio programmes. In other words, their knowledge improved through radio listening. With *New Home New Life* the BBC AEP introduced a more systematic evaluation process, asking specific questions related to important issues before and after the relevant episodes of the drama, and then returning two years later to ask the same questions to test recall. A sample of 300 respondents was used, taken from a town, a village on the road and a village off the road. The results are indicative only, and not representative of the entire population as the samples were small and not strictly random. But the trends are revealing. The percentages are those who answered correctly.

Mines Awareness

Q1: What are the warning signs of mines? (A: red paint).
Q2: What do you do when an unfamiliar object is found (A: inform the mine-clearance team).

	Before (April 1995)		After (October 1995)		Later (Feb 1997)	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Q1:	67%	19%	89%	56%	91%	76%
Q2:	19%	14%	43%	52%	89%	59%

Q1: When should weaning be introduced? (A: between 3 and 6 months after birth).
Q2: What should a lactating mother who has TB do when feeding her child? (A: cover her mouth).
Q3: What is the best protection against malaria? (A: mosquito nets).

	Before (April 1995)		After (October 1995)		Later (Feb 1997)	
Q1:	38%	43%	72%	73%	56%	50%
Q2:	31%	30%	73%	96%	45%	91%
Q3:	73%	54%	90%	96%	84%	93%[13]

The data show variable results –perhaps influenced by the duration and attractiveness of the different storylines– but the general trend is an increase in knowledge and an ability to remember the key points (without reinforcement), and considerable knowledge retention two years later.

Unlike the surveys above, which indicate knowledge acquisition or reported behaviour change, the example below is a rare example of actual behaviour or social change.

13 "Long Term Memory and *New Home New Life*", in Evaluation Newsletter, Vol. 1 No. 1, BBC AEP, Peshawar (undated).

This is a survey commissioned by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan (UNOCHA) and undertaken by CIET International –*The 1997 Mine Awareness Evaluation*. From a large sample taken from 86 sentinel sites representing some 57,000 people from over 9,000 households inside Afghanistan, and including 86 male, 86 child and 7 female focus groups as well as interviews with 471 mine victims, the survey was required to assess the most effective way of informing Afghans about the dangers of landmines. Fieldwork was focused on a random sample of sentinel communities selected to represent four United Nations administered regions –Herat, Kandahar, Jalalabad and Kabul. Along with *New Home New Life*, the efforts of three other organisations involved in community-based training were assessed. The results showed that the BBC was not only effective in getting the key messages across, but in fact had a strikingly positive impact on mines casualties:

> Considering only those in mine affected areas, a non-listener was twice as likely to be a mine victim after 1994 [when *New Home New Life* started], in comparison with a *New Home* listener (odds ratio 2.01, $p<0.05$). This encouraging indicator contrasts with the notable absence of evidence of impact on mine events by the three direct [face-to-face] training programmes[14].

This survey –which was as close to a scientific nationwide sampling as it was possible to have at that time– also found that BBC listeners were more likely to report mines incidents than non-listeners; 23% of respondents said they would not enter a marked minefield or mined building, and 27% recalled the long running *New Home New Life* story of Jandad who lost a leg in a mine incident, had depression during his months of recovery, but finally found a job, got married and had children. There were distortions in the survey, particularly in terms of the small number of female respondents. However, 50% of household heads replied they listened to the BBC, of whom 93% listened to *New Home New Life,* 73% of them with their wives and children. Almost all reported that their wives listened to the programme. These encouraging findings are in line with the BBC's own surveys on mines awareness, and that of Handicap International, one of the other mines training programmes evaluated by CIET. According to a HI report from 1996, of the 31 respondents, 26 could remember specific drama stories on mines awareness[15].

What these examples –and particularly the CIET survey– indicate is that listeners *can* change behaviour through exposure to the mass media *alone*, contrary to the claims of many researchers, including Bandura. But to achieve this level of impact, programmes have to be well researched, produced and structured, and broadcast at times convenient for the target listeners.

14 "The 1997 National Mine Awareness Evaluation: final report to UNOCHA", CIET International, 1998.

15 Quoted in "Radio for Meeting Learning Needs in Emergencies", paper delivered by John Butt at a workshop on Multi-Channel learning organised by UNICEF in Cairo in October 1996.

Alliances for peace-building between media and aid organisations

Another significant influence of radio in Afghanistan was recorded in November 1994, when a combination of special announcements and features broadcast on a number of BBC programmes including the soap opera, gave the widest possible publicity to the biggest immunisation campaign in Afghanistan for 17 years. Thanks to this, along with painstaking efforts of WHO (World Health Organisation), UNICEF and local NGOs who set up the infrastructure for the campaign and negotiated with government and warlords, there was a nationwide ceasefire for one week –the first in Afghanistan for 16 years. Not only were one million children and 300,000 women vaccinated, but hostilities were suspended– a revealing example of what can be achieved when an issue benefiting all sides is effectively negotiated during a period of conflict. It was also a lesson on what can be achieved when the mass media and aid workers collaborate closely. The BBC's role in this first groundbreaking campaign led to discussion in the correspondence columns of the London *Times* on the importance of mass media collaborating with aid organisations in ventures of this kind[16].

This set a precedent, and a number of subsequent ceasefire NIDs (national immunisation days) were subsequently negotiated in Afghanistan, one of them due to take place just as coalition forces were about to invade Afghanistan in October 2001. The aid agencies had pulled out of Afghanistan, there was near panic in Kabul because the American bombing campaign was expected at any time, yet the NID was scheduled to continue. The BBC broadcast a series of announcements after *New Home New Life* along the lines of "despite the current difficulties, the national immunisation day is taking place as scheduled", and "even if you are on the move, please get your children vaccinated: emergencies will pass, but if a child catches polio, the child may have to live with paralysis throughout life"[17]. The NID happened, and a large number of children were vaccinated. Later, one woman in Kabul spoke to the BBC and said:

> With a lot of people leaving Kabul, one thought the Americans were coming to wipe Afghanistan off the face of the earth. But when we heard in *New Home New Life* that vaccination was being carried out and when we saw it happening, I suddenly thought 'there is still hope'. That is how I got my children vaccinated and I decided to stay put for which I am happy. Many other people who ran, suffered a lot[18].

16 Letters column, 31.1.95 and 3.3.95, *The Times* of London.

17 Siddiqi, Shirazuddin - personal communication to the author (May 2004).

18 Siddiqi, op cit.

Immediate post-conflict challenges

The current simmering conflict in Afghanistan is posing new challenges for BBC AEP and other broadcasters of "socially useful" programs. There is increased competition from international and national radio stations. And while it was possible in wartime to set the social and educational broadcasting agenda in consultation with aid organisations, in the post-conflict era close collaboration with government is needed. This is particularly true in Afghanistan where the transitional government headed by President Karzai is sensitive over the presence of western coalition forces and is keen to show it is in charge over non-security matters. There are multiple problems, one being that the Afghan civil service, decimated by 25 years of conflict and emigration, has a huge shortfall of skills and resources with which to run the country.

Education is an interesting example of this: the Afghan Ministry of Education has largely reverted to a traditional centralised model of service delivery and teacher training based on 1970s learning psychology. There is little understanding of "child centred" educational methods, of modern cognitive approaches or how modern media programmes and technology can help fulfil the urgent need for education at all levels. This has proven to be a challenge for *It's Great to Learn*, part of the Afghan Primary Education Project (APEP), funded by USAID since February 2003 and implemented by Media Support Solutions, which provides tailor-made radio programmes aimed at improving primary teachers' skills. *It's Great to Learn* is based on the proposition –tested through *New Home New Life*– that Afghans are capable of learning from radio listening alone, and putting what they learn into action. Programmes feature a combination of learning themes from the primary school curricula in Pashto, Dari, Maths, Science and Health, Social Studies and Life Skills, along with General Teaching Methodologies focusing on child centred learning. Teachers –who number about 85,000 in total– have the opportunity to be tested on their knowledge after a year, and be awarded a course certificate.

In the Afghan situation, this programme is an obvious short-to-medium term measure bearing in mind the destruction of the educational infrastructure including teacher-training institutions, and the continuing insecurity in the country. Radio's ability to deliver programmes quickly is also responding to the population's urgent desire for education. Girls were banned from going to school under the Taliban, and female teachers –80% of the total– were not allowed to work. Lack of trained teachers is now a major constraint, and if radio can be used to help raise standards, it will be fulfilling an important role in the country's reconstruction.

Despite all this, the Afghan Ministry of Education has been ambivalent over these radio programmes. Education has traditionally been a core function of the state, and it is hard for civil servants brought up in this tradition to accept an outside initiative in teacher training. Also, radio has traditionally been seen as very much a junior partner to traditional teacher training. There is a reluctance to

accept that extraordinary situations require unconventional approaches, including examining teachers in what they have learned from the radio programmes. Teachers are often educated only to 8th or 9th grade, and many in remote areas have no immediate prospect of improving their skills through conventional further training. *It's Great to Learn* also aims to appeal to parents and older siblings who are supporting the educational process, so programmes have to be of general as well as specific interest. This raises another challenge –how to persuade professional educators that the programmes are sufficiently "serious" to be truly useful as a teacher training tool. Much advocacy effort is required so the Ministry assumes ownership of the new approaches. Ultimately it is likely that the strength of the programmes' impact on listeners will win or lose hearts and minds in Kabul's corridors of power.

Freedom of the airwaves

Along with using the media for specific educational or development related purposes, the other major trend in Afghanistan's post-war reconstruction is the freeing of the media from government control. Under the influence of the international community, the embryonic Afghan government was prevailed on to pass a liberal media law in 2002 that allows freedom of expression and the proliferation of private media. This is in sharp contrast to most other Asian countries where the government have been very slow to deregulate the media. One exception is Cambodia, which was influenced by the international community in a similar direction after the UN supervised the elections of 1993.

This process has, in Afghanistan, been oiled by generous aid money for independent radio stations, including a network run by women. Whether they will thrive after the short-term funds dry up, remains to be seen. Lack of donor funds to train people in production skills –a long-term process– can ultimately lead to failure in encouraging media diversity.

Potentially, community based radio stations can have a very positive impact on development –indeed, some twenty of them are broadcasting the daily *It's Great to Learn* programmes. Through their close contact with listeners they are in a good position to enable communication rather than simply provide information. On the other hand, in the politically fragile situation of Afghanistan, they can also become mouthpieces for regionally based warlords who have not been supportive of the government, or even of peace. And while the independent radio sector has been generously funded, Radio Afghanistan has received much less help in restructuring itself, though it has benefited from new transmission and television equipment. As with many state broadcasting organisations, it has too many staff who are badly paid and weakly led. For foreign donors, reforming Radio Afghanistan is not a tempting project –it will be a very long term process, and will almost certainly lead to conflict between donors and government. Whether the current proliferation of independent radio stations is of lasting help to Afghanistan will depend on international donors and local broadcasters work-

ing together to make the stations serve the needs of its listeners rather than being the voice-pieces of powerful local vested interests.

Conclusion

New Home New Life shows that Afghan listeners can absorb key information from the radio drama, and in some instances act on it, without reinforcement from the state or other sources. This is a challenge to Bandura's proposition that "social persuasion" by itself will not succeed in bringing about adoptive behaviour, and this challenge will need to be sustained if *It's Great to Learn* is to work successfully as a teacher training tool. But other examples –for instance the cease-fires to facilitate immunisation campaigns– have also provided support to Bandura's thesis that mass media are more effective when backed by complementary activities on the ground. In a country as large, as remote and as dangerous as Afghanistan, this support can only be delivered sparingly. So the role of radio, which reaches into the homes of most Afghans, remains essential.

Ultimately, the question remains as to whether the Afghan broadcasting experience is relevant in other conflict and post-conflict areas. All situations are unique, and the Afghan trust of the BBC is not replicated everywhere though it is, for instance, in Somalia where listening figures to the BBC are also very high. But a convincing case can be made that people with access to radios do respond to solutions-oriented entertaining programmes, particularly those in their own vernacular languages, which reflect their lives and with which they can identify. In Botswana, a country facing HIV/AIDS prevalence rates of between 30% and 40%, a new radio soap opera attracted two thirds of the country's young people as regular listeners within 18 months of starting, despite there being no history of soap operas in the Setswana language. The evidence is that the show is positively influencing attitudes and behaviour on HIV/AIDS[19]. Organisations such as Search for Common Ground can point to the positive impact of radio drama on national broadcasters in places such as Burundi and Sierra Leone. Radio-based social education projects have mushroomed over the past decade, with the BBC World Service establishing a trust to promote and implement new projects of this kind[20]. With the help of improved satellite delivery systems, deregulation of broadcasting and new digital technology, it seems that the humble transistor radio receiver still has an important part to play in "socially useful" communication with the poor, the remote and those afflicted by war.

Lessons learned

What lessons, then, can be learned from the experiences of broadcasting to Afghanistan during wartime and in the immediate post-conflict period?

19 Makgabaneng Quantitative Survey, CDC, Atlanta, 2002.

20 For a fuller analysis of radio soap operas see Myers (2002).

1 International broadcasters can have considerable influence during wartime, if they are credible and produce relevant socially useful programmes that are entertaining as well as informative. It is important to be close enough to the situation to undertake the necessary rolling research and consultation so the listening audience's social needs are constantly reflected.

2 If they are well produced and transmitted in good quality at prime time, radio programmes can change perceptions and behaviour *on their own* without the "the resources and positive incentives" supporting them which Bandura discusses. The evidence from Afghanistan is that having interpersonal contact to reinforce the issues is a great help, for instance in the anecdote from the healthworker and the national immunisation days cited above. But the impact of radio alone is striking in the case of the mines awareness campaign evaluated by CIET international, and from the BBC AEP's own monitoring reports.

3 Partnerships with aid organisations and/or government are important in terms of verifying the accuracy of programmes, and in service delivery –such as school or teacher education, immunisation or mines clearance.

4 The media being based close to the conflict is important for many reasons: keeping abreast of events which can be fast changing; choosing the appropriate aid organisation with whom to collaborate –some are better informed and more professional than others; having access to listeners for monitoring and needs assessment; and for recruiting staff who have a close understanding of what most concerns the population.

5 Drama –and especially soap opera– is an effective means through which to provide socially useful information. Role modelling through carefully researched characters can be a powerful influence on listeners. But it is comparatively expensive to produce, and there is a danger that it can be misused, hence the need for thorough prior research and continuous monitoring of impact.

6 Use of everyday language is all-important –people identify with not only what is said but *how* it is said. This may mean arbitrating between different dialects, and teaching actors how to read colloquial rather than formal texts. In radio social communications, it is vital to write for the voice in an accessible way.

7 The structuring of information –key messages– in drama or a long running series like *It's Great to Learn,* and then monitoring whether the listeners are absorbing it, is vital to a successful outcome. Careful planning is needed to sequence information and issues for each audience.

8 Priority target audiences have to be identified in advance and the impact of programming on them has to be monitored regularly, and

passed on to the production team so they can adjust the programmes if required. The monitoring team should also identify the specific needs of the target audiences which the programmes can address.

9 Broadcasters have to ensure, as far as possible, that the target audiences have access to the programmes This implies determining in advance when the best time for radio listening is, and whether the target groups have ready access to radios. Also providing audible radio frequencies at the appropriate time on radio stations that are seen as being credible –something which again has to be researched in advance

10 In deregulating the media, it is important to provide sustained, long-term help in production to independent community-based radio stations, etc., so they can enable communication and work with listeners to provide socially useful programming, rather than be simply mouthpieces for local vested interests

In the immediate post-conflict period, providers of socially useful radio programming need to establish links with government broadcasters and other relevant ministries –for instance health or education– in addition to links with aid organisations. Often, government ideas will be traditional, and capacity building activities are needed to update old ideas. Difficulties can result from territorial jealousies, bureaucracy and corruption, and the process is likely to take time. But it is important that new governments should assume a degree of ownership if the initiative is to endure beyond the end of the project. And it is important that domestic broadcasters are helped to assume greater responsibility for socially useful radio programming.