

PAKISTAN'S RADIO WARS



The conflict along Pakistan's northern frontier bordering Afghanistan offers an unprecedented test for international broadcasters reporting the war and refugee crises there and for the seamless interaction of new and old media.

Alan Heil considers the challenges in this expanding arena

When the Pakistani army moved in force in the once peaceful

Swat valley to clear it of opposition Taliban operatives, the fighting caused at least 2m people to flee their villages. The mass flight of civilians in northern Pakistan continues elsewhere in the area, altogether more displaced people than in any other crisis since the Rwanda genocide of 1994.

There are four principal areas of unrest in the region: the Federally-Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in the far north, the Swat valley a bit further south, North and South Waziristan even further to the south and west, and Baluchistan, the wild untamed region in the far west that borders the Indian Ocean.

An estimated 26m inhabitants of the northern border area speak varying dialects of the Pakistani Pashto language – quite distinct from the Pashto spoken in neighbouring Afghanistan. Until VOA launched a service in Pakistani Pashto called Deewa Radio (Deewa means light in Pashto) in September 2006, no international broadcaster had attempted to broadcast in the

language understood by most of the citizens there. Then, even Pakistan's state broadcaster confined its transmissions to the primary language of the country, Urdu.

PORTABLE TRANSMITTERS

The Taliban, during the past several years, developed a network of portable FM transmitters – some on the backs of trucks or even donkeys beaming signals from mountain-tops. These portables transmitted sermons and interpretations of the Koran, along with jihadi music and threats against individuals it targeted for beheadings.

Much listening in the region has been on the illegal Taliban FM stations or lately, those taken over by the Pakistani army or government. FM has been the predominant medium in reaching civilians in the area and VOA, too, is now broadcasting around the clock in Pakistani Pashto to the northern frontier areas via three FM stations from across the border in Afghanistan.

MULTIPLYING VOICES

In the radio wars, the terrain is shifting and the voices are multiplying. VOA's Deewa Radio was the first international broadcaster to respond to the challenge. It began in August 2006

“ If Deewa were not here, the displaced persons would be unknown to the world ”

with a nightly ten-minute newscast on short wave; today it is on the air nine hours daily, from 6-9 a.m. and 6 p.m. to midnight. “The broadcast,” says VOA South Asia Division Director Spozhmai Maiwandi, “is produced by a small but highly motivated and knowledgeable team of journalists in Washington, almost all of whom were brought from Pakistan.”

There are 21 reporters on the scene in northern Pakistan offering eyewitness accounts that are attracting new audiences every day. And these listeners – citizen journalists – are in instant communication with VOA, via cell phones. VOA announced on 13 October that a just-concluded agreement with the Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation now permits VOA to broadcast in Urdu on 11 FM stations across Pakistan. VOA also has a 30-minute daily Urdu TV programme on Geo News, Pakistan's leading cable and TV news channel.

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, too, is starting broadcasts in Pakistani Pashto on shortwave, a spin-off of its service in Afghanistan, Radio Azadi (freedom). By the end of 2009, the two US-funded stations were on the air around the clock in Pakistani Pashto.



IMPACT

It's impossible to do comprehensive listener surveys in areas such as the Swat valley and the Federally Administered Tribal areas of the Northwest Frontier Provinces. But Radio Deewa's impact is clear from the unprecedented number of mobile phone calls it receives - there were 6,600 calls during the last week in August. One would not expect mobiles to proliferate in a poor, low-tech rural area such as northern Pakistan. However, subscriptions are cheap and need for communication among war weary civilians is acute. Today, nearly 60% of Pakistan's 167m people use mobile phones. With the advent of instantaneous links between broadcasters and their listeners, the impact of Radio Deewa is coming sharply into focus: Taliban FM stations, including Mullah Radio, have accused Deewa of being a radio of the "infidels", and spokesmen for the Taliban have issued decrees against Deewa incorporated into Friday sermons and funeral ceremonies in various regions.

Deewa Radio provides local, national and international news as well as information about the US, plus cultural, music and sports programmes relevant to Pakistan. The weekly Deewa Top Five music programme is very popular among youth - music is forbidden on Taliban radio.

There are many stories of how the broadcasts have affected listeners directly, by putting them in touch with relief agencies or with suffering relatives, and by providing concrete help through Deewa's health programmes, etc. A displaced person in the Swabi Mansour camp said in a recent programme that "if Deewa were not here, the IDPs (internally displaced persons) would have been disgraced, destroyed and unknown to the world."

The Pakistan army's operation against the Taliban in Waziristan has resulted in another wave of IDPs. Deewa's expertise is once again being tested, as the service develops its already sophisticated website streaming 24/7 as well as a short message service especially designed for cellular phone access. VOA's service in Urdu, Pakistan's principal spoken language, is known as Aap Ki Dunyaa (Your World Radio). VOA Director Danforth Austin said his network's audience in Pakistan has nearly doubled in the past year to more than 11m, almost 12% of the total population. The new accord with state radio is expected to greatly increase that audience.

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