



# JUST GET INFORMED

Despite being one of the poorest countries in the world, Afghanistan has an estimated penetration rate for mobile phone use close to 60%. **RFE/RL's Radio Azadi**, the country's leading media outlet, recently launched a first for Afghanistan: an interactive SMS/MMS service that provides free news updates and encourages citizen journalism. RFE/RL's Chief Broadcast Operations Officer **Julia Ragona**, Associate Director for Broadcasting **Akbar Ayazi** and Deputy Director for Broadcast Strategy & Operations **Mardo Soghom** played key roles in setting up the hugely successful project

**T**he mobile phone is really taking off in Afghanistan [said MS] so it was time to use that platform to deliver content in order to complement our radio broadcasts on MW, FM, and short wave as well as our bi-lingual website. We entered into discussions with several mobile operators in Afghanistan and decided to cooperate with Etisalat because of their interest in working with us to develop a comprehensive three-part initiative – none of which has ever been done before in Afghanistan. One is to deliver daily news headlines through SMS. The second is citizen journalism – 'Citizen Journalism powered by Azadi'. People can send their SMS and MMS to us which we broadcast on-air and also post on our website. The third part of the project concerns IVR (Intelligent Voice Response) technology which we launched this January – we deliver voice content to people who are interested in listening on the phone to the latest headlines, domestic and international

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news, weather, sports and even satire programmes.

**[AA]** During the 30 years of war, the infrastructure in Afghanistan was completely destroyed. I would say probably now in the region, including Iran, Afghanistan has the most sophisticated communication technology because they are starting afresh with new technology. That's why the mobile industry is growing at a tremendous rate. Mobile phone use is quite inexpensive for people and you'll see people with iPhones and BlackBerrys in the metropolitan areas. There are at least 14 private television stations and four international networks - this tells you how fast the communications industry is growing.

**Why did you go with Etisalat?**

**[JR]** Doing business in Afghanistan is not simple. And in this particular case we were trying to do something that hasn't been done before in Afghanistan in terms of the concept as well as the technology behind it. Etisalat is one of the top three mobile service providers, and in addition to their international reputation we found them to be very collaborative

and responsive. We got this off the ground in under a year from my first meeting with them last February to launch in December, that's not a bad turnaround.

**How does it work for the user?**

**[JR]** It's a free service for all subscribers to Etisalat. They dial a short code and then can either send us an SMS or MMS, get the headlines or get emergency updates in either Dari or Pashto, such as - you know - 'Bomb in central Kabul – avoid these streets'. For the IVR we are providing the content, so 'Press 1 for domestic news, press 2 for regional news, 3 for weather', that kind of thing. This was something that Etisalat wanted to build for Afghanistan, they have done it in other markets. Our news content is part of a stream that will also have more entertainment type of content that they are providing as paid content.

In terms of our reach, as the number one radio station in the country we have a lot of ears. Afghan President Karzai has stated that he starts the day listening to our programming. The additional exposure we are getting through

Etisalat helps us to connect with people in some of the cities and regions where we don't have FM. For example, Etisalat sends SMS updates to up to 2m of its subscribers - every two weeks initially and now it's every month - saying 'If you want to subscribe to this news service for free, sign up now'.

For us it is a way to get our content out to a new audience and to reinforce our traditional radio delivery, which in this particular country is still the main platform. And of course we get valuable content back from our audience via SMS and now also MMS.

**What has the take-up been?**

[JR] In a country where people don't have a lot of experience dealing with things like citizen journalism, they have very quickly picked up on the idea of 'Let me tell you what I saw', 'Let me give you my perspective' - we are getting around 150 citizen journalism SMS daily. That's a great boon to the entire concept of our mission, which is building civil society, having an opinion, being informed.

[AA] Giving people a voice is so important - for them to be able to say what they want to say to a major media organisation without the intervention of any warlord or any autocrat.

[JR] It's also quite important that they can speak to their fellow citizens in a way that's not mediated. People realise they have got the power of their voice to communicate with each other.

[MS] Most of the messages we get sent reveal important, fundamental social issues. The bulk comes from small villages or small towns, where people have less of an opportunity to get their voices heard by government officials or by the media. For example one person writes 'Because of the Taliban threat all mobile phone antennae in our region are out of order, please get this word out'. Somebody else says they have set up a school with difficulty, the number of students has increased to 320 but they have received no help from the education ministry

and have only two teachers.

[AA] I have one example from the city of Kandahar which asks the opposition for restraint and help in securing the gas pipeline with Turkmenistan which is important economically, politically and socially for Afghanistan. It's issues from daily life that people are sharing with us.

[JR] We need to bear in mind that illiteracy is very high in Afghanistan - 60% for men and 90% for women. Radio remains the most important way for people to get news, and this is why we distributed 20,000 solar-powered and hand-cranked radios in rural areas. These radios can also be used to charge a mobile phone, as many people live without electricity. So while the mobile phone market is growing rapidly and should continue to be developed as a delivery stream, for many Afghans radio still remains the most important and accessible source of news. Our most important goal is to reach people, so we aim to cover all platforms - mobile, radio, web - and let audiences access our content whichever way they chose.

**Will these solar-powered radios be used to tune into Radio Azadi?**

[JR] The idea was actually to put access to the rest of the world in the hands of some people who just can't afford it. We would love them to listen primarily to us but that's okay. Nothing is blocked, you can listen to anything. The point is to just get informed.

**Why do you think Radio Azadi is the top media outlet in Afghanistan?**

[JR] We still have ratings of around 50% nationwide, which is remarkable. The reason for that must be that we are actually part of the community fabric in Afghanistan, which goes a bit deeper than just being a media provider. Our radio is by Afghans for the Afghans, and we are trusted in a country where there isn't a lot of trust to go around. Afghans look at us not just as a source of information but as a trustworthy link to what is going on.

**The Afghan President starts the day listening to Radio Azadi**



▼ FROM TOP:  
Julia Ragona,  
Akbar Ayazi,  
Mardo Soghom



[AA] Our stringer network is probably the biggest and the best in the country. We have reporters in almost all major provinces, we have a large bureau with almost 100 employees in Kabul, we are well connected.

The content and the programmes we are providing are copied in the market now. We focus on current affairs, human rights issues, women, youth, we have sports and even political satire. Our shows engage government officials, experts, and the common man with all his social, health and political problems.

Also our interaction with listeners is probably the strongest. We are getting 200 to 300 voice messages every day, and we receive over 500 letters a month from a country where a great part of the population is illiterate.

And now the SMS and MMS project strengthens our citizen journalism and gives even more Afghans the opportunity to be part of our station.

**Thank you, Julia Ragona, Akbar Ayazi, Mardo Soghom.**