

VoA Deewa Radio: Propaganda or Persuasion?

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Abstract

The article presents a critical review of VoA Deewa Radio, a Pashto language radio started by the US following the Afghan war in the year 2001 to combat the Taliban ideological propaganda in the Af-Pak regions. It is argued that the radio has specific designs of persuasion and propaganda to counter the Taliban's narrative of the War on Terror in the region. This study employs qualitative methodology of interpretive analysis to examine the VOA Deewa programs and agenda and link it to the wider discursive pattern of war and US positioning in the minds of populace.

Keywords: VoA Deewa Radio, Propaganda, Persuasion, Taliban, Pashto

Introduction

“Who says what – in which channel to whom with what effect” (Lasswell, 1948).

Propaganda and persuasion has been explored and explicated by scholars coming from diverse scholarly traditions. Propaganda is manifestation of ideas used to persuade or influence others while persuasion acts as a tool to spread it. They are used in tandem to influence religious faiths, government policies, war and military actions as well as to sell corporate interest and products. The examples where propaganda is used for persuasion include, but not restricted to, propagation of Catholicism during middle ages and use of posters, pamphlets and wireless radio by allies during WWII to propagate their victories. In present era, government in collaboration with military agencies constitutes information and public diplomacy departments whose job is to justify their actions and to put enemy in bad light and also to bolster the morale of people. The news and stories propagated may or may not constitute complete truth or accurate depiction of reality. Thus, the propaganda campaign was not confined to allies but Nazis were also using radio to muster support.

As Richard C. Holbrooke, the chief U.S. envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, told the senate foreign relations committee that the United States lacked “counter-programming” to Taliban FM stations, “concurrent with the insurgency is an information war. We are losing that war. The Taliban have unrestricted, unchallenged access to the radio, which is the main means of communication in an area where literacy is around ten percent for men and less than five percent for women” (Lake, 2009). To combat the radio war, Voice of America (VOA) introduced Deewa - a Pashto (local language of the region) language

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service in 2006. The aim was to communicate the American perspective to the populace of that region.

Theoretical Framework

This section reviews and describes the literature to understand the concepts of propaganda, persuasion and agenda setting. The evolution of these concepts and their theoretical underpinnings are elaborated to provide a tool to explain the efforts put in by the VOA during war on terror.

Propaganda

Harold Lasswell provided a concrete scholarly foundation to the concept of propaganda in early twentieth century. Lasswell (1927) argued that propaganda is used to “modify or crystallize an attitude” towards an object. Propagandas can be used to organize an attitude towards a person, group or towards a policy. Lasswell envisages propaganda strategy as “stimulus-response” and argues that “propagandist may be said to be concerned with the multiplication of those stimuli which are best calculated to evoke the desired responses and with the nullification of those stimuli which are likely to instigate the undesired responses” (Lasswell, 1927, p. 630). Furthermore, “propagandists multiply all the suggestions favorable to the attitudes which he wishes to produce and strengthen and to restrict all suggestions which are unfavorable to them” (Lasswell, 1927, p. 630).

Contrarily, propaganda has also been often characterized in negative connotations. Pratkanis & Aronson (1992) argued it to be the “dissemination of biased ideas and opinions, often through the use of lies and deception” but at the same time it is a technique used to persuade masses. Furthermore, “propaganda involves the dexterous use of images, slogans, and symbols that play on our prejudices and emotions; it is the communication of a point of view with the ultimate goal of having the recipient of the appeal come to ‘voluntarily’ accept this position as if it were his or her own” (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1992, p. 11).

Persuasion

In early twentieth century, it was believed that advertisers use hidden persuasion techniques to convince consumers to buy their products. But in 1940s, researchers found that mass media has minimal influential power as the people take their decisions after rationally analyzing information provided by the mass media. During 1950s and 60s, Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) employed persuasion technique called psychoanalysis to guide propaganda but failed to attain desired objectives. The information-processing model explained the failure of the persuasive attempts which claims that persuasive process must pass through certain stages. They purported that “mass media may not tell you what to think, but they do tell you what to think about and how to do it” (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1992, p. 28).

Thus, advertisements could not make the consumer buy a car even after watching a powerful car promotion repeatedly, but they do convey a message that what attribute should be considered while buying a car.

Agenda Setting

“Of all the issues that should or could have been aired and examined, only a few became dominant. This is agenda setting” (Baran & Davis, 2003, p. 311). Many early studies of agenda setting found that “public learn the relative importance of issues from the amount of media coverage these issues receive” (Ghanem & Wanta, 2001, p. 279). Cohen (1963), one of the pioneers of agenda setting in communication, argues that “the press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. It may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen, 1963, p. 13). Furthermore, people picture the world not just according to their interests but based on sketches drawn by writers, editors and publishers of the papers they read (Cohen, 1963).

The framing theory is employed here to analyze how, when and how many times the messages are aired on VOA Deewa during their talk shows designed for creating awareness regarding the polio campaign.

Methodology

This study employs the qualitative methodology of interpretive analysis to examine the VOA Deewa programs and agenda and link it to the wider discursive pattern of war and US positioning in the minds of populace. The interpretive analysis takes a “holistic approach, looking at the internal relationships between textual elements and the external relationships between media texts, other media texts, and political, economic, historical and cultural contexts” (Anderson, 2012, p. 349).

Unit of Analysis

The Government of Pakistan, in concert with international agencies, is running a polio eradication campaign for more than a decade. Since the start of Taliban insurgency in the country, paramedic teams participating in the campaign have been attacked and killed by the Taliban groups. Taliban banned polio campaign in July 2012, in the tribal areas of Pakistan and threatened the locals and paramedic teams of the region of dire consequences in case they participated in the polio eradication drive. They demanded the US government to stop drone attacks or else they will stick to the ban. The situation prompted the US government to counter their narrative at different fronts including media outlets. Thus, the state department brought into use its media arm, Voice of America, by launching a program named *Sahar pa khair* (Good morning) in a talk show format broadcasted in the local language centering polio eradication campaign and to counter Taliban narrative. For this study three of the shows are selected employing purposeful sampling technique. The three shows were broadcasted by VOA Deewa on the days of polio campaign in tribal region, that is July, 16, 17 and 18, 2012. The format of the show included live calls from local residents of the target areas and the questions were designed in a way that explored their opinions about the polio campaign as well as the drone strikes.

Data: Patterns and Details

The shows start with a greeting in local language that is followed by two editorials from leading national dailies. In these shows, the editorials from the “Herald Tribune”, “Express Tribune” and “The Dawn” were translated and presented a few sections from the editorials that were relevant to their topics of discussion.

The second part of the show was related to the issue or theme that they have selected to discuss with their listeners. In the programs that are selected for this study the issue under discussion was the polio campaign. In each show, the presenter also discussed “*matal*” (idioms), explained its meaning and related it with the overarching topic and contemporary events. The idioms presented in these three shows were interpreted and related to the problem. In these shows callers from different parts of the tribal region participated by calling in, discussing the issue and giving their views.

Findings and Discussion

VOA was born out of the propaganda efforts of the US government during WWI and has continued its journey and presence in war/conflict infected regions of the world. The US government introduced this service to counter the narrative of communism and therefore concentrated on the regions that were either under the influence of the Soviets or were prone to get into their camp. The US government spends millions of dollars every year on VOA and hires locals who can speak local language and can talk to the regional population in their peculiar cultural context. As one of the USIA and VOA veteran opined, “propaganda is an art requiring special talent. It is not mechanical, scientific work. Influencing attitudes requires experience, area knowledge, and instinctive ‘judgment of what is the best argument for the audience.’ No manual can guide the propagandists. He must have ‘a good mind, genius, sensitivity, and knowledge of how that audience thinks and reacts’” (Bogart & Bogart, 1976, p. 199).

Language: Fortner (1994) argues that the main tool for propaganda is language (Fortner, 1994). VOA has used this tool very well. The broadcast is for the Pashto (local language) speakers and the presenter speak in the same.

Culture: All anchors are from the same region and are well aware of the cultural values of the Pashtuns. They talk to the listeners in their language, discusses the rural life, bring the “*matal*” (idioms) that are part of Pashto language and people uses them in local parlance. The anchors do not bring the religious or ideological arguments, do not even try to refute any caller and also do not explicitly oppose Taliban. During these three shows anchors uses “*matal*s” that they linked to the village life and polio campaign like “always see both side of the picture before making a decision”. The presenters also brought emotional element into their message by suggesting that if a child did not get polio drops then parents have to pay the consequences. The anchors while talking to the callers and listeners used terms as “precious listeners, dear brother, respected sister”, which is typical of how Pashtuns address each other.

Inclusion of womenfolk: The show dedicated 30 minutes to women callers and participants. The section starts with a well-known Pashto song celebrating the lifestyle of women of that area and acknowledging their contributions and sacrifices: “Bibishireene (sweet woman) you wake up so early in the morning and all the household work is there for you to do, you work from morning till evening without any rest, pretty sweet lady, you spent all your life in doing this work and when you get sick, you only get the *Taveez* (amulets, Phylactery) and *Hakim* (unqualified medical treatment provider)”. The devotion of a segment of the program to one of the most deprived strata of society was very well taken, as expressed by the participants, and many women opined that it inculcated a feeling of inclusion in them. This strategy of involving such a large demographic entity and earning their confidence goes a long way in developing favorable attitudes in the mind of the populace.

Polio Campaign: In all the three shows, the topic for discussion was polio campaign and anchors encouraged listeners to call and discuss the issue while contemplating real life experiences of polio patients by asking their families, friends and village people. The anchors encouraged the listeners to participate and explain the hardships in the life of polio patients. They started discussion with the news that Pakistan is among the top three countries in terms of number of patients infected with polio and provided the number of polio cases reported per year in Pakistan. Though, the news was correct but the presenters only discussed one side of the story by deliberately avoiding discussing the reasons of non-availability of vaccine for a considerable number of children due to the ban imposed by the Taliban. They only emphasized the importance of the anti-polio vaccine without providing political side of its non-availability.

Anchors kept the discussion balanced, while explicating that the comparison of cultures is not meant to suggest or identify any culture as good or bad and that “we respect all cultures and this comparison is just for improving the living conditions of our dear listeners and we are giving you some good examples, so you can think about it and take positive steps”. Thus the objective seems to be not just information but also to try to influence and produce favorable attitude toward developed or western nations. Anchors also steered the discussion towards the religion Islam in tandem with drawing parallels with western countries; “Islam values honesty, hard work, cleanliness, education, respect of women, and good health, and these values”. It is also argued that “the successful persuasion tactic is one that directs and channels thoughts so that the target thinks in a manner agreeable to the communicator’s point of view; the successful tactic disrupts any negative thoughts and promotes positive thoughts about the proposed course of action” (Prathanis & Aronson, 1992, p. 31).

The strategies and tactics used by the VOA Deewa are in line with Lasswell’s understanding of propagandist. Lasswell posited that the propagandist strives to intensify the attitudes that are favorable to him and reverse the attitudes that are contrary to his narrative. Thus, “if the plan is to draw out positive attitudes toward an object, it must be presented, not as a menace and an obstruction, nor as despicable or absurd, but as a

protector of our values, a champion of our dreams, and a model of virtue and propriety” (Lasswell, 1927, p. 630).

Conclusion

VOA is an outcome of a comprehensive propaganda strategy pursued by the US government during and after WWII for divergent purposes. It is continued to be a pivotal component in the broad armory of state department to counter anti-US narrative and operates in the regions considered strategically important by the US government. The service, though, is not disseminating black propaganda as it does not block or deny the opposing narrative and provides straight and concrete news; however, it deprives the listeners from debate on the issue and sometimes ignores other equally important problems. They do bring balance in their reporting by informing the audience what their opponents propagates but steers the discussion towards the issue they target to avoid arguments and opposition from the audience. The VOA Deewa’s white propaganda efforts are evident in broadcasting correct but biased news. Furthermore, the service accommodates cultural, emotional and moral values of locals to persuade and propagate their agenda.

The common themes identified in the study are selection of specific editorials, focusing and highlighting one side of the issue, repetition of the same issues several times and iterating same facts and figure are some of the factors depicting and emphasizing the agenda of VOA Deewa. Though it portrays that the US favors peace, better condition of living including health but avoid debate on drone attacks that damages their credibility and ultimately the effectiveness of their message. Moreover, VOA Deewa and its services in other languages across the world are initiated in times of a dispute or war having a negative impact of the organization as a propaganda machine. In line of its overarching mission of accessing regions where American interests are compromised, radio Deewa was started following the Afghan war in the year 2001 to combat the Taliban ideological propaganda.

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