

**International Broadcasting as Component of U.S.
Public Diplomacy
(A Case Study of Voice of America's DEEWA Radio)**
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Abstract

This paper analyses the contents and role of Voice of America (VOA)'s Pashto language broadcast service Deewa radio as a tool of United States' public diplomacy. For this purpose, I analysed and reviewed the different contents of Deewa Radio in order to examine how effective this radio service is in the U.S. public diplomacy efforts. I have conducted interviews with media professionals, who have reviewed Deewa Radio's programs for the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), to know their opinion about the broadcast and its contents. I listened to Deewa Radio's broadcast over a period of four weeks and then interviewed the respondents. My findings include the following. Being interactive, Deewa Radio has local relevance and has developed a sense of ownership among the local people. However, by not discussing issues which do not reflect good on the U.S. image but are important for the local people has made the listeners suspicious of the broadcast's intentions. Deewa Radio has a great potential which needs to be exploited for the interests of the people of Pakistan/Afghanistan border region which has become all the more important for global peace.

Keywords: Voice of America; Deewa radio; FATA; United States; Public diplomacy; Pashto language.

Introduction

In October 2006 the United States launched Pashto language *Deewa Radio* at the Voice of America (VOA) for Pakistan/Afghanistan border region, which has been a theater of the so called global war on terror since soon after 9/11. *Deewa Radio*'s target audience is about 40 million Pashtuns living on the Pakistani side of the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. It also includes tribal areas where Taliban and Al-Qaeda terrorists have taken shelter and frequently launch attacks on NATO forces inside Afghanistan.

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The region that *Deewa Radio* targets is a hostile media environment and is underserved by traditional media because of its geographical isolation and Pashto dialect.¹ Unlike the rest of Pakistan, where television predominates as the source of news and information, radio is the most important medium in the Pashtun areas. Pakistan's mainstream media, including newspapers and televisions, are mainly in *Urdu* and English which shows their neglect of this region and its people who speak Pashto.

Pakistan's media laws do not allow the tribal areas – called the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) – to have their own radio, TV or newspapers, which have rendered this long stretch of land into an information hole and the epicenter of extremism and terrorism. This information vacuum was filled by the Taliban who operate unlicensed FM transmitters throughout the region, though with limited range, to broadcast propaganda. In that challenging environment, “*Deewa Radio*'s goal is to provide accurate and balanced news and information to the local people in their own language Pashto”.²

In this paper I analyze and review the different contents of *Deewa Radio*, which are available on its website and review them to examine how effective this radio service is in the U.S. public diplomacy efforts. As McMahon notes, “There is too little available research about the impact of U.S. international broadcasting to the Muslim world.”³ However informal feedback mechanisms such as e-mails and telephone calls sometimes provide anecdotal evidence of the station's impact. I conducted interviews with media professionals, who have reviewed *Deewa Radio*'s programs for the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), to know their opinion about the broadcast and its contents. I listened to *Deewa Radio*'s broadcast over a period of four weeks and then interviewed the respondents. Towards the end the paper I give some recommendations for the VOA to make their contents more relevant to the region and its people.

U.S. Public Diplomacy

Since the 9/11 attacks the United States has been engaged in an actual war, which the George Bush administration called as the ‘war on terror’. However, the United States is also actively pursuing its public diplomacy to win hearts and minds of mainstream Muslims by projecting its ‘soft power’ image. Cull explains that public diplomacy is an international actor's attempt to manage the international environment through engagement with a foreign public.⁴ Public Diplomacy is ‘less about telling’ and more

about 'showing'.⁵ However, it is also about listening and building people-to-people relationship. Public Diplomacy is many things to many people, and one of its many attributes is, what Gilboa emphasizes, "simply creating a favorable image for one's own country's policies, actions and political and economic system".⁶

During the Cold War the United States Information Agency (USIA) was engaged in Public Diplomacy-related activities. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan established the Office of Public Diplomacy mainly to 'manage' the media and to encourage support for the US's covert wars in Central America. After the end of the Cold War, the U.S. emerged as the only super power with no ideological rival anymore, though this realization proved later on to be misplaced. International broadcasting, which had played an effective role during the Cold War through the Voice of America, was scaled down while the USIA was merged into the State Department.

However, the 9/11 attacks convinced the United States to once again launch a more aggressive public diplomacy. "Greater official U.S. interest in Public Diplomacy began in the wake of 9/11 with the rise of the 'why do they hate us?' introspection."⁷ The U.S. Public Diplomacy has many facets; international broadcasting is an integral part of it. International broadcasting is one of the five components of public diplomacy that Cull identifies in his article entitled "Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past."⁸ *Listening* (the foundation for all effective public diplomacy), *advocacy*, *cultural diplomacy*, and *exchange* are the other components.

Zaharna argues that debates within the U.S. public diplomacy have concentrated most heavily over whether the United States' Public Diplomacy should focus on telling its story or building relationships.⁹ The US public diplomacy is a complex phenomenon aimed at "conveying its commitments, goals and intentions to the world through a wide variety of means and channels."¹⁰ The landscape of Public Diplomacy, however, has changed considerably after the end of the Cold War. With varied sources of information available to many people, Public Diplomacy is now a race for selling its own story in the free market of ideas, but listening to the story of others also.

Many commentators argue that international broadcasting "can affect the terrain on which all Public Diplomacy is practiced."¹¹ It can perform all other functions of Public Diplomacy – listening, advocacy, cultural and exchange diplomacy – and thus plays an important role in achieving foreign policy objectives in the 21st Century. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks the

U.S. has refocused on international broadcasting through the Voice of America and its surrogate¹² radios as an integral part of its PD to win hearts and minds of the Muslims worldwide.

Voice of America (VOA)

This U.S. government-funded radio broadcasting has its roots in World War II, when the Voice of America (VOA) was created at least partly to counter fascist propaganda. It was launched on February 25, 1942, seventy-nine days after the attack on Pearl Harbor.¹³ Initially, the VOA was part of the Office of War Information (OWI), which had been founded the same year. “[T]he OWI was in fact the far more benign American version of Goebbels’s infamous Ministry of Propaganda.”¹⁴ It was abolished at the end of World War II in 1945. The VOA was moved to the State Department from 1945-53. In 1953, the United States Information Agency (USIA) was established which took over the VOA.

Congress revamped the administrative structure of U.S. international broadcasting in 1994, creating the Board of Broadcasting Governors (BBG) to oversee all non-military U.S. international broadcasting. The 1994 act also set up the International Broadcasting Bureau to consolidate some broadcast operations within the BBG. In 1999 when the USIA was merged into the State Department, the VOA and its surrogate stations were kept out of it and left under the control of the BBG which then became an independent entity. BBG had been overseeing U.S. broadcasting within USIA since 1995. In the BBG, there are five main broadcasting entities: the VOA, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) which was established in 1949, the Office of Cuba Broadcasting which was established in 1983, Radio Free Asia (established in 1996) and the Middle East Broadcasting Network (MBN) which was established in 2004.¹⁵

RFE/RL is based in Prague, Czech Republic, and broadcasts to 21 countries in 28 languages targeting Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan. Radio Free Asia broadcasts to Burma, Cambodia, China, Laos, North Korea, Tibet and Vietnam. In all, the VOA broadcasts in 60 languages. McMahon in his article *Channeling the Cold War: U.S. Overseas Broadcasting* argues the inability to prevent the Sept. 11, 2001 was also widely seen as a result of the breakdown in U.S. public diplomacy.¹⁶

Deewa Radio

After the NATO forces toppled the Taliban government in Kabul, the United States and its allies were engaged a long-drawn war to dismantle al-Qaeda and help Afghanistan in establishing a democratic government. The U.S. was also engaged in efforts to counter extremism through public diplomacy. The U.S. embassy in Islamabad told the Office of Inspector General of the BBG in 2005 that in the tribal areas of Pakistan extremism is prominent and “for that reason, broadcasts in Pashto are more important.”¹⁷ The OIG Report notes that in addition to tribal areas, about 35 percent of the population of Balochistan province was Pashto speakers which could be potential audience for a Pashto language radio. The tribal areas of Pakistan are still governed by British colonial era’s set of laws, called Frontier Crimes Regulations (FCR), which does not allow any mass media.

In October 2006 the VOA launched *Deewa Radio* to target Pashtuns living on both sides of the troubled Pakistan-Afghanistan border to counter extremism by communicating with the local population in their own language. *Deewa Radio* is thought to be providing the United States with a vital communications link to a region of major significance to U.S. foreign policy and national security. Target audience of *Deewa Radio* are people most of whom cannot read – or have no access to – a newspaper. Television service in most part of this region is either not available or people cannot afford to have a television set.

Most of these areas are without electricity which automatically blocks them from television. Religious and cultural taboos also hinder the spread of television broadcast in the border region. As Yusuf notes, “Many communities shun television as un-Islamic and it doesn't help that cable infrastructure has yet to extend into the northern areas.”¹⁸ However, Khattak disagrees with this notion.

*“This perception is totally misplaced; this may be the view of the Taliban but not of the common Pashtuns who can become loyal viewers of a TV channel if it truly reflects their issues and grievances.”*¹⁹

With a low literacy rate newspaper is not a popular source of information in this region. Political parties cannot function in FATA which gives the clergy an unchallenged power. “The *Mullah* [clergyman] is the politician, the clergy, the judge, the spiritual head of the region and, most of all, the only source of information.”²⁰

Since no indigenous media is allowed in the tribal areas, the tribesmen have few choices in the case of source of information. Because of this situation, the people of the tribal and the adjacent settled areas comprise a captive radio audience.²¹ Radio remains an important source of news and information for the local people for two primary reasons: First because of the frequent power cuts that affect TV viewing; second because radio can be listened to when out and about, travelling or working. There is nothing that really represents the true sentiments of the people of FATA. Having little sources of information in the absence of their own media and almost completely neglected by the mainstream Pakistani media in covering their troubled region, the people of FATA were exposed to hate radios of extremist forces like the Taliban which filled the information vacuum.

Foreign radio service had always been popular with the people of FATA. "The South Asian news consumer has traditionally showed greater trust and confidence in foreign news sources, largely because of state controls on the media in the region."²² This situation has also created a niche for the private media to give an alternative opinion to the local people. But Pakistan Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) cannot grant license in an area which is beyond its jurisdiction.²³ It was an open invitation for pirate radios and the extremist forces that capitalized on it by airing their sermons on makeshift FM radio stations.

This was the media landscape when *Deewa Radio* was launched in October 2006. *Deewa Radio* is transmitted by short-wave signal and is also available on the Internet.²⁴ Three FM stations in Afghanistan near the Pakistan border initially carried the signal around the clock. These stations are operated by the United States Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG). The transmitters are located in Afghanistan rather than in Pakistan because the Pakistan media laws do not allow any media inside the tribal areas. However, those stations were later on allotted to *Ashna* radio, a surrogate of the BBG, while *Deewa Radio* switched to medium and short waves.

Deewa Radio broadcasts 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Nine hours of daily live programs featuring news, current affairs and call-in shows are available during prime time in the Pakistan/Afghanistan border region. The remaining 16 hours include special radio packages and contemporary Pashto popular music. The programs can be heard on medium wave and shortwave. *Deewa Radio* programming features local, regional, U.S., and international news, as well as features on politics, illegal

drug and narcotics trafficking, the economy, health, education, and sports.

The most significant and unique proposition of US international broadcasters, including VOA's *Deewa Radio* and RFE, is its reach, ability to extensively cover issues and give space to the voices of its services users.²⁵ Imtiaz Ali Takar, a Pashtun journalist who has reviewed *Deewa Radio*'s programs for the BBG and conducted interviews with listeners, says the strength of its signal has made VOA's Pashto broadcast popular among the local people. "Listeners initially tended to switch between stations without caring to which one they are listening and *Deewa* would stand out quite clearly, which attracted more listeners."²⁶

It has a dynamic website²⁷ that features short videos, a pictures gallery, Facebook, Twitter and podcasts too. According to the VOA website, the radio broadcasts four call-in shows every day, which "have been a winning formula" and as a result of these shows "the number of pro-Taliban calls has tailed off perceptibly as their views have been frequently challenged successfully on air."²⁸

A 2008 study commissioned by the British government's Department for International Development (DfID) says *Deewa Radio* has been given a new lease of life by its daily one-hour phone-in program. "Despite being hosted from Washington, the formula of local guests hooked into the programme by phone discussing a wide range of issues, not confined to politics, has been a winning formula," the report says. Literary issues are featured and the discussion is frequently light hearted, with singing, shouting and clapping like in a *hujra*' according to one informant. Any foreign media will have to be more interactive and must develop an ability to feel more like local than foreign. It will have to root itself and contextualize the events in a way that gives the people enough traction and sense of ownership. Cull notes that one of the most encouraging recent developments is the rise of truly interactive programming in international broadcasting.²⁹ Similarly, Adam and Shoemaker stress that "local voices will almost always have more impact than foreign ones".³⁰ This is considered to be the strength of *Deewa Radio* which "gives a sense of ownership to people of the region by giving them airtime. Its programs, especially current affairs talk shows, are interactive which has enhanced listeners' interest and built a new bond of trust with the local people."³¹

The first talk show of the day is *Hello VOA*, which discusses political situation – mostly, but not necessarily, in

Pakistan. Political figures and senior journalists from Pakistan are hosted via telephone in the talk-show in which they also reply to questions by common listeners who make a toll-free call from anywhere in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Middle East. This and other talk shows provide a common platform to power-holders and common people to come face to face. According to 2009 data of the Department of State, *Deewa's* two daily, live call-in shows attract about 300 calls a day, scores of e-mails, and voice messages. Program topics included suicide bombings, school burnings, and discussions of religious moderation.

The second talk show is *Bala Deewa (Bright/Shining Light)* which discusses topics like Sufism (mystical aspect of Islam), *Deewa Top 10*, a Pashto music program – which is popular with the young generation, according to Takar, women issues, Pashto literature and poetry on separate days. This show also hosts experts in case of other programs and singers in case of music program who also respond to telephone calls from the listeners.

ShpaPakher (Good Night) talk show focuses on rural areas of the border region. The unique feature of this show is that a particular village or locality is selected and day-to-day life in that area is discussed. Like the works of literary persons in that area are discussed as they are interviewed over the telephone. Health, education, sports and development issues of the selected village are discussed in an informal participatory manner – just like Pashtun people do in their *hujras* in the evening. Government officials and local elected members are taken as guests who answer to questions from callers of the same area. *Muslims in America* is a permanent feature of this show which tells the listeners about the life of Muslims living in the U.S. Like how they pursue their careers, their daily life activities like going to mosque, celebrating their cultural and religious festivities and other life experiences.

The fourth show is *SaharPakher (Good Morning)* in which political and social issues are discussed. These call-in shows have made *Deewa Radio* a participatory medium developing a sense of ownership among the listeners. Ali says among listeners, *Deewa's* content has clearly had a 'positive impact'; in the short term, they praised its coverage of the 2010 floods. "In the longer term, listeners expressed the belief that *Deewa* has improved their knowledge and awareness of international issues through its news and analysis programs like the phone-in program."³² There also continue to be questions about the impact of the new broadcasting efforts on Muslim audiences in terms of attitudes and opinions toward the United States.

VOA Director Dan Austin said on April 6, 2011 at George Washington University that *Deewa Radio's* "broadcasts are effective, with research from 2010 showing *Deewa* was the most popular international broadcaster in the [Pakistan/Afghanistan border] region, reaching 22 per cent of adults every week".³³ There are reasons for its popularity: when the radio service was launched war on terror had already begun and extremist forces had become active in the tribal areas of Pakistan. They had started forays in the adjoining areas too. Therefore people were more interested in news. They could listen to only FM radios of the militants. In a way this large swath of land with about 40 million people was without any independent and credible media.

BBC is one of the main competitors of *Deewa Radio*, but the later is locally more relevant because of its Pashto language and local dialect. BBC Pashto service is more oriented towards Afghanistan because the dialect it uses is quite foreign for the Pashtuns living in Pakistan. However, BBC Urdu service is a familiar name because it is one of the oldest foreign radio services available in Pakistan. Before the proliferation of international and private mass media, BBC was the only alternative source of news – the other being the state-run television, radio, and state-run newspapers besides a few independent papers. Being an alternative and outside of Pakistan government's influence, BBC enjoyed – and still enjoys – credibility in Pakistan.

"People consider the BBC (Urdu) to be *Deewa's* only real competitor. The BBC is often the first choice for international news because it enjoys tremendous historical recognition and listener empathy,"³⁴ Khattak says, adding: "However, the BBC is probably stronger on international news than Pakistani or FATA events. BBC is suitable only for international events."³⁵ It is interesting that the local people do not associate the BBC with any government or country: it is just foreign. They consider it just a credible source of news with no influence by any government or country. As Cull mentions "BBC research indicates that a small percentage of listeners [elsewhere] do not connect the BBC with the country, Britain."³⁶ However, in case of Pakistan it can be assumed that this percentage can be larger because of low literacy rate, especially in the tribal areas.

Negative Image of Deewa Radio

Not everyone looks positively at *Deewa Radio*. There are people who don't trust this broadcast, and they have their own reasons. There is a strong belief among some of the local listeners that

Deewa has both a pro-American agenda and, in common with other international broadcasters, a broadly anti-Muslim and anti-Pakistan stance.³⁷

This perception is the likely result of the U.S. occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan. CIA operated unmanned aircraft, commonly known as *drones*, frequently fire missiles in Waziristan and other tribal areas to take out Al-Qaeda and Taliban militants. These strikes also kill innocent people, including women and children, which has stoked anti-American sentiments in Pakistan. These anti-American sentiments make anything associated with United States suspicious. "It is a widely held belief among people that *Radio Deewa* has a strong pro-American agenda and therefore provides information with a strong bias."³⁸

The state-run radio service in Pakistan is called 'Radio Pakistan', which being a mouthpiece of the government enjoys less credibility. When *Deewa Radio*, every now and then in their broadcast, mentions "This is Voice of America Deewa Radio", people associate it with a government propaganda like that of Radio Pakistan. However, they, according to Khattak, consider *Deewa's* news coverage to be unbiased and reliable, particularly when compared to Radio Pakistan. However, Elliot in his blog on international broadcasting says: "Credibility is essential to successful international broadcasting, and credibility begins with a station being upfront about its own identity."³⁹

Mission statement of the Voice of America, which also applies to *Deewa Radio*, claims that besides giving credible news "VOA will represent America, not any single segment of American society, and will therefore present a balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions".⁴⁰ In line with this policy, a regular feature of *Deewa Radio's* daily broadcast is a Pashto translation of an editorial, which the broadcaster calls *de Washington nazar* (in other words, the U.S.'s view). This dents the credibility of *Deewa Radio* as an independent and reliable broadcast.

Khattak says as against this, some listeners consider the BBC as independent and able to report truthfully and in an unbiased way. "For some folks on the street BBC offers credibility, balance and impartiality."⁴¹ For the local people *Radio Deewa* is just like Radio Pakistan: because Radio Pakistan is working for the government of Pakistan and *Deewa* is working for the American government. This impression is likely to have been created by the fact that *Deewa Radio* almost never criticizes policies of the U.S. It

also does not give enough airtime to voices that are critical of the U.S. or its policies.

The State Department's Office of Inspector General conducted a probe into journalistic affairs of *Deewa Radio* when it interviewed a Pakistani Taliban leader in 2009. The probe was prompted after a Congressman wrote to the OIG that "[t]he U.S. taxpayers should not be subsidizing free air-time for al-Qaeda terrorists and Taliban leaders".⁴² This absence of dissenting voices likens it to *Radio Pakistan*. However, *Deewa Radio* is more interactive by airing local voices more often which also makes it locally relevant.

Way ahead

Deewa Radio has a great potential to play an important role in the Pakistan/Afghanistan border region by giving them alternative source of information in the face of propaganda and hatred being spread by illegal FM radio stations. The absence of mainstream Pakistani media in FATA because of legal constraints and lack of focus on FATA in the Pakistani media, make the local population a captive audience for radio. This dilemma offers a window of opportunity to fill the huge void on the airwaves both for radio and television audience. The VOA has many advantages to become an effective source of information in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Its signal covers almost the entire area that faces extremism and is being used by terrorists as their stronghold. Despite being popular in the target areas, there is still room for improvement for the VOA to become a more vocal and effective agent of change. The Pakistan/Afghanistan border areas is passing through a crisis and "in crisis states, populations contemplating changing behavior or allegiance need to have the appropriate means to discuss and consider alternatives before deciding what to do".⁴³ And the VOA can provide the local people this means to discuss what to do.

Conclusion

Deewa Radio is playing an important role of giving voice to a voiceless people at a critical moment in their history. VOA's ability to generate locally framed global news will give it enough roots to be embraced by those who may even disagree with the United States. Local roots for a global network has always played the trick to win people's attention. This is especially true for *Deewa's* target audience who have almost lost their voice in Pakistan's mainstream media which are Urdu and English-based. They are a captive audience exposed more to extremist propaganda

than information. "Information is the essence of what might be called the 'Attitude of Liberty' – the feeling of being free."⁴⁴ Being interactive, *Deewa Radio* has local relevance and has developed a sense of ownership among the local people. However, by not discussing issues which do not reflect good on the U.S. image but are important for the local people has made the listeners suspicious of the broadcast's intentions. *Deewa Radio* has a great potential which needs to be exploited for the interests of the people of Pakistan/Afghanistan border region which has become all the more important for global peace.

Recommendations

Credibility is at the core for success of any news media, especially a foreign media. It has become all the more important since the U.S. is fighting a global war on terror almost across the world. Being a party to the war and sound impartial, unbiased and credible is a difficult feat to achieve.

Deewa Radio has to be credible to be effective in fighting extremism. But credibility comes with a price worth it. As Cull points out that the BBC emphasized the absolute credibility of news during World War II by reporting stories whether or not they reflected well on Britain, and Britain escaped its reputation for propaganda.⁴⁵ *Deewa Radio* should be objective in reporting news about U.S. policies, especially towards the Muslim world.

This is only possible if the VOA is separated from the U.S. Public Diplomacy machinery. Only then can it grill spokespersons of not only other governments, but those of the U.S. government too on issues of international interests.

As McMahon adds, the VOA has abandoned the worthy practice of targeting elite audiences within countries of concern; it should revive the focus on broadcasting to elites in important countries like Pakistan.⁴⁶ Elites in Pakistan have easy access to the Internet, but few people read Pashto websites, which means they are not targeted by *Deewa*. It should make its website translatable into English to target this small but important section of the Pakistan/Afghanistan border region. *Deewa Radio* should look for local affiliates who could broadcast its transmission on FM transmitters. The Pakistan/Afghanistan border region comprises more than 40 million Pashto-speaking population with only one Pashto language television, which is not available everywhere. The VOA should launch a Pashto television for the region which could be more effective than the radio for obvious reasons. In fact VOA Pashto television could be the ultimate price for us public

diplomacy effort in the region that will offer a largely untapped news market and giving American worldview a virtual walkover in an area under heavy influence of America's enemies.

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