

# **Analyzing the Performance of International Broadcasters (BBC & VOA) on the Coverage of War on Terror**

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## **Abstract**

*This study offers analysis of the performance of international broadcasters including BBC and VOA while reporting on the war on terror in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The researchers identified an array of issues that characterize reporting of these two broadcasters. These include serving the strategic interests of US and UK, propaganda and mass persuasion. The experts agreed that due to lack of alternative sources of information in the border regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan, both BBC and VOA had wide listenership. The study concludes with a set of recommendations for peace-oriented media for national and international broadcasters.*

**Keywords:** War on Terror, Propaganda, International Broadcasters, National Interests, Focused Group Discussion.

## **Introduction**

The literature on war and media suggests that states often resort to propaganda to maximize their strategic interests and influence public opinion during wars and conflicts (Hallin, 1986; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). From the First World War to the Iraqi invasion in 2003, these and other researchers have found that media openly supported the cause of their respective governments and compromised their editorial independence. According to Lynch, in all these major wars, journalists surrendered the professional ethos of journalism.

Consistent with the above, after the 9/11 incident, a global coalition was formed to defeat Al-Qaeda and Taliban in Afghanistan (Marcela, 2009). Alongside the military operation, a massive media campaign was launched by the UK and the US governments to win support for their cause in the war on terror (Michael, 2007). As the Pakistan tribal areas bordering Afghanistan were also suspected to have been used by the Taliban, these areas also got huge media attention. The Voice of America (VOA) and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) are the most important outlets that focus on the developments in the area.

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This study focuses on the performance of these radio channels through the perspective of Pakistani experts who were engaged in a focused group discussion by the researchers.

#### *Research Objectives*

Following are the key objectives of this study.

- 1) To know the performance of VOA and BBC in the ongoing war on terror
- 2) To identify the key factors that influence reporting of war on terror
- 3) To determine what objectives the international broadcasters serve for their respective countries in the ensuing war on terror

#### *Media, Wars and Propaganda*

Media's role in war times has been extensively studied in the context of propaganda research after the First World War (Bernays). After the Second World War, there was some academic shift but the Vietnam invasion reignited the interest in the area (Hallin, 1986; Strobel, 1996). The invasions of Latin and Asian countries provided new impetus to the scholarly investigations in this academic discipline (Chomsky and Herman 1988; Taylor, 1995).

While keeping in mind logic of harnessing media during war times, it is important to give careful consideration to the literature on the development of propaganda in modern times though this concept itself is extended to the ancient Greece. From a historical perspective, before the advancement of broad communications, the conquerors did not have access to larger audiences. Napoleon, Caesar and Alexander the Great were viewed as the progenitors of modern propagandists (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1999). "Propaganda" started in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by Pope Gregory XV (Taylor, 1992). Today, the word "propaganda" suggests a negative, pejorative undertone. (MerriamWebster's University, 1985)

Propaganda advanced and turned into an effective apparatus of mass influence with the rise of mass channels of correspondence, daily papers in the nineteenth and radio and TV in the twentieth century. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, the newspapers played a massive role in the Spanish-American War of 1898 (Jowett and O'Donnell, 1999). World War I was a significant period in the advancement of sorted out political influence. Interestingly, the administrations and services of all countries required in the war combined their endeavors in the quest for the best strategies for mass influence. The new innovation took into consideration mass-delivered print materials, papers and motion pictures to come to a wide crowd.

*International Broadcasters and War on Terror*

There are a variety of courses in which communication can control information so as to bend the message or spread misinformation, disturbing the musings and responses of the message saver. One clear approach to twist the facts is to just present one side of the story, and oppress or overlook information in fact. (Drescher, 2009).

Martin (2008) in his exploration article "*The media's part in international terrorism*" clarified that terrorism is much similar type to persuasive communication. According to Martin, terrorism similar to propaganda is a derisive term. Some researchers have eluded it as in action propaganda.

*News media and the 9/11 attacks*

When the US President G W Bush declared a "War on Terrorism" on September 20, 2001, with it came "a consensus that US public diplomacy requires a commitment to new foreign policy thinking...and the need to make clear why the US is fighting this war and why supporting it is in the interest of others, as well as Americans" (Peterson, 2002).

An essential part of that commitment is, without a doubt, international broadcasting. Within weeks of the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, the US Commando Solo aircraft took over the airwaves in Afghanistan, with radio broadcasts that included the following text: "On Sept. 11, 2001, thousands of people were killed en masse in the US...among them was a 2-year-old girl, barely able to stand or dress herself. Did she deserve to die?" The broadcast went on to further explain that the attacks in the US were on innocent people – an act forbidden by the Muslim Koran (Garamone, 2001).

Kaufman (2002) accurately summarized the current situation regarding the US foreign policy when he said, "In the twenty-first century, the US president will continue to face many kinds of international problems."Military, economic, or diplomatic tools will be insufficient to prevent or solve them. Democracy, freedom, and a civil society require constant advocacy...and International broadcasting must return to the front page of the US foreign policy agenda".

In an editorial published more than a decade ago in *The Economist* (1992) it open with a statement that "more than 100 governments now broadcast their messages abroad...with their purpose to influence opinion in the interest – political, cultural or religious – of whoever is paying their bills."

As this historical review has indicated, international broadcasting has played a key role in the US foreign policy and has been credited for

its indispensable role in the US victories including World War II, the Cold War, the Gulf War, the Kosovo Conflict and Iraq. As Malcom S. Forbes succinctly said in an interview (Raghavan, et.al, 1993), "there is no more effective and cheaper means of influencing events in other countries on a daily basis than radio broadcasting...it reaches millions of people."

There has never been a time in the US history, when the importance of effective international broadcasting has been greater than it is today. The events of September 11 and, afterwards, the war in Iraq, brought to the foreground debates over the future of public diplomacy and international broadcasting. These debates sharpened an understanding of the interest one society has in the media space of others. There are few other contexts in which there is so direct a discussion of a national purpose to alter the mix of voices, to affect the market for loyalties, to achieve greater civic participation in target societies and, finally, to win over hearts and minds. If there is "a revolution in public diplomacy," international broadcasting will be one critical site for its implementation. There may be a move from news to entertainment, from "objective and impartial" reportage to promotion of a particular culture or style. New technologies, new genres, new kinds of partnerships, all these will certainly characterize the future of international broadcasting.

### **Research Method**

Focus Group Discussion technique is widely used in research that deal with various social groups. The researcher intend to provide a detailed overview of the long lasting impacts of international broadcasters in terrorism-hit areas across the Pak-Afghan border in order to determine its impacts on local community. For this purpose, twelve professionals from media and academia were contacted who are broadly recognized for their services and expertise on this subject. Due to financial constraints and time limitations the researchers restricts themselves to organize one focus group discussion comprising a panel of five professional with the sound knowledge on the issue.

A group discussion was held in Islamabad on May 10, 2016. All of the authors of this study were present and the corresponding author moderated the discussion and asked some key questions from participants of group discussion. Utmost effort was made to provide the participants' with open environment so that they could respond the in-depth questions prepared for the discussion without hesitation.

### **Findings**

The researcher asked the following five main questions:

*FG Question one*

To what extent BBC and VOA radio programs in Pushto portray image of the local community for which they claim to provide a variety of news and current affairs programs and how you could justify the motives of these programs for the sake of development support?

*Outcomes*

The participants were of the view BBC and VOA portrays the local community of Pakistan and Afghanistan as a society which is living in socio-cultural chaos, ethnic and political rivalries, faced with extremism and terrorism. The respondents were convinced that the VOA and the BBC mostly highlight the above mentioned areas in their news and commentaries. They never cover plans and schemes of socio-economic development in their news and programs. Less time is given to political news. Usually they set the agenda for their coverage in Pakistan and Afghanistan in three dimensions firstly, news regarding violence then news regarding engagements/activities of the US/UK ISAF forces and at last news regarding socio-cultural chaos, corruption and political rivalries in the region.

When asked about the chief focus of the radio programs, the participants were of the view that Pashto services of BBC and VOA has failed to highlight the community's local level issues like basic health, education, civic amenities, un-employment etc. "They usually pick up bad news of the area and ignore the good news".

Broadcasters cover from changing weather to natural calamities and remarkable developments in arts and culture as well. But also unlike local media international media just cover one country or region but an important regional and global event as well, after all technology is shrinking the world very fast.

Contrary to this, the BBC & VOA services hardly portray the image of local community resulted during focus group debate on this subject. The participants concluded that international broadcasters are more interested in highlighting the positive image of the bilateral and multilateral donor agencies. Their contents are directed at the local community who are at the receiving end. The participants believed that multilingual radio service has the same agenda and would not differ from each other in terms of agenda setting.

Additionally, the participants were convinced that these channels mainly do propaganda for the Western countries and highlight their perspectives in the war on terror. However, to prove that they are neutral

and impartial, they do focus on many social problems that is good initiative for the local community to some extent. International broadcasters create awareness about these issues and the elements of propaganda can be identified by focusing on the language used, frames emphasized and sources selected for reporting.

Media today belonging to any part of the world works on the core principle of political economy. Contents of every media are influenced by a number of factors. Major among them are: ideology, commercialism, geopolitics, internal and external forces, such as pressure groups, the feeling of ours and others, etc. some participants were of the opinion that international broadcasters especially radio BBC and VOA are not very good friends of Pakistan and Afghanistan in the international arena. They slant news and current affair programs and frame them according to their political agendas.

#### *FG Question two*

How you see the role of international broadcasters in terms of providing opportunities for economic development, rehabilitation of dispersed people, anti-terrorism strategies and maintaining law and order in Afghanistan and Pakistan?

#### *Outcomes*

The researchers asked the participants about their view point on various awareness programs provided by international broadcasters for their local listeners in regional languages. It was summarized that although the international broadcasters (VOA & BBC) cover up to maximum level, the news regarding violence, but they do not suggest practical solutions to the issues like opportunities for economic development, rehabilitation of dispersed people, anti-terrorism strategies and maintaining law and order in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They provide very little opportunities in helping resolve these issues, according to the experts. International broadcasters have a huge role in regions and countries where the local media is not up to the task. It can arguably promote greater transparency and participation in government. As far as dispersed people rehab is concerned international media can play an important role if provided with proper access to the areas from where they have been displaced. Local media though enjoys more freedom as far as this access is concerned, but international media is restrained. On anti-terrorism strategies question, the participants specified that international media can question intentions of the rulers, their capabilities. They think that compared to local media, international broadcasters have little chance to create any scare or sensationalism hence it could be more useful. Among

the participants it was also agreed that the international broadcasters can play an important role in all these areas provided they project the issues objectively and give voice to the community. They can play vital role in education, health and nourishing responsiveness and income generating activities and peace initiatives. Their programs in Pushto can be more appropriate and effective.

Some of the participants were of the opinion that primarily, international broadcasters are there to promote Western agenda on the issues relating to war on terror. However, they often focus on the development issues, entertainment and problems of refugees which is a good sign because other broadcasters are unavailable in the areas they cover. Often their strategies collide with the national interests and hence doing more harm than good to states like Pakistan and Afghanistan.

#### *FG Question three*

What are your thoughts about the framing of the issues relevant to our society and agenda setting role of BBC and VOA in their radio services for Afghanistan and Pakistan?

#### *Outcomes*

The experts were of the view that BBC and VOA in their services frame the issues relevant to this society in a Western context. These contexts include the Western overall perspective about the Muslims, the West perspective about the third World, The political economy of Western media perspective, the so-called War on Terror Perspective etc.

Some guests specified that the focus of these broadcasts is to do propaganda for the West and promote their interests. However to give the impression of impartial reporting; they do become critical of US policies sometimes. To some professionals, the international broadcasters frame Pakistan and its society as part of the problem, sponsoring terror and that to do more to defeat terror. They are more powerful as these are in regional language and common people to a large extent believe in them.

The discussion on this question could be summarized as the frames used in the contents on various socio-economic issues do not usually favor this society. International radio is framing this region as if citizens' residing in this part of the world is consists on most downtrodden individuals of the world with prime needs.

#### *FG Question four*

In your Opinion, how International Broadcaster could effectively play his role to ensure peace and stability in Pakistan and Afghanistan and advocate a neutral part in bringing the two nations (Afghanistan and Pakistan) on same page against terrorism?

### Outcomes

When asked from the participants if the International broadcasters could effectively play their role to ensure peace and stability in Pakistan and Afghanistan and advocate a neutral part in bringing the two nations on same page against terrorism, they pointed out some basic strategies to be adopted by the international broadcasters including by highlighting the real cause of terrorism, extremism and militancy, by stressing and digging out the core common issues of both countries, by ignoring the news, issues and matters that create split and differences between Pakistan and Afghanistan, not giving maximum coverage to those politicians, statesmen, and experts which time and again create controversies and differences between Pakistan and Afghanistan, opinions of those analysts would be materialized more and more who are neutral and want rapprochement between two neighborly states and international media should call upon both countries as both have common enemies.

Addition to that, the journalism is not about ensuring peace and stabilities, it is the job of the rulers and law enforcing agencies. Media is there to report what is actually happening on the ground without any exaggerations or prejudices, and of course not to aggravate any situation. Ideally, it cannot be independent if it starts taking sides or act as predictors. It can only report and get background analysis from relevant experts to pin point errors in strategies and suggest better options. But journalists have in their own personal articles and write-ups suggested better coordination and addressing issues of mistrust as a priority between the two neighboring countries.

The experts agreed that international broadcasters can play vital role in development of the community by sharing healthy information and programs but it is a wishful thinking that they will ever do that to bring the two nations on the same page. Rather their efforts had been keep them poles apart so that they can play their role with ulterior motives.

### *FG Question five*

What are the major workable solutions and valuable suggestions that may help local radio listeners to segregate the propaganda out of messages propagating by international broadcasters and how well they could utilizing these services for their socio-economic development?

### Outcomes



The experts provided some workable solution for this matter. Some valuable solutions are as following:

1. The local media of Pakistan and Afghanistan should educate the people over the issue of foreign media propaganda.
2. Authorities of both countries should realize upon the people the vested interests of the World powers.
3. The private media owners, senior journalists and analysts should educate the people.
4. The local Radios should tell the truth so that they could gain the trust of the people as the local population do not trust over the local Radios and usually blame them for telling lie and concealing the truth from them.
5. The local radios should become more professional, objective and fair.
6. Listeners of international broadcasters should not be considered as ignorant. It would be like judging them wrongly. Even a politically conscious street vendor would know where the clever spin is coming from. We always get requests for more science and technology, health, sports and entertainment reports and programs than political content. By paying attention to these requests one can help them get better aware of opportunities.
7. The local audience should shun the foreign propaganda machinery of BBC & VOA and learn to trust, support and patronize the local broadcaster and media channels. There is a need of the capacity building and training of the local media professionals.
8. If people have strong critical sense, they filter out propaganda but common people cannot do it as they cannot differentiate between information and propaganda. They see many things for themselves and somehow get the power to differentiate reality from propaganda. If they hear that Pakistan soldiers are killed, they would trust that we are fighting Taliban and that we are the victims. Having said this, still there are strong chances for propaganda to succeed.
9. Good intelligent people and not vocalist entertainers are needed in the society.

### **Conclusion**

This study offers an analysis of focus group discussion held with media practitioners, experts and analysts to critically analyze the nature and role of BBC and VOA for their coverage of war on terror in the border

regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan. While the experts interviewed for this study appreciated certain aspects of the two broadcasts for providing information about the war on terror, they also opined that both BBC and VOA mainly promoted Western interests. They believed the war on terror was a complicated issue and alongside terrorism, many issues like strategic interests, regional rivalry, finances, recruitment were involved and these broadcasts were silent on these issues. They were of the opinion that the local media in Pakistan and Afghanistan should educate the people over the issue of foreign media propaganda. Rahimullah Yousafzai said that lack of awareness and media literacy are responsible for the development of propaganda of international broadcasters. He said that it is the prime responsibility of the local media to educate the listeners to differentiate between propaganda and information. While endorsing Yousafzia's points, Haroon Rashid of BBS opined the authorities of both countries should educate people of the far-flung areas about the vested interests of the world power. The private media owners, senior journalists and analysts should educate the people, Haroon added.

Professor Syed Abdul Siraj said the local radio channels, especially FM should tell the truth so that they could gain the trust of the people as the local population do not trust the local radios and usually blame them for telling lie and concealing the truth from them. He also criticized the government-run media for keeping the listeners in dark. The local radios should become more professional, objective and fair, Professor Siraj stressed.

Haroon Rashid further said that social media gives lots of independent information and listeners of international broadcasters should not be considered as ignorant. It would be like judging them wrongly. "Even a politically conscious street vendor would know where the clever spin is coming from. We always get requests for more science and technology, health, sports and entertainment reports and programs than political content. By paying attention to these requests one can help them get better aware of opportunities", he further elaborated.

Rashid Khattak of Daily Dawn the local audience should shun the foreign propaganda machinery of BBC & VOA and learn to trust, support and patronize the local broadcasters and media channels. There is a need of the capacity building and training of the local media professionals and for this purpose. Khattak further said that people have strong critical sense, they filter out propaganda but common people cannot do it as they cannot differentiate between information and propaganda. Commenting on the understanding of the listeners, Rashid said that they see many things for themselves and somehow get the power to differentiate reality from propaganda. "If they hear that

Pakistan soldiers are killed, they would trust that we are fighting Taliban and that we are the victims. Having said this, still there are strong chances for propaganda to succeed”, he concluded.

The participants said both BBC and VOA portray the local community of Pakistan and Afghanistan as a society which is living in socio-cultural chaos, ethnic and political rivalries, faced with extremism and terrorism, surrounded by corruption, lawlessness, bad governance and uncertainty. They never cover plans and schemes of socio-economic development in their news and programs. Rahimullah Yousafzai said both the services have failed to highlight the community’s local level issues like basic health, education, civic amenities, un-employment etc. He said, “The prime job of journalists is not to hide facts and figures but to reflect what is happening on the ground” he said and added both BBC and VOA were selective.

Additionally, the participants were convinced that these channels mainly do propaganda for the Western countries and highlight their perspectives in the war on terror. However, to prove that they are neutral and impartial, they do focus on many social problems that is good initiative for the local community to some extent. International broadcasters create awareness about these issues and the elements of propaganda can be identified by focusing on the language used, frames emphasized and sources selected for reporting.

This study found that the two services do not offer practical solutions to the issues like opportunities for economic development, rehabilitation of dispersed people, anti-terrorism strategies and maintaining law and order in Afghanistan and Pakistan. They provide very little opportunities in helping resolve these issues. International broadcasters have a huge role in regions and countries where the local media is not up to the task. It can raise issues of transparency, accountability and other elements of governance such as resource allocation more independently. It can arguably promote greater transparency and participation in government. As far as dispersed people rehab is concerned international media can play an important role if provided with proper access to the areas from where they have been displaced. Local media though enjoys more freedom as far as this access is concerned, but international media is restrained.

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