



AFGHAN MEDIA – THREE YEARS AFTER

Assessment of Internews-Supported Local Radio Stations

Executive Summary

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Introduction

As part of the media evaluation conducted for USAID and Internews, Altai Consulting carried out an **assessment of 16 out of the 28 local independent radio stations** that are supported in one capacity or another - e.g. financially, technically, through training - by Internews, a non-profit media development organization.

In addition to observations and interviews conducted with station staff, questionnaires were used on members of the community, within the coverage areas of the stations, who identified themselves as listeners of the respective local independent stations assessed.

Staff Vision and Mission: Serve the Public

Perceived staff goals of the local independent radio stations include:

- Provide local news to listeners
- Educate the public, encourage them to learn and promote literacy
- Promote democracy, freedom and social progress (in particular, women's rights)
- Serve as a link between local people and the government, hold the latter accountable
- Promote Afghan culture through music, literature, poetry and history

Overall, station staff members strongly believe that radio **can change society**.

Target audiences mostly mentioned are the young, the uneducated, women, and the poor.

Means to Achieve Vision

The **staff backgrounds** are quite varied. The minority has some previous experience in journalism; most have learned on the job. Very few have been formally educated in journalism.

There is generally a strong **motivation** to serve the public, which does not exclude personal incentives: access to a salaried job for staff, status for station managers. A significant proportion of the staff is made up of volunteers and some managers support the station through personal revenues.

Women's stations play an important role in terms of increased visibility of women in a professional capacity, especially management. However, incorporating women into existing stations is also paramount.

Most staff members have received some **training**, and desire more, with a focus on journalism and technical skills.

Capacity to run the technical equipment is generally satisfactory. **Further needs** expressed included additional computers and mixers, means of transportation and upgrades of transmitters.

Donor funding, advertising, fees on listeners' letters, and staff support are the main forms of funding. **Financial constraints** at some stations lead to lack of motivation among under-paid staff, inability to cover news events outside the immediate area, and shorter broadcasting periods.

Challenges and Methods Applied

Freedom of speech is limited by cultural and security factors. The main approach used to promote social change is to found arguments on Islamic principles. As personal safety is not completely guaranteed, journalists must pay attention to local powers, whether official or unofficial. Airing **audience complaints** through interactive programs is often used as a way to bypass this obstacle.

Satisfaction of all segments of the audience proves difficult, given the heterogeneity of educational levels, native languages and ethnic groups. As a solution, stations often try to employ journalists from various ethnic groups.

The inclusion of female staff is generally sought, but proves difficult in some areas, due to disapproval among local people and/or lack of educated women. Some station staff have recruited female relatives to fill the gap and to serve as an example for other women to come forward.

Where the Stations Stand

The local Internews supported stations are **very popular in their coverage areas** (with average rates of recognition at 80% and listenership at 79% among the surveyed sample). Overall there are positive signs of **integration** in the communities. 31% of respondents know who manages the station and 29% have already called or sent a letter.

Stations have on average reached a high level of **trust**. They benefit from the general trust in media, and especially in local media that was observed through the different phases of research. Interviewees stated that, trust should not be taken for granted, as mistakes are not easily forgotten.

Local stations are often considered as easier to **understand** than national or international stations. They use vernacular language, local accents and express key concepts with simple vocabulary. This explains their popularity for various kinds of programs, from health and education to local news.

Most respondents view these local stations as **independent**, still acknowledging and tolerating a certain level of self-censorship by local journalists. However, a significant number of interviewees (16%) perceive them as aligned to the provincial governments.

Almost all stations hope to extend their coverage. Still, improvement of the quality of the signal in the existing coverage area should be prioritized and the question of the staff's ability to serve a wider community needs to be addressed.

Programming

The three preferred programs are **Salam Watandar, music and news**. **Educational programs** are also highly desired. While **women's programs** are valued by women, incorporating women's perspectives into all programming would further reach out to them.

Programs are generally appreciated (54% think that they are at least as good as other stations). However, some interviewees complain that there is too much music; that announcers' pronunciation is poor; or that broadcasting periods are too short.

Salam Watandar is among the most successful programs on the local independent stations. Highly regarded among the program's segments are "Children's Town" and "You are the Judge." Most interviewees appreciate the mixing of Dari and Pashto as encouraging national unity. Understanding of some parts ("Zambel-e-Gham" for instance) is problematic among the less educated, due to the rapid speech, level of vocabulary and background knowledge needed.

Conclusion

To varying degrees, the local independent radio stations supported by Internews are proving to be an **effective tool in reaching under-served communities** by: providing understandable programs; fostering interaction between media and the community; and offering on-the-job training to a new generation of media professionals.

They have **rapidly gained popularity**, which reflects the desire for local media highlighted by the general survey. They should be considered as reliable partners for public information campaigns and advertising.

They still face a number of **challenges**: improve the quality of programming in line with audiences' expectations, extend their coverage areas when possible and strengthen their treatment of local news.

The **expansion of Arman FM commercial radio** outside Kabul places competitive pressure on Internews stations regarding their stated goals, as they will lose listeners. That said, increased choice and audience segmentation also helps to strengthen the overall media community and develop an advertising culture.

Most of the local stations are still **fragile financially**, but steps towards sustainability can be taken through actively pursuing advertising revenues in conjunction with other sources of donor funding.