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Afghanistan

Radio Hope in Kabul

Bettina Schiel and Stefanie Görtz, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (conservative), Zurich, Switzerland, Nov. 1, 2003

In the summer of 2001, a few brave Afghan journalists met with French friends in Paris and decided to set up an underground radio transmitter in the Panjir Valley to oppose the hated Taliban by sending news from the front to Kabul. Florent Milesi, one of the group, relates how his friends were flying to Afghanistan on Sept. 11, 2001, without having any clue of the attacks in New York.

Ten days later, Milesi followed them, first from Munich to Dushanbe, then by military helicopter into the Panjir Valley. In just a few months, the group ended up founding a media center in liberated Kabul under challenging conditions: a place where Afghans, for the first time in years, could work as independent journalists. It was established in the former headquarters of the Taliban's Morals Police, notorious for their gruesome torture.

The media center was christened Aina—the Dari word for “mirror.” Aina’s motto is giving people a voice, explains Milesi, who heads the center. In the building next door, Jamila Mujahed, a well-known journalist, produces her shows for the “Voice of Afghan Women.” The many offices arranged around the green courtyard are home to eight different independent publications, including *Kabul Weekly* and *Malalai*, a women’s magazine.

The video division, in which the first Afghan camerawomen have been trained, has attracted a great deal of attention. Aina’s goal is establishing several independent production companies and agencies, which will be exclusively Afghan and run as commercial operations. Along with Aina’s radio programming, listeners in Kabul have the national Radio Afghanistan, with its rather long-winded, pendantic style, the BBC World Service, the Voice of America, the radio station run by the International Security Assistance Forces—The Voice of Liberty—and Radio Azadi, all providing mostly news and information.

Saad Mohseni, the director of Kabul’s first privately owned radio station, Radio Arman, looks upon the foreign media activity with skepticism. “Ninety-eight percent of the media in Kabul will go bankrupt in 12 months, because the foreign funding will run out,” predicts the charismatic banker, who has returned to Kabul after many years in exile in Australia. A few weeks ago, Mohseni began selling and broadcasting commercials, and the station should soon be profitable. For Kabul, which is dependent upon foreign aid, this makes the station exceptional.

What has caused a furor throughout Kabul, however, is the station’s unconventional format: The programming is based entirely on infotainment, with popular music, entertainment, leisure-time tips, and talk shows. What does the “www” on the Internet mean? Where does garbage go? What’s a good place for a family to picnic on Fridays? After years of privations and restrictions, the programming obviously is filling a vacuum.

Everyone in Kabul, whether they are in the bazaar, in taxis, in restaurants, or at home, listens to Radio Arman, and they like what they hear. Only on Radio Arman do men and women share the mikes and joke and laugh together. For Afghan listeners, used to an extremely strict division between male and female roles, that was shocking at first.

The DJs on Radio Arman are young people without any experience in broadcasting, people who lived in Kabul during the Taliban years. When the station began hiring, they were chosen for their motivation, enthusiasm, and sense of humor. Many of the announcers have trouble reading or cannot speak formal Dari, which is very different from the colloquial language of the streets. One of the on-air women did not leave her house for years during Taliban rule.

“These people, especially the women, were denied education and had no opportunity to develop their spoken-language skills,” says Mohseni. “The fact that they have trouble speaking reflects the current situation in our society. Most listeners cannot understand what is said on the other stations, and they have had enough of politics and serious discussions. They want a little bit of entertainment and fun at last.”

Radio Arman, with its listener-friendly concept, has divided this city of 3 million on the Hindu Kush. Its casual announcers cause intellectuals to accuse the station of not practicing serious journalism. Seelay Srak, the head of production at Radio Aina, criticizes the nothing-but-entertainment format of her top competitor. Its announcers use the language of kids on the street, she says, and adds: “Radio Arman is content-free. They just play music all day long.”

Jamila Mujahed, the publisher of *Malalai*, the women’s magazine, and director of “Voice of Afghan Women” radio, goes even further in her criticism. The political situation is too unstable for innovations like this, she says. She is afraid of consequences, such as legal restrictions, that would then affect every station. “They do not understand that fundamentalists, just as before, are still part of our society,” Mujahed says of Radio Arman’s announcers.

But Mohseni is, more than anything else, a businessman. He does not see his programming as an affront to the fundamentalists. What matters to him is that the people of Kabul are listening. “We do not make religious jokes, nor do we discuss politics. I would like for us to be able to break real barriers,” he declares, “but we cannot. We must be sensitive to our culture and our people.”

That 80-90 percent of the population of Kabul does listen is proof enough for Mohseni that he is on the right path. Now he is looking at what profile a commercial radio station in Afghanistan ought to have. When you consider that on TV Afghanistan, the country’s only television channel, women have not yet been allowed to sing, Kabul had better prepare itself for a new wave of outrage.



A man polishes one of his second-hand radios to attract customers in a Kabul market (Photo: Hoang Dinh Man/AFP/Getty Images).