

**Cultured Men, Uncultured Women:  
An Exploration of the Gendered Hierarchy of Taste Governing Afghan Radio**

by

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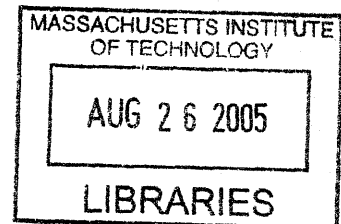
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**Abstract**

After years of strict bans on the media, local radio in post-Taliban Afghanistan is undergoing an intense period of reconstruction. This thesis uses a multi-sited ethnographic investigation to examine local Afghan radio's various relationships with women in Afghanistan. In examining both the production and consumption contexts of local radio, it pinpoints areas of disjuncture that can and do lead to breakdowns in communications with the Afghan woman audience. Societal constructions of "cultured" tastes in the production room tend to obstruct female-friendly radio in favour of elite, male-oriented textual encodings. Consequently, women's radio transmissions are often at odds with the genre preferences and high levels of illiteracy of women in Afghanistan, failing to communicate with large segments of their intended audience. Radio producers face real and perceived penalties for disrupting cultural rules on what is and is not done on the air, thus the current system propagating ineffective women's radio is highly resistant to change.

Thesis Supervisor: Henry Jenkins

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## Preface – The Changing Face of Kabul

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I traveled around Kabul in January 2003, astonished at the level of bustle and energy in the streets. My previous (and first) trip to Afghanistan had been in July 2001, during the reign of the Taliban. Then, the strict media ban and severe social restrictions of the Taliban had left the streets eerily deserted and silent. Now, new radio stations and newspapers were mushrooming, taxi drivers were opinionated, and the streets were filled with honking cars.

An Afghan friend of mine commented on the many incongruities that characterized Kabul's uneven growth and rapid development following the fall of the Taliban:

There are many luxurious cars, but no good roads. You can find Internet connections and high-speed computers everywhere, but search all of Kabul and you won't find a floppy disk. There's an expression in Dari that people use to say that something is excessively present, everywhere. They say: every time you turn over a rock, you find the overly abundant thing. These days, [he chuckles], every time you turn over a rock in Afghanistan, you find yet another Non-Governmental Organization.<sup>1</sup>

I found that his comments captured some of the flavour of Kabul life in the chaos and busy-ness of reconstruction. Foreign workers had brought about rapid changes and haphazard technological leapfrogging. Most Afghans continued to rely on traveling businessmen for letters and news, but the elite bypassed the either unreliable or non-existent telephone and postal services to communicate via Afghanistan's newly established mobile phone system. The presence of international development and humanitarian agencies could be felt and seen strongly in urban areas, and in many ways had become a major locus of power and resource that far surpassed (and some believed, undermined<sup>2</sup>) the Afghan government.

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<sup>1</sup> My English translation of a Dari quote from a discussion I had with my friend Khalid in Peshawar, Pakistan, January 2003, prior to my trip to Kabul, Afghanistan.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Monsutti (forthcoming) for a discussion on NGOs in Afghanistan. For a more general treatment of NGOs in the region, see the Middle East Report #214, Spring 2000: "Critiquing NGOs: Assessing the Last Decade."

I was to run into a number of unexpected situations in my data collection as a result of the rather topsy-turvy state of the country. Indeed, my plans often went quite drastically awry on discovering things that ran counter to my expectations. I will describe my very first change in plans here in an effort to set the scene on the state of fieldwork conditions in post-Taliban Afghanistan and explain part of how I came to choose my final area of research. The following anecdotes describe incidents during a two-week trip I made in January 2003 as the first of four fieldvisits to Afghanistan:

I am traveling by road to Kabul from Peshawar, Pakistan. Unlike my first visit in 2001, this time I'm officially entering as a foreigner, and this necessitates time-consuming paperwork and the hiring of an armed guard (required by Pakistani law) to travel the insecure road to the Afghan border. The newly repaved road to Kabul takes 5 hours instead of the 12 hours - complete with two flat tires caused by tank mine craters - of my first trip. The abandoned tanks are still around, but the Taliban checkpoints are not.

The men with the scary eyes have gone.

I was wearing the burqa the last time I came. This time I use it for lumbar support.<sup>3</sup>

I crossed into Afghanistan with a sense of recognition along with marvel at the degree of change the country had undergone in less than two years. The twisting turns of the Khyber Pass offered glimpses of snow-covered stony vistas that were as beautifully stark and unforgiving as I remembered. I could see them clearly because I was not wearing the face-concealing burqa that I had worn continuously on my last trip. All the other women in the packed minivan were wearing burqas, but I was happier with mine rolled up and used as a pillow against the jolting of the vehicle. I physically resemble a Hazara<sup>4</sup> woman and so my uncovered face garnered a few curious glances, but otherwise drew little attention. I was dressed modestly, had wrapped a scarf around my head, and was traveling with a male Afghan companion who was presumably my husband or brother; in post-Taliban Afghanistan, this was acceptable behaviour for an Afghan woman.

I was revisiting Kabul with ambitions of understanding the interplay of media with politics in Afghanistan's historical moment of transition. I hypothesized that new press

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<sup>3</sup> This is a January 2003 "mental snapshot" or reworked and more vividly dramatized presentation of my fieldnotes. I describe and justify the mental snapshot data presentation style in Chapter 5.

<sup>4</sup> The Hazara are an Afghan ethnic group that comprises about 19 percent of the population.

freedoms and the diversification of media sources were resulting in suspicion, but also unacknowledged acceptance and change in radio usage among Afghans. My research questions were concerned with understanding how Afghan information-gathering processes were shifting as their media environment opened. How did newly launched radio broadcasts impact Afghan listening habits and information gathering processes? In what did Afghans invest the most trust as their news source, and why? How did this vary across gender, ethnicity, and religion? How did Afghan's current media relationship compare with informal news flows during the Taliban and pre-Taliban regimes?

I had formulated these questions before I entered the field, as I knew that radio broadcasts had expanded substantially in the two years following the fall of the Taliban. During the time of the Taliban, only one radio station, *Voice of Shari'at*, had been permitted to broadcast in Taliban-controlled areas -- foreign broadcasts at the time from the *BBC*, *Voice of America*, *Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, and *Radio Pakistan* could only be listened to clandestinely by short-wave radio owners. In contrast, by the time of my visit in January 2003, there were approximately 17 state and 2 independent Afghan radio stations operating on FM intermittently. There were also plans for the development of numerous repeaters on Afghan soil so that foreign broadcasters could retransmit their signals on clearer and more accessible FM signals within Afghanistan. I thought it would be relevant and timely to try and understand how Afghans were coping with the dynamic, politically-charged moment of media reconstruction they were experiencing.

Almost immediately on entering the field, however, I was faced with a problem. There was very little basic data available on radio listening habits or on access to radio sets in Afghanistan. I interviewed 4 of the most active radio organizations in Afghanistan,<sup>5</sup> and the recurring message I received was that they did not have any current or historical data

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<sup>5</sup> I interviewed the following four people in English in Kabul between January 18-25, 2003:

- Rodolphe Baudeau, Co-founder, AINA
- Amaury Coste, Project Director, Media Action International
- Alexis Martin, Afghanistan Project Director, Institute for Media, Policy, and Civil Society
- John West, Afghanistan Project Director, Internews



on Afghan listening habits, and that they hoped I could generate some. I realized that I essentially had no sensible way of talking about changes in media usage or modifications in radio listening behaviour without a credible baseline of information on how Afghans listened to the radio in the first place. There were only a handful of publicly available listening surveys conducted in Afghanistan; I acquired copies of all of them and soon realized that I did not have a solid base for working on my hypothesis. I considered designing a questionnaire to ask how respondents had listened to the radio in the past, but its validity would depend on accurate self-reporting and would not have allowed for very definite findings.

I spent the rest of my trip researching and conducting informational interviews so that I could redefine my research questions. I now knew that simple research on listening habits could help fill some of the knowledge gaps on radio use, but I was not entirely sure what population I should study, nor why. I listened to the radio, conducted interviews with radio practitioners and users, and lived in two Afghan households for five days each, observing my hosts' radio and television consumption to gain a better sense of the local media environment.

I spent time with the media development community in Afghanistan and was struck by the efforts they made towards including women in their production and broadcast processes. One radio development organization, the Institute for Media, Policy, and Civil Society (IMPACS) worked exclusively with women journalists. They invested deeply in the belief that radio was an appropriate communications medium for delivering messages to the large numbers of illiterate Afghan women whose mobility was restricted for cultural reasons. IMPACS put a lot of time and effort towards broadcasting messages for Afghan women, and yet had limited resources for determining whether women on the other side of the airwaves actually listened to their broadcasts.

I began to have some doubts on the usefulness of radio for women as I spent more time with Afghans. In the three households I visited and the two households in which I lived, it seemed to me that women were much less likely to touch the dials on the radio than

men. Previous studies had found Afghan radio listening to be a communal activity (Von Seibold 2002), and yet it seemed to me that questions on individual access, control, and level of engagement were hidden in the term “communal radio listening.” I wondered how often radio sets in the country were tuned to women’s radio programs if indeed women did not usually adjust the set. I became curious as to how the radio set fit within the female world specifically. How much importance did radio broadcasts hold for women? How did they interpret the stories they heard? How did radio relate to the status and self-conceptions of women in their homes?

My decision to study the situation of women was further reinforced by the experience I had working with an Afghan woman humanitarian worker in Kabul whom I will call Roya. We went together to receive a shipment of donated medicines from Spain that was arriving by military plane at the peacekeeper’s camp near Kabul airport. I learned a great deal about the cultural restrictions facing Afghan women and some of the penalties for flouting cultural laws as a result:

A Spanish embassy representative is driving Roya and I to the airport to pick up a large donation of medicine. A mangled airplane in a nearby weed field is a silent reminder of the US bombing of the airfields. We pass two military checkpoints before we are admitted to the Spanish International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) tent. We are led into what looks like a mess hall. It is clean, cool, and airy. Two men are watching a music video by satellite TV while another fetches a beer from a massive steel fridge. A bare-breasted woman pouts at me from a calendar on the wall. "Don't look at that!" exclaims the Spanish embassy representative accompanying us. Roya’s face is expressionless, but I can read her discomfort.

I am intrigued by the juxtaposition of this neat and orderly world against the dust and ruin on the other side of its canvas walls. But my speculations are cut short: the medicine has not yet arrived. We will have to return later when the plane arrives.

When we return to the ISAF base a few hours later, the soldiers at the Afghan checkpoint raise their voices and refuse to let us pass. The Spanish embassy representative and his translator descend quickly to try and understand the problem. Roya and I stay in the car. One of the Afghan soldiers approaches Roya’s side of the car. He peers inside and begins questioning us. He has the nervous aggressiveness of an addict needing a fix, and has a bandage covering most of his face. Other men crowd in behind him.

I lied. The men with the scary eyes are still here.

On discovering that Roya is Afghan, the first soldier harshly orders her to leave the car ("Get out! Get out!!"), gesturing with his rifle. She refuses. He opens the door but she

catches the handle and firmly shuts it again. The Spanish embassy representative, himself a uniformed military officer, rushes back and sits behind the wheel. "I will never understand this, never," he mutters to himself as we back up quickly and drive away.

We deposit Roya someplace safe, then return to the ISAF base. The Spanish embassy representative and I are waved through the Afghan checkpoint this time with no problem. The mess hall is packed with soldiers eating lunch, and a room full of heads swivels to look at me. The embassy representative positions himself to shield me from the stares, and I stand there, mute and uncomfortable. It's intimidating this time.

I concentrate on the floor on our way out, and can almost feel the air around me lighten as I step out into the brisk Kabul winter air.<sup>6</sup>

Roya and I discussed this experience later. I was utterly confused by the fact that we were allowed into the ISAF compound early in the day, but barred (or at least, Roya was barred) later in the day. Roya and the Afghan translator explained that the checkpoint guards had set up a kind of ambush. Alerted to her entry into the camp earlier, a group of more conservative guards had replaced the morning's sentry and waited for our return. Had she lied and claimed not to be Afghan or stepped out of the car at the checkpoint, the repercussions could have been serious. By disallowing Roya's entry to the military camp, the Afghan soldiers were protecting her virtue, and hence, the honour of their country. To their thinking, an Afghan woman attempting to enter the ISAF compound was likely a prostitute. I, on the other hand, was a foreign woman and warranted no protection.

There are complexities to the Afghan concepts of honour and women's virtue, and Afghan women do enjoy a certain respect from their society that is often missing in reports filed by Western media. In this example, however, I felt the confounding of a female humanitarian worker's legitimate business with prostitution demonstrated the ease with which Afghan women's efforts at participation in the new society could be obstructed or besmirched. I also began to understand the degree of sensitivity with which Afghan women's activities were viewed.

From my perspective, Kabul had changed in some ways, but in other ways it had not changed at all. I and other female foreigners in Afghanistan's ubiquitous Non-

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<sup>6</sup> Mental snapshot, Kabul, January 2003.

Governmental Organizations could comfortably bare our faces, but we were a privileged minority. While Afghan laws no longer required that women's faces be covered, social rules led many women to continue to conceal their faces in the streets of post-Taliban Afghanistan as the continuation of a social practice prevalent during and before the reign of the Taliban.

I became very interested in studying Afghan women's radio as a foray into the changes in the voice of Afghan women. Radio reconstruction had in some circles been touted as a tool for women's empowerment and as a catalyst for changed attitudes. I became curious about its effectiveness and inner processes, cognizant of the way in which some Afghan women had struggled for and often been denied a means to express themselves and their vision for the country through twenty years of war and male-dominated politics. I was also aware, however, that Afghan politics and culture were very complex, and Afghan women's brand of feminism had evolved in an environment of blood and tears very different from my own. My only hope was to listen with attention and try my best to produce an adequate study of women's radio within Afghan culture. The pages that follow present the final product of my project.

## Introduction

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*“Democracy is fashionable right now and media projects are the current fad, but what impact does it all have?”*

--Habiba Sarabi, Minister of Women’s Affairs, Afghanistan<sup>7</sup>

Women’s radio listening in present-day Afghanistan has significant social relevance for the future of the nation. For years, Afghan women, and rural women in particular, have suffered outdated and harmful practices that run counter to women’s rights, both from the standpoints of Islam and international conventions. Now women have been granted an unprecedented public voice in their nation’s history, and are gaining greater recognition as a social and political force. The power conceded to women is often superficial and frequently undermined, but nevertheless represents an acknowledgement of women’s right and duty to participate in the building of their society.

A core premise in much scholarly literature on women’s media, especially in the Western world, points to the hegemonic power of the mass media<sup>8</sup> in propagating sexist messages and patriarchal culture. Studies on body image, for example, decry the negative influence of the Western mass media on women’s eating habits and self-esteem. The situation in Afghanistan is quite different. The reconstruction of Afghanistan’s media infrastructure is being spearheaded in large part by international agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) whose agenda includes the “empowerment” of Afghan women. Thus, deep within a conservative male-dominated nation, there have been concerted efforts to propagate progressive gender messages and gradually weaken the hold of male-centric culture.

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<sup>7</sup> My English translation of a Dari quote from an interview I had with Habiba Sorabi in her home, October 2003, Kabul.

<sup>8</sup> As theorized by Gramsci, cultural hegemony refers to the domination of one social class over others by establishing its views and values as the common sense, legitimate beliefs of the society. Mass media is seen as being instrumental in constructing this consensus.

This study, however, argues that fundamental disjunctures in radio communications processes can and do prevent radio messages from reaching women. The radio listening and production communities that I investigate in this paper suggest that the form and presentation of Afghan women's programming often conform to male-centric conceptions of what constitutes a "good" media product. The radio producers in my study employ forms that are linguistically and conceptually inaccessible for much of their female Afghan audience. As a result, their radio programming often fails to adequately deliver messages to the most vulnerable segment of its intended audience.

Why would radio producers package messages in ways that are inaccessible to their intended audience? Why, as shown in my chapter 4 case study of a women's radio station, would female radio producers employ male-centric forms and conventions in their radio broadcasts? The answer, I posit, may lie in societal framings of morality and taste with respect to Afghan media. Western media theory suggests that media are often judged as being either legitimate or illegitimate: in 1944, Horkheimer and Adorno labeled mass media forms like radio and movies as insidious, illusory controllers of their consumers. Art, in contrast, while corrupted by becoming overly accessible for the general public, offered the only possibility of real pleasure and engagement to its audience (Horkheimer and Adorno 1987).

Categorization of art as "high-brow" and popular mass media as "low-brow" is not restricted to the domain of theorists, but is also evident in media consumer attitudes. A study by Ien Ang of the US television series *Dallas* demonstrates that the "ideology of mass culture," by which Ang means the widespread view that mass culture is low-brow and therefore unworthy, is one of the chief justifications used by *Dallas* haters to legitimize their dislike.

[The ideology of mass culture] makes a search for more detailed and personal explanations superfluous, because it provides a finished explanatory model that convinces, sounds logical and radiates legitimacy (1985:96).

Taste distinctions are made among genres of "low brow" mass media programming as well, with certain mass media genres considered more legitimate than others. Research

has shown that media consumers tend to apologize for watching TV soap operas but speak of consuming current affairs and news programming as part of their civic duty (Alasuutari 1999). Notions of *legitimacy* are separate from actual genre *preferences*, however. Popular media genres like soap operas may be considered lowbrow, but consumers derive pleasure from them and consume them regularly. Further, empirical studies have shown a gendered division in media consumption preferences and practices, with “realistic” programs, those with “fantasy content,” and “light entertainment” with an “every day or domestic theme” being categorized by Dorothy Hobson as part of the “woman’s world.” Meanwhile, “the news, current affairs, political programmes and scientific programmes, together with portrayals of war (real or in the guise of war films) are actively rejected by...women” (1996:114) as men’s programming.

This thesis explores the implications of the “highbrow/lowbrow” taste hierarchy and its tension with gender-based genre preferences in the context of Afghan radio. I will argue that rural women’s disinterest in radio content in Afghanistan is due to underlying perceptions of culture that tend to portray, value and broadcast male-centric content at the expense of less socially legitimate, female-friendly programming. I will draw from cultural studies, feminist media studies, and reception theory to explore questions of power, taste, gender, and the media. My hypothesis is as follows:

One of the underlying causes for rural Afghan women’s low radio listening patterns is that local Afghan radio broadcasts favour Afghan male preferences for the national, political, and abstract over Afghan female concerns with the domestic, everyday, and practical.

The goal of this thesis will be to try and map some of the interplay of media, culture, gender, taste hierarchy and choice in the production and consumption spaces of women’s radio programming. The questions I mean to address are as follows:

1. What kinds of relationships do Afghan women have with the radio set? How do personal and societal conceptions of women’s roles in Afghanistan figure in women’s radio listening choices? What genres and programs do women generally enjoy, and why? How do these preferences match against the programming reaching them?

2. What is the production context for Afghan women's radio programming? How do radio producers conceptualize the audience for women's radio, and how does this influence the form and style of programming they produce? How do producers choose the programming and content they broadcast over the air? What internal and external pressures influence radio production choices and actions?
3. Examining the consumption and production worlds together, what patterns emerge? What role does culture play in creating this dynamic? What implications does this have on the future of women's voicing in Afghanistan?

The data I present will be primarily based on four months of fieldwork in 2003, when I conducted a multi-sited ethnographic exploration of the production and consumption of women's radio programming. I will begin with a study of rural Afghan women's radio listening<sup>9</sup> where, using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods in a remote village in Samangan Province, Afghanistan, I examine the availability and role of the radio set in rural households and the level of engagement of Afghan women with radio programming. I then enter the world of radio production, describing some of the elements involved in the day-to-day operations of an Afghan women's radio station and a radio production unit.

My paper will be presented in 5 chapters. In chapter 1, I will review some feminist studies on women and the media, outline my theoretical framework, and sketch the context of Afghanistan's radio environment. Chapter 2 will present my methodological approach and fieldwork choices. Chapter 3 will offer a study of rural women's receptiveness to and consumption of the radio. I will demonstrate how the women I surveyed overwhelmingly expressed difficulty understanding and/or had little interest in radio broadcasts. I will link their limited consumption of the radio to cultural factors that include poor prior exposure to the media, the linguistic and genre-based inaccessibility of broadcasts, and domestic norms. Chapter 4 will examine the logic of choices in the production of women's radio texts. I will look at notions of audience and production

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<sup>9</sup> My data on women's rural radio listening draws from a study I conducted with support from a combination of grants from Oxfam International, the Mellon-MIT Inter-University Program on Non-Governmental Organizations and Forced Migration, and MIT Wilson Awards.



decision-making in the studio room to suggest the dominance of male tastes in the women's radio production process. I will present a tentative breakdown of the "cultured/uncultured" hierarchy in the Afghan context and suggest reasons why BBC Radio's Afghanistan broadcasts are able to disregard some elements of that hierarchy. Finally, chapter 5 will re-examine my methodological choices, discuss their limitations, and present my learning and adaptations in the face of unforeseen circumstances.

As the Afghan Minister of Women's Affairs suggests in the opening quote of this introduction, the reconstruction of media has received a great deal of attention in Afghanistan, but systematic inquiry into its impact has received much less investment. In my opinion, radio likely does have great potential for enabling personal and social transformation among women. Illiterate women, especially in rural areas, are particularly vulnerable to harmful customs that are often less prevalent in urban areas. Access to external information via the radio would be useful for them to aspire to significant improvements in their quality of life and facilitate changes in what the Minister calls the "regime of Taliban-like mentality reigning Afghanistan."<sup>10</sup>

I will endeavour to show in this paper, however, that the reception and production of women's radio are filled with contestations and negotiations. While complex and often contradictory, the dynamics of women's radio communications suggest that, far from countering patriarchy, local Afghan radio stations can and often do propagate dominant male assumptions and tastes in their women's programming. Ideological constructs embedded in the studio room degrade the potential and power of radio as a medium for the support and education of Afghan women. Chapter 1 begins to explore why.

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<sup>10</sup> My English translation of a Dari quote from an interview I had with Habiba Sorabi in her home, October 2003, Kabul.

## Chapter 1 – Ideology, Women, and Radio in Afghanistan

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Many studies on the mass media in Anglo-American academic circles have focused on the media's intersection with women's worlds and social experiences. The breadth of feminist media discourse is broad and rich, diverse and fragmented, and certainly beyond my ability to present meaningfully in this chapter. I will limit my discussion to certain trends and findings within feminist literature that inform my project of gender and hegemony in Afghanistan's radio production and consumption.

### Western Feminist Media Studies

---

Laura Mulvey (1975) argues that the “shot/reverse shot structure” in Western cinematic convention, wherein two camera shots depict a viewer and his or her viewpoint in succession, tends to position men as active/viewers and women as passive/objects of the gaze. Hollywood motion picture production practices, she claims, thus subtly program patriarchal assumptions into the textual language of the screen. Mulvey's work in what is often referred to as “screen theory,” works to understand spectator-text relationships through analyzing the structure of the text itself.

A number of British media scholars, among others, later critiqued screen theory for “[failing] to distinguish between the reader implied by or inscribed in the text and the actual social subjects who interpret or decode texts” (Moore 1990:14). Their criticism marked a shift among some feminist investigations from textual analysis to ethnographic investigations of the “active audience.” The concept of the “active audience” assumes that individuals face and choose from a spectrum of meanings in media texts and that audience interpretations of media texts vary.

Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) is an important study in this regard. Radway emphasizes the “the act of romance reading” in her study over what she terms

her former “inadvertent but continuing preoccupation with the text.” She argues that women’s act of reading for their own pleasure is a feminist act of resistance even while the texts they read are regressive and patriarchal. Radway foregrounds the contradictions of agency in women’s readership of romance novels explicitly:

Does the romance's endless rediscovery of the virtues of a passive female sexuality merely stitch the reader even more resolutely into the fabric of patriarchal culture? Or, alternatively, does the satisfaction a reader derives from the act of reading itself, an act she chooses, often in explicit defiance of others' opposition, lead to a new sense of strength and independence? (1984:15)

Women’s agency in the reader-text relationship is presented differently in Amy Kiste Nyberg’s study on women and comic books. Drawing from interviews with comic book industry marketing representatives, Nyberg argues that comic book producers have a fairly clear and uniform understanding of the gendered tastes differentiating their consumers. The industry’s formulation of gendered tastes is as follows: typical female preferences include romance, a focus on characters and story, and comedy whereas male preferences include adventure, a focus on action and art, and “serious” titles. Cognizant of industry statistics indicating that 95% of comic book readership is male, Nyberg concludes that publishers produce comics that are overwhelmingly slanted towards the male world, obliging women to “trespass” and read comic books “in spite of the ways in which they are excluded” (1995:212).

The three examples of feminist media scholarship above highlight concerns with lack of transparency in media representations, complex and contradictory formulations of agency in accessing media, and exclusion by gendered constructs of taste. These concerns will be central to my study. Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model (1980, originally published as 'Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse' in 1973) offers a fairly elegant and holistic construct for conceptualizing the gendered media questions I envision, and as such will form the theoretical base for my arguments.

## The Encoding/Decoding Model

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Hall's model puts significant emphasis on the role of 'encoders' (or producers of a media text) and 'decoders' (or receivers of a media text) in the mass communication process. The 'moment' of encoding a text is influenced by producers' "knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on" (Hall 1980:129). The receiver reverses this process at a similar 'moment' of decoding that is likewise contingent on the receiver's knowledge frameworks and practices.

The moment of decoding is closely associated with Michel Pêcheux's concept of "inter-discourse," described by David Morley as the precise moment when readers use their bank of knowledge and experience – or, in other words, "cultural competencies"<sup>11</sup> – to make sense of a text (Morley 1980). Hall argues that due to "structural differences of relation and position between broadcasters and audiences" and "*lack of equivalence* between the two sides in the communicative exchange" (1980:131, italics in original), the meanings presented by the encoder as the text's "preferred reading" and the meaning understood by the decoder at the "interdiscursive" moment are often different.

Hall's model has been criticized for bypassing the question of how to find the "preferred reading" of a text, and for its assumption in the first place that a preferred meaning exists and is encoded in the text. Shaun Moores asks "where is the [preferred meaning] and how do we know if we've found it? ...Can it be found by examining any sort of text?" (1993:28). Further, the theory's origins in the more urban, developed, and literate context of the West raise questions on whether it would serve as an adequate frame for an investigation of Afghan media. Indeed, Annabelle Sreberny suggests that theoretical constructs developed in industrial nations may not suit the often infrastructurally weak

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<sup>11</sup> According to Bourdieu, social differences are legitimized by taste, so whether selecting art, clothing, furniture, or food, an individual's acquired "cultural competence" determines their level of culture (1984).

developing world. She points out that Western models are often "too insistently media-centric, a problematic but understandable tendency in contexts with long histories of media institutionalization, with a wide variety of media channels, differentiated patterns of ownership and control, and a colossal output of media product" (2000:64).

The encoding/decoding model remains a useful construct for the purposes of this thesis, however, as I am concerned more with the context of the moments of encoding and decoding than I am with tracking preferred readings within media texts. Further, Hall's model, while framed as a general model for mass communication, is equally applicable to the transmission of meaning in interpersonal communications and thus can be considered an appropriate model for cultures with limited media infrastructure.<sup>12</sup> I will endeavour to harness the explanatory power of the encoding/decoding model while also presenting modifications and additions necessary for situating it in the Afghan context.

### **Non-Western Feminist Media Studies**

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Moving one step closer to women's media in Afghanistan, I will now present the approaches and findings of some feminist media investigations in non-Western environments, particularly in transitional societies.<sup>13</sup> Ang and Hermes (1996) argue that gender studies conducted on predominantly white, Western populations should not be used to extrapolate gender issues across national borders. Such "creeping essentialism" is dangerous for ignoring variations across ethnicity, class, age, and education, and "absolutizing the differences found" (1996:331). Studies in non-Western contexts offer some sense of the diversity and dynamism of societal constructions of gender, ideology, and the media around the world. One of my main concerns in this study will be to try and highlight areas of recognition and contrast in my field experience against selected theories and bodies of work in feminist media studies globally.

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<sup>12</sup> My thanks to William Uricchio for sharing this insight.

<sup>13</sup> Transitional societies can be defined as "village-based and traditional, and in the process of transformation into modern societies" (Odejide 1996:27).

Nigeria, while geographically and contextually distant as an English-speaking West African nation, is similar to Afghanistan in the low life expectancy of its citizens, diverse mix of its ethnicities and languages, and predominately Muslim and rural population. Some feminist discourse in Nigeria suggests that women's access to media messages is often limited in transitional societies:

Women in certain kinds of societies, especially in developed ones, tend to have advantage over men by experiencing greater exposure [to media texts], assuming of course that the advantages in this regard do not mask essential disadvantages in some respects. In developing or transitional societies such as Nigeria, women tend to be disadvantaged in [this capacity]. (Oloko 1996:83)

Oloko points to inadequate broadcasts in local dialects, the tendency of Nigerian media to be "centralized and clustered in urban areas," and the prevalence of "culturally alienated media practitioners who are either ignorant of or indifferent to the problems, aspirations and felt needs of women, especially in the rural setting" (1996:83) as barriers to Nigerian women's consumption of the media.

Not all transitional societies present equally dramatic instances of women's limited consumption of the media, however. Like Nigeria, India is polyethnic, polylingual, and highly rural, but unlike Nigeria, its government broadcasts are relatively effective and accessible, and raise questions of a different nature. In a study of women's interpretations of Indian state TV, Mankekar (1993) explores the way in which women negotiate the propaganda girding their favourite entertainment programs. She indicates that viewers often "see through" TV soap operas to an underlying state agenda constructing the meaning of Indian womanhood, and also often shuttle between resistance to and acceptance of the government's messages. One informant, speaking of the way in which state TV propagated its ideology, said that the soap opera "informed viewers, in a frighteningly fundamental way, about their place in the world" (1993:557).

### **Afghanistan's Media Context**

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The non-Western studies I have presented here put forward themes – rural/urban disparities in media access, the role of language in women’s consumption, media messages on woman’s “place” in society, and gendered hierarchies of taste – that recur in my study of Afghan media and women. Afghanistan’s media environment resonates in some respects with that of its neighbour, Pakistan. Rai Shakil Akhtar suggests that an investigation of the media in Pakistan “is an attempt to disentangle a web of social change, wrought primarily under the impact of the West over the last two centuries” (2000:x). Likewise, studying Afghanistan’s media sector exposes a complex history fraught with Cold War wrangling and British imperial influence. The need for care and a highly particularized study of Afghanistan’s political context in relation to communications is clear, especially given Afghan media’s historical subjugation to military and occupational powers working to wrest control of the country. Unfortunately, it is outside the scope of my project to discuss the history of Afghan media and politics in any depth. My (tangential) treatment of the political arena of Afghan media will briefly touch on Afghan radio’s relationship with Western reconstruction agencies during its rapid transition away from the Taliban regime’s ban on most media.

The need for care is also present in examining the influence of religion on Afghanistan’s media system. Afghanistan, along with Iran, Pakistan, and Mauritania, is officially known as an Islamic republic and its media reflect the conservative Islamic and cultural sensibilities of a theocratic nation. Women inhabit a complex and sensitive space within Afghanistan’s media rubric. Images of women in scanty, tight clothing may be nominally accessible to the country’s elite via high tech means like pirated DVDs, satellite television, and expensive Internet connections, but otherwise such images are considered socially unacceptable, believed to be publicly unavailable, and are generally unacknowledged. At the same time, however, pressure and cultural “spillage”<sup>14</sup> from Western development agencies have brought women’s issues to the forefront of the public sector and encouraged higher levels of women’s participation, depiction, and

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<sup>14</sup> Cultural spillage is described by P. Eric Louw (2001) as a natural consequence of the interaction of different cultures. “Sometimes...spillages are deliberately engineered by intellectuals as a part of their hegemonic battles, but many spillages are merely the result of the ease with which information and ideas can flow globally” (2001: 23).

engagement in Afghan media than might otherwise have been expected in the nation. These two contradictory forces of internal and external media culture bear some elaboration.

As I described earlier in the preface, Afghan women's virtue is a point of extreme sensitivity in Afghan society. A village leader that I met in 2001 in a refugee camp in Pakistan had survived a series of massacres<sup>15</sup> in his village during the Mujahideen<sup>16</sup> - Taliban civil war. In describing the horror of the continual battles over control of his village, he characterized the actions of the Taliban as brutal but "clean" – they executed a dozen villagers before his eyes and forced him to stand for hours in a frigid stream, but otherwise concerned themselves with fighting the Mujahideen. In contrast, the Mujahideen acted dishonourably, like "animals" – so much so that execution by the Taliban was preferable to the shame and violation brought to the village through the Mujahideen. My informant told me he buried 24 of his relatives as a result of the Taliban massacre, and yet hated the Mujahideen faction more for their atrocities in the village.<sup>17</sup>

As explained by Soraya Parluka, the head of The National Union of Women of Afghanistan, "under the [Mujahideen], the weapon of one community against the other community was to attack, to jail, to rape, to hit in public the female members of the other community" (As quoted in Povey 2003). Such notions of women as embodiments of family and clan honour run deep in Afghan culture in times of war as well as the present fragile peace.

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<sup>15</sup> The massacres I am referring to occurred at Yakawlang, Bamiyan Province, in December 2000. According to Amnesty International, over 300 unarmed men and a smaller number of women and children were killed by Taliban forces over several days.

<sup>16</sup> Known in the West as the Northern Alliance, the Mujahideen are groups of fighters who were supported by the West in resisting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. With the withdrawal of the Soviet Union, they fought amongst themselves in a bitter civil war. The Taliban, founded by a breakaway faction of the Mujahideen disgusted with the atrocities and corrupt behaviour rampant in the country, organized itself to fight in opposition to the Mujahideen. By 2001, the Taliban had control of 90% of Afghanistan and had imposed a series of severe laws to rid the land of what they believed to be corrupt, un-Islamic influences.

<sup>17</sup> Interview in Dari with a rural male Hazara refugee in a Pakistani refugee camp, July 2001.



Conceptions of “Afghan media culture” are complicated by the foreigner presence in Afghanistan, however. With the influx of international aid workers and millions in reconstruction money, cross-cultural (mis)understandings of women’s role in society on either side of the Afghan/foreigner divide can lead to tension in the radio studio. Italian porn by satellite and alcohol- and dancing-filled parties of the NGO community exacerbate certain Afghan beliefs that the West is morally bankrupt. On the other hand, the official state ban on women’s singing on TV confirms some Western viewpoints that Afghan society is repressive and backwards in its treatment of Afghan women.

As a consequence, the media production environment in Afghanistan often has to negotiate a complex maze of competing and contradictory forces in determining its gender policies. International organizations and foreign aid spearhead the reconstruction of Afghanistan’s media infrastructure, but the Afghan government issues approval for broadcasting licenses and is the longterm, eventual authority for Afghan journalists. The resulting tension is occasionally quite overt as is demonstrated in the following anecdote:

A day before their radio station’s inauguration, the women responsible for *Radio Neda-e-Zan* (“Women’s Voice” Radio) are a bundle of nerves. Marzieh receives a phone call. “He’s coming!! He’s coming!!” she cries when she puts down the receiver, then sashays her way out of the room with relief oozing out of every pore.<sup>18</sup>

In the above example, a Western radio organization helped to successfully launch a women’s radio station in Ghazni, a city a few hours south of Kabul ruled by an infamously conservative governor. The governor did not officially sanction the radio station prior to its launch. At the time, the Canadian ambassador to Afghanistan commanded the largest contingent of ISAF troops in the country, and he met with the governor on the day before the launch to request that he officially approve the station. After the meeting, the governor informed the station by phone that he would appear at the inauguration ceremony and thus implicitly lent his support to the women’s radio station. As a result, the Afghan women were able to operate the city’s first ever women’s radio station, but with careful attention to the governor’s preferences and sensitivities. The radio station may have been launched with powerful backing by foreigners, but its

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<sup>18</sup> Mental snapshot, Ghazni, January 2004.

continued existence depended on constant negotiation with the local Afghan governor whose approval had been so hard won.

Women and media in Afghanistan face a significantly different situation from much of what is studied in Western media discourses. I would argue that there is likely no simple relationship between media content and patriarchal hegemony in Afghanistan. I do, however, believe that a strong gender bias negatively influences women's relationship with the radio. I would argue that the source of this bias is not in radio's *content* so much as its *packaging*. The content in Afghan radio is often unambiguous in its agenda to improve women's lives; however, as I will argue in this paper, current radio language and framing -- or radio encoding (Hall 1980) if you will -- is such that large segments of the female population find the radio incomprehensible and irrelevant to their lives.

In addition to problems of encoding, domestic norms can add obstacles at the moment of decoding. Currently rural Afghan men have a well-defined social role as mass media consumers: after broadcasts, they are often arbiters of the perceived accuracy of radio news in discussions with other men. Rural women, on the other hand, are often believed to have "no business" discussing radio news (Skuse 2002b).

In fact, rural Afghan women have a conflicting set of expectations bracketing their relationship with the radio. On one hand, BBC audience researchers in an Afghan refugee camp found that many husbands prevented their wives from independently listening to the radio because, as one man put it, "I do not wish my wife to listen to a strange man without me being present" (Mytton 1999:141). On the other hand, radio development organizations and the government in Afghanistan expect rural women to listen to radio programming and thus equip themselves with information required for voting, participating in reconstruction processes, and other duties associated with good citizenry. I will now discuss the choices and methods I used in my fieldwork to explore these contradictions and constraints more closely.

## **Chapter 2 – Fieldwork Choices and Methods**

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This chapter will provide the reasoning and justification for the choices I made in my study, offer additional background on my fieldsites, as well as engage in reflexive analysis on my data collection methods. The course of producing this study followed a fairly tortuous path. As I indicated earlier, I entered Afghanistan with a very different agenda than the one I eventually followed. The development of my methodology likewise was strongly influenced by my gradually growing understanding of field conditions in Afghanistan. I had to remain quite flexible to adapt to the circumstances and situations in which I found myself.

I went on four fieldtrips to Afghanistan comprising a total of 101 days to prepare for and conduct my study. All four trips took place in the span of one year, from 17 January to 1 February, 2003; 30 July to 22 August, 2003; 27 September to 8 November, 2003; and 19 December, 2003 to 6 January, 2004. I also drew nominally from my earlier experiences working and living with Afghan refugees in Pakistan for six weeks in the summer of 2001. My experiences then included travel in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan for one week and living in the refugee camp that housed the village leader I mention in Chapter 1 for another week.

### **Phase 1: Women's Radio Consumption**

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As discussed in the Preface, my first fieldtrip helped me to refine my research area and questions to better suit Afghanistan's media context and fieldwork conditions. Based on my initial investigations, I decided to investigate women's radio reception in a remote village as a starting point into an investigation of women and radio.

I was particularly interested in investigating a remote village so that I could gain an understanding of women's radio consumption in an area where access to media other

than the radio was very limited. 80% of the Afghan population is rural and yet previous studies<sup>19</sup> in radio consumption had tended to focus on listening habits in more urban areas. In particular, women's relationship with the radio in remote areas was very poorly understood, and my study was later to be labeled a "first" by an independent audience research specialist working in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> All the reasons which discouraged researchers and humanitarian workers from entering rural Afghanistan (difficult terrain, poor to non-existent communications infrastructure, lack of security) made it that much more important to understand radio's role in connecting rural inhabitants to the main arteries of information in Afghanistan.

My first and easiest decision on methodology was to use a statistical survey of radio listening based on international audience research standards. I wanted to gather data using a tool that would allow for some degree of comparison with other audience research studies using similar instruments. I also felt a survey would be helpful in establishing a statistical baseline of information on demographics and radio usage at the site I was to study.

Afghanistan, I quickly learned, is a challenging location for fieldwork. The difficulty of conducting quantitative audience research in Afghanistan was discussed in some detail at the 2003 Conference of International Broadcasters' Audience Research Services in Moscow. Among the logistical and fieldwork quality concerns raised in the conference were poor to non-existent communications and road infrastructure, inadequate mapping,

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<sup>19</sup> An essentially complete list of publicly available reception studies was published in 2002 by the BBC World Service Trust's<sup>19</sup> (WST) report entitled Afghan Media Reconstruction in Focus. To my knowledge, two studies have been published since the BBC WST report: a May 2002 study by Juliette von Seibold for Media Support Solutions and a 2002 Gazette journal article by Andrew Skuse that discusses, among other things, a statistical survey of Afghan radio ownership. Please see the bibliography for the full citations of the audience reception studies that were relevant to my project.

<sup>20</sup> Personal communication with Mark Eggerman, independent media researcher, 2004. He provided this feedback on reading a brief report I wrote on my radio listening survey called "Disconnected from Discourse" in the Media Monitor newsletter published by Internews Afghanistan, March 15 2004.

lack of security, and illiteracy. Widely divergent population estimates and shifting displaced populations were also problems (Eggerman 2003).

I conducted numerous interviews with Afghan and non-Afghan journalists and media workers to gain a sense of the media environment in the country and to develop questions for my study. I also obtained copies of all the publicly available reception research that had been conducted in Afghanistan in recent years and learned from their approaches. Through this process, I developed a fairly strong conception of what my study would entail: My sense was that I would need a mix of quantitative and qualitative information to develop as complete a picture as possible of the audience environment I would encounter. I therefore chose to employ statistical social science- and descriptive humanities-based tools in an effort to “overcome the deficiencies and preserve the merits” of both these major traditions in audience studies (Schrøder 1999:38).

I decided that I would use a simplified standard audience research questionnaire to survey all the households in the village and thus obtain background characteristics on the village’s radio landscape and demographics. I would then conduct indepth interviews and focus groups (possibly following up on questions raised by the preliminary survey results) with different groups of interest. Underlying all of this work, however, would be my use of participant observation: I would live in the homes of different women in the village to gain direct insight into the meanings and uses of the radio in the context of their daily lives.

I returned to MIT and formalized my research plan and quantitative radio survey for review and approval by MIT’s Committee On the Use of Humans as Experimental Subjects (COUHES).<sup>21</sup> I then travelled to Afghanistan for a second fieldvisit in July, 2003, to choose the site for my radio consumption study and pilot the survey I was to use.

I chose my fieldsite based on a number of criteria. First, I wanted the site to be remote. Second, the site had to be Dari-speaking because Dari is the dominant language in radio

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<sup>21</sup> Approved as protocol #3036, effective 3/20/2003.

broadcasts and I did not want obvious linguistic barriers to intrude on my study of women's listening habits; I am also conversationally fluent in Dari and as such would be able to operate independently in the community. Third, I preferred the area to be ethnically Hazara, as I physically resemble a Hazara woman, and wanted to be less foreign to the community I was entering. Fourth, it had to be in a relatively stable and secure area for my personal safety. And finally, I had to have a personal acquaintance or well-trusted contact of an acquaintance within the community (preferably a community leader) willing to host and support me throughout my stay.

After much consultation and research, I narrowed my options down to three possibilities: a very poor community on the outskirts of Kabul, a very remote village in Nuristan Province, and a mountainous village in Samangan Province. The first community was rural, close to Kabul, and home to relatives of a close Afghan friend of mine. It would have been safe and appropriate, and I had already visited the community several times and established warm ties with some of the women there. The major drawbacks were that the community housed a mix of languages and ethnicities and I did not have a baseline understanding of any one ethnicity to be able to tackle the dynamics of their interaction. Further, I knew that the women from the village often visited Kabul and I preferred to conduct my research in a more "disconnected" area. The second community was very remote, requiring two days travel over harsh terrain in the mountains. It was very unique and interesting as an ethnic and cultural group in Afghanistan. However, the community spoke a very distinct language (Nuristani) that was not broadcast on the radio, and at less than 5% of the Afghan population was highly unrepresentative linguistically.

The one site that stood out among all the other possibilities was the final option: a small mountainous village called Ghambar in Samangan Province. The community was in a remote area four hours from a paved road, and was only accessible by jeep, all-terrain vehicle, or non-motorized transportation. The village was Hazara, Dari-speaking, and Shi'a by religion, which suited my Hazara resembling, Dari-speaking, half-Iranian and

therefore Shi'a by implication<sup>22</sup> self. I was also interested in visiting the Ghambar community because I already had some sense of their history, having met some of the villagers briefly in the summer of 2001 when they had been living in destitute conditions as refugees in Pakistan.

The quite significant disadvantage of working in Ghambar was its instability. A massacre of 70 villagers in the 1990s during factional power struggles had created an ugly rift in the 100-family community. Following the massacre, many fighters fled to the surrounding mountains where they painstakingly carved out caves for shelter. A number of iterations of counter-attack and retribution hardened divisions between the two village factions, all of whom were related to one another either by blood or marriage. Despite some normalization of relations and the return of displaced and refugee villagers upon the close of the US-led bombing campaign, tensions remained and manifested themselves in heated personality conflicts.

I was not aware of the degree of tension in the village when I decided to conduct my research there. The deciding factor for me in choosing Ghambar was meeting one of its village elders in the home of the Minister of Women's Affairs in Afghanistan. When I broached the subject of conducting radio research with him, he was very open to the idea and offered to act as my host and guide during my stay. This offered me a very official introduction to Ghambar via an established community leader and strong assurance for my safety through the involvement of a high-level Afghan government official. Indeed, I later found that some of the women of Ghambar believed I was visiting as the Minister of Women's Affairs' representative, and treated me very well as a result.

As I eventually learned in some detail while collecting data from the village (had I known I would not have gone), the intense proximity of rural community life has forced strained and resentful relations between the two rival factions in the community, leaving a degree of underlying instability to the social order in the village. Uncertainty over whether their rival had disarmed had presumably led both factions to retain hidden weapons.

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<sup>22</sup> Iran is predominantly Shi'a.

Allegations of power-mongering were rife. Towards the end of my data collection period, I grew fairly uncomfortable because I felt the rival groups were beginning to demand that I choose sides, and so I decided to leave before the scheduled end of my data collection. I felt I had enough material to work with, and felt uneasy at my isolation in the village as the Afghan male guide who had escorted me to the village had returned to Kabul the day after we reached Ghambar.

In retrospect, this was a good decision: on returning to Kabul, I learned that while I had been conducting my radio listening survey, there had been an outbreak of armed conflict between opposing militia groups a few hours away in neighbouring Balkh Province. Over 50 people were killed. My ignorance of the small war nearby was both ironic and instructive: had I paid attention to the radio, I might have heard.

Having chosen my fieldsite, I worked on translating my radio survey questionnaire into Dari. I created a coding sheet and enlisted the help of Afghan colleagues in polishing my Dari questionnaire. I thought it was likely that the women in Ghambar would be illiterate, and so I piloted my questionnaire with three illiterate women in Kabul.

I conducted my study in Ghambar during my third fieldtrip to Afghanistan. I met the male Afghan guide I had arranged to accompany me to Ghambar on the day after I arrived in Kabul, and we left for Ghambar shortly thereafter. We went the “Afghan way,” or in other words, via the modes of public transportation open to Afghan men and women as opposed to personal vehicles foreigners tended to use. I wanted to have a sense of the barriers to women’s travel from the village and discovered that there were many.

Only one vehicle, an old Soviet-era jeep that broke down twice for two hours during my trip to Ghambar, traveled the dirt track of deep ruts and riverbeds between the main highway and a village 45 minutes by foot from Ghambar. The jeep only occasionally traveled the extra distance to Ghambar itself. It was usually overloaded with produce, travelers, and barrels of fuel, and excluding breakdowns, took 3 hours to complete the



Ghambar-highway journey. The only other options for travel were by foot, by mule, or by one of the two horses in the village.

Ghambar is demographically homogeneous: Dari-speaking, ethnically Hazara, and Shi'a<sup>23</sup> by religion. It is difficult to measure all the ways in which the radio culture in Ghambar may have been influenced by its demographic composition. Likewise I find it hard to speculate on how the circumstances of the women in Ghambar might reflect that of Afghan women generally. Ethnicity, language, and religion are very important demographic markers for Afghans. Estimates vary, sometimes wildly, on the breakdown of the Afghan population; I have seen, for example, the Hazara estimated at between 9-22% of the population. The box on the right is not definitive but sketches the relative sizes of the demographic groups in Afghanistan.

### **Afghanistan demographics**<sup>24</sup>

#### **Ethnicities**

- Pashtun 42%
- Tajik 27%
- Hazara 9%
- Uzbek 9%
- minor ethnic groups (Aimaks, Turkmen, Baloch, and others) 13%

#### **Religions**

- Sunni Muslim 80%
- Shi'a Muslim 19%
- other 1%

#### **Languages**

- Afghan Persian (Dari) 50%
- Pashtu 35%
- Turkic languages (primarily Uzbek and Turkmen) 11%
- 30 minor languages (primarily Balochi and Pashai) 4%
- Much bilingualism

According to popular conceptions I have often heard from Afghans, the Hazara have more progressive attitudes towards women than other ethnicities. On the other end of the spectrum, the Pashtun are often used as a benchmark for conservatism, with Pashtun

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<sup>23</sup> Community members identified themselves as “Jaafari” or the branch of Shi’ism predominant in Iran. Of the 36 settlements scattered through their local region, they said 60% were Jaafari, and 40% Ismaili. Whether Jaafari or Ismaili, the Shi’a (particularly Hazara Shi’a) historically have faced a great deal of discrimination and marginalization within Afghanistan at the hands of Sunni-dominated governments and militia groups.

<sup>24</sup> Source: The World Factbook. *Afghanistan: People*. May 11, 2004. Retrieved September 10, 2004 from <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/af.html#People>

women stereotypically regarded as leading very restricted lives. Indeed, the deplored restrictions on women during the Taliban regime were in effect the result of the Taliban enforcing their particular brand of ascetic Pashtun culture on the rest of Afghanistan. The implications and complications that arise from issues of ethno-linguistic and religious identity are, I believe, very important, but are unfortunately beyond the scope of my project. For this reason, the homogeneity of Ghambar was an advantage for me in reducing the complexity of my fieldsite.

Ghambar's 400 villagers depended on a nearby mountain spring for water, and had no electricity or health services in the village. Their main economic activities were animal husbandry and farming by men, and carpet weaving by men, women, and children. Over 50% of the 70 families in the village were returned refugees, mostly from Pakistan.

On reaching Ghambar, I immediately went to the house of the village elder I had previously met in Kabul. He welcomed me warmly, and offered his support as my main host and community contact for the duration of my visit. We agreed to have four of the most educated schoolgirls in the village accompany me in shifts as I conducted my quantitative survey. The schoolgirls proved to be invaluable: as females they had easy access to the inner domestic sanctum of other households; their schooling gave them greater familiarity with "city" Dari and thus they acted as my translators and teachers in the local spoken dialect; and they were invaluable informants on the customs, history, and personalities in the village. I, in turn, tried to return the favour by answering their questions on the research and life outside of the village as they guided me from house to house.

I wanted to have a sense of the inner sanctum of all the households in Ghambar, and thus chose the household as my basic unit of investigation. In choosing respondents to my survey, I considered randomizing respondents from within households using a Kish Grid, which is a reasonable probability sampling method in international audience research (Mytton 1999). On visiting Ghambar households, however, I found that the women generally felt more comfortable deferring to the heads of their households, so I set aside randomization techniques and simply spoke with all the household matriarchs in the

village. I interviewed all the households in the village in this way, except for two whose female heads of household were visiting relatives in another town.

During the more rote parts of the interviews, I focused on recording the interesting comments women made as well as marking the checkboxes on my coding sheet. In this phase of my data collection as in others, I tended to transcribe directly into English in my written notes, possibly missing words or phrases in the additional cognitive work involved in translating while listening and writing, but on the other hand capturing the “feel” of tone and gesture which might have otherwise been lost in translating later. The eventual questionnaire I used (modified from the post-pilot version in Kabul slightly to suit field conditions in Ghambar, then translated back into English) is included in the Appendix.

Having completed my quantitative survey of the village, I focused greater attention on accompanying women on their daily chores and speaking with them informally, focusing on their radio use in the domestic context. I gathered data using conversational interviews, which have been an important element of reception studies (Hobson 1982). I found this form of unstructured interview useful as I was able to follow the flow of discussions I was having with women and freely explore topics specific to their responses. Further, I could avoid “trying to force responses into constructed categories” (Gill 1996:213) and steer clear of having “the assumption that there is one single answer ... built in the very design of the research, the questions, or interview schedule” (Gill 1996:212).

In following women about their household work, I tried to develop an “intersubjective ground” that James Clifford argues is necessary in attempts at ethnographic interaction. I spoke with women in their homes to utilize “the discursive formation of women talking to women in a domestic setting [to suggest] the construction of a distinctly female space” (Spradley 1979:153).

During my last few days at the village, I used group interviews to gather some semi-structured qualitative data for my study. I conducted a focus group with male leaders in

the village to hear their thoughts on women's radio listening. I was interested in observing the effect of education on radio use, and so organized two focus groups with educated girls in the village. Presumably households with schoolgoing girls were more progressive regarding women than those without, so I followed up with two focus groups with the mothers of those girls. My plans to hold corresponding focus groups with non-schoolgoing girls and their mothers were cut short due to the factional tension in the village and my early departure.

Despite my shortened field visit, I felt my stay in Ghambar had been quite fruitful. Before I returned to Kabul, I took the opportunity of staying with and interviewing 2 women from Aybak and Mazar, helping me contextualize my data from Ghambar and draw comparative observations from urban data points in the region.

## **Phase 2: Women's Radio Production**

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My work finished in Ghambar, I returned to Kabul for the remainder of my third fieldvisit to Afghanistan. I had become curious about the processes and internal world of women's radio production, and so began a process of exploring the other side of the radio divide. I wanted to know if, how, and when radio texts became gendered. How did producers of women's radio conceptualize their audience? How did this translate into choices on the genres that were produced? How did societal and personal notions of good taste influence the production process?

While I had not originally set out to do so, in tracing back the path of women's radio texts from my study of women's radio listening to its production origins, I in effect employed a "multilocale" fieldwork strategy. As described by Marcus and Fischer, multilocale or multisited ethnography requires that "rather than being situated in one, or perhaps two communities for the entire period of research, the fieldworker must be mobile, covering a network of sites that encompasses a process, which is in fact the object of study" (Marcus and Fischer 1999:94). I crossed from the site of consumption to production and split my data collection in the production world into two locations: the

production studio of the pre-packaged radio production unit, and the broadcast arena of the radio station.

Angela McRobbie argues for what she calls the three e's - the empirical, the ethnographic, and the experiential – to bridge what she sees as the dearth of 'lived experience' in feminist cultural studies (1997). I decided to try and take on the challenge of living the production experience, and cast about for opportunities to work and research in a radio station. My criteria for choosing a radio station were fairly simple. As I had recently investigated the consumption of radio by women, I wanted to now study the production practices of a radio station that either produced or broadcast material intended for the female audience. Further, as I wanted to conduct an ethnography of the radio production culture, I needed some latitude and tolerance for my “[living] intimately in the space of the culture’s members” (Lindlof and Taylor 2002:17). That latitude also had to extend for a prolonged period of time that would allow me to gain an “interpretive context” for the writing of an ethnography (Potter 1996).

Quite by chance, through contacts I had acquired and developed through my first two visits to Afghanistan, I was able to arrange to conduct my research and also volunteer as part-time translator and logistics support for an Afghan women’s community radio station called Radio Navid. Radio Navid was supported by Western donors but run and staffed entirely by Afghan women. I felt that it would be interesting to look at a woman-managed radio operation, as presumably woman producers would be better positioned to intuitively understand how to communicate with a female audience than would male producers. Further, any obvious interference by men in the studio room would have interfered with my desire to observe and attempt to identify the unarticulated or even unconscious tendencies of women to adopt or subvert dominant male ideology in the production room.

Potter argues that contextualization should “serve to illuminate the facets of the focal subject by comparing that subject to elements outside itself” (1996:292). I attempted to contextualize my ethnography of local Afghan women’s radio with an understanding of production processes at the BBC. While I did not have sufficient time to enter the

production context of the BBC, I did conduct an interview with the manager of the radio drama, *New Home, New Life*, that was popular among women. What I learned of the *New Home, New Life* production cycle enabled me to situate and view Radio Navid more critically. I also shadowed the Western donor organization supporting Radio Navid for three days before traveling to the radio station compound.

My presence at Radio Navid was multi-layered: I was part trainer, part researcher, part ally, part foreigner, part on-air interviewee, part yes-man, critic, stand-in technician...the list goes on. The chaos and intensity of the live radio studio were very compelling to me, and I quickly became caught up in its daily rhythm. Lindlof and Taylor comment that “ethnographers will turn to any method that will help them to achieve success,” such success being defined as “describing and interpreting observed relationships between social practices and the systems of meaning in a particular cultural milieu” (2002:16). Their characterization of methodless method rang true with my approach to data collection: other than the participant observation and conversational interview I had already used in Ghambar, my research practices were fairly spontaneous and eclectic. I taped occasional broadcasts, copied daily “run-sheets” (or logs of the material broadcast every day), interviewed local journalists, sat in on the radio station’s board meetings, visited and stayed at the women’s homes, and more. The women planned and produced their programming in the same room, and thus I was able to observe their production cycle from beginning to end.

At the end of my three weeks at the station, I had a fairly good sense of its internal workings and daily routine. I left Afghanistan for visa reasons, but returned for my fourth and final fieldvisit six weeks later. I revisited Radio Navid for one more week of daily work and observation at the station. In conducting research at the station, I noticed that the radio programs that the women broadcast were often pre-packaged programs delivered on CDs to the radio station by a separate women’s radio programming unit. Dornfeld (2002) argues that while the full implications and path of a media text is methodologically very difficult if not impossible to track, following its development in multiple production spaces can offer interesting additional insights into the production process. I decided to follow the path of Radio Navid’s pre-packaged radio programming

to its production origins at an Afghan women's radio production unit in Mazar-e-Sharif, a city in northern Afghanistan.

I was in luck: after some discussion, I received permission to spend ten days observing and occasionally providing logistical support to the women's radio production unit that developed and distributed women's radio programming across Afghanistan. My visit and interaction with the women was too brief for me to call my data collection at the unit "an ethnography." Indeed, I am not certain that the four weeks I spent in the radio station studio could qualify my work there as adequate for the term, either. However, I used a similar methodless methodology for similar reasons and tried to produce a mini-ethnography of the women that would serve as an adequate exploration of their media environment and "elucidate carefully the multiple constraints within which they worked" (Dornfeld 2002:249).

My ten days at the production unit concluded the field component of my study. I left Afghanistan and began analysis of my findings, beginning with the radio consumption environment that is the subject of the following chapter.

## Chapter 3 – Afghan Women’s Radio Consumption

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A survey of Afghan women’s radio listening habits was my point of entry into the rural Afghan media environment. Prior to conducting the survey, interviews and research I had carried out in the Afghan media development community had led me to believe that Afghanistan had a “radio culture,”<sup>25</sup> that almost all Afghan households owned radio sets,<sup>26</sup> and that radio was the most effective way of reaching the illiterate Afghan population.<sup>27</sup> I was surprised to find in my survey, however, that only 44% of the women I interviewed lived in households with working radio sets, and further, that only 12% reported listening to radio broadcasts. Some women even expressed, either directly or indirectly, antipathy towards the radio. What was going on?

As I explained in the Preface, the dearth of information on women’s radio listening habits was a major problem for radio broadcasters in Afghanistan. Andrew Skuse conducted an ethnographic study of the production and consumption of a BBC radio soap opera called *New Home, New Life*. His observations on women’s radio reception, excerpted below, suggest that women have little decision-making power in household radio usage:

In Afghanistan communications infrastructure is extremely basic, though radio ownership levels are at saturation level. Despite this, women and children often find it difficult to access and use radio, because radio listening is socially constructed as an ostensibly male activity. Women have low levels of social mobility due to the cultural constraints placed upon them by what is a strongly patriarchal society. Because of this women have fewer opportunities to engage in social communications and few opportunities to engage with media in public places. At home, domestic communications may be poor and men can monopolise the use of the radio for the serious duty of listening to news. Because little investment is made in female education women are widely perceived to be less capable or interested in economic or political issues. However, where women do have regular access to radio it is commonly described as a window to the outside world or as a lifeline. (Skuse 1999:67)

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<sup>25</sup> *Afghanistan: Restoring Media*. (n.d.). Retrieved March 19, 2003 from the USAID web site: [http://www.usaid.gov/locations/asia\\_near\\_east/afghanistan/media.html](http://www.usaid.gov/locations/asia_near_east/afghanistan/media.html)

<sup>26</sup> Interview with BBC Kabul Drama Department Coordinator in Dari, Kabul, January 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Phone interview with Spozhmai Maiwandi in English and Dari, Voice Of America Pashto Coordinator, Washington DC, April 2003.



Skuse's findings encapsulate much of the situation of the women I met in Ghambar – except for the fact that most of the women I interviewed did not appear to regard the radio as a “lifeline.” Instead, many expressed indifference or appeared to regard the radio set as a nuisance. I set about to try and understand why.

### **Rural Orality and Literate Radio Culture**

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I learned some of the reasons for women's lack of enthusiasm for the radio fairly quickly. I interviewed all the female heads of household in Ghambar, and they all, without exception, said that they had difficulty understanding radio broadcasts. While all the women were Dari-speaking and spoke no other language, Dari programming (news in particular) was beyond their comprehension. “I don't understand,” “We are blind from illiteracy,” and “They use difficult words which men understand”<sup>28</sup> were recurring complaints in the interviews.

I think women's problems with radio language may have been rooted in several issues. First, while all the women in the village were Dari-speaking, their dialect of Dari was quite different from the Dari used on the radio, which tended to be of the form spoken in Kabul. For the first few days that I was in their community, I had to ask four young girls to take turns acting as translators for me between village Dari and the Dari spoken in the capital. I adjusted somewhat to the local dialect after some time, but only in terms of the limited vocabulary necessary for conducting my survey.

Second, aside from two women who could read a few lines of the Koran, the women I interviewed were all unschooled. Lack of formal education has strong implications on radio listening. Dari and Pashto are the two official languages in Afghanistan, and they both have a formal and informal mode. The formal mode is very literary and used in official settings, whereas the informal mode is used in colloquial, everyday speech.

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<sup>28</sup> Unless otherwise attributed, quotations in this chapter are my English translations of Dari statements made by men, women, and girls in Ghambar, Aybak, and Mazar in October 2003. My translations of Dari statements in Ghambar were supported by four Ghambar schoolgirls.

Afghan radio stations generally use the formal mode in their broadcasts and unschooled people often find them difficult to understand. In fact, I could sympathize with the women I interviewed, as my own Dari language skills are limited and I have difficulty understanding formal radio broadcasts. I received two years of formal education in Farsi (a language very similar to Dari) and as a result can read and write Dari at a functional level, but not enough to employ or understand formal Dari with ease.

Third, while I am unable to conclude definitively that this is the case, my sense is that part of women's difficulties may have been rooted in differences between what Walter Ong would call their primary oral culture (1988) and the radio's underlying print culture. According to Ong, people in primary oral societies, or societies that are unfamiliar with writing, think and express themselves differently from literate societies in fundamental ways. Ong relates such differences to the need in oral societies for communication to be relevant and memorable whereas print societies can refer back to written texts and hence express themselves less redundantly and more linearly (Ong 1988). I believe oral versus written culture incompatibility was the root of some communication breakdowns that occurred during my interviews with women:

“How important is it for you to know what is going on in Afghanistan?” I ask her. She looks blank.

I repeat the question. “Yes,” she replies.

I try again. “Is it a little important, or very important for you to know what is going on in Afghanistan?”

“Yes.” Pause. “I don't know.”

I scribble yet another “no answer” on my coding sheet. I've written those two words a lot today.

“Where do you get your news?” I ask.

She looks at me blankly, then looks enquiringly at the schoolgirl who is my guide/interpreter. “Where do you get your news?” the schoolgirl asks.

She still looks blank. “Where do you get your news?!” the schoolgirl asks again, like me, growing somewhat frustrated. “Do you hear things from neighbours, from the radio, or...”

“I don’t know.”

I shift irritably on the mat I am sitting on. We’ve had to ask her most of the interview questions three times, only to hear “I don’t know” over and over again. I feel like she is making fun of me.<sup>29</sup>

I had thought my interview questions to be fairly simple and standard, and yet they caused a fair amount of consternation among the women I interviewed because the women were unsure how to respond to me. I was asking set questions and requiring their answers in a fairly dry, formal way which did not allow for free conversation or for the "empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced" interaction characteristic of oral culture (Ong 1982:45). My quantitative questionnaires assumed comfort with linear information processing more prevalent in print-based societies, and when some of the women in the village were unable to respond as I required, I felt irritated and victimized when in fact the problems I was having were my own fault! My print culture assumptions and questions caused a breakdown in communication between me and my oral culture respondents, and I believe the breakdown in women’s radio communications may have had a similar cause.

Conrad Kottak and his team of researchers grew familiar with a certain type of interview respondent whom they called “Olga-type respondents” during anthropological fieldwork in Brazil. Olga-type respondents “were so unfamiliar with the kind of information processing [a quantitative media] survey called for that they had difficulty with opinion questions and with answers that came naturally to most villagers” (Kottak 1990:138). Such respondents, according to Kottak, were almost always “media-deprived” people – barely literate and with little exposure to television. He hypothesized that television viewing gradually improved the interview skills of Olga-type respondents, helping them to understand “urban-national norms” and express themselves in more formal settings.

Ong differentiates between oral and print cultures and Kottak claims that heightened media exposure can bridge the gap between the two cultures in certain situations. But for the Afghan women I interviewed, their relationship with the radio was such that even

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<sup>29</sup> Mental snapshot, Ghambar, October 2003.

prolonged exposure to the medium did not seem to lead women to improve their understanding of literate radio culture. A number of women tuned out radio broadcasts in their households, while others turned to their husbands or school-going children for occasional clarification of broadcasts.

My sense was that a number of women could have learned to understand radio broadcasts but were not inclined to do so. In one household, a recently married 14-year-old explained that her husband who was a teacher wanted her to learn to read and write and to pay attention to the radio, but she had no interest. I decided to try and find possible grounds for disinterest or even active dislike for the radio and so I immersed myself into the lives of the women in Ghambar, using participant observation in daily chores like fetching water and baking bread to gain a sense of the place of the radio set within women's daily lives and their worldview.

### Rural Domestic Listening Profiles and Attitudes

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*Woman in Ghambar*

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world. Life expectancy in the country is 43 years.<sup>30</sup> One out of 4 children die before reaching the age of 5, and the maternal mortality rate is one of the highest in the world. The United Nations Human Development Index (HDI), which measures basic human development, rates only Sierra Leone lower than Afghanistan out of all the countries in the world.<sup>31</sup> The marks of living in such difficult conditions are apparent in women's prematurely aged bodies and scarred, calloused hands.

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<sup>30</sup>United Nations Human Development Indicators: *Afghanistan 2003*. (n.d). Retrieved April 15, 2004 from United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Reports web site: [http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2003/indicator/cty\\_f\\_AFG.html](http://hdr.undp.org/reports/global/2003/indicator/cty_f_AFG.html).

<sup>31</sup>Schifferes, Steven. *Aid Fails to Boost Afghan Economy*. Retrieved April 16, 2004 from BBC News On-line, World Edition web site: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/3582493.stm>.

I found women's lives in the village very hard and filled with continuous physical labour. The women woke early in the morning to knead and bake bread in kilns that they fired with bundles of painstakingly gathered dry brush or dung patties. They also made several liters of tea in the same kiln. After feeding the children and their husband, and attending to in-laws, they cleaned and swept their homes, attending to livestock if they had any.

After serving lunch, breastfeeding their younger children, and arranging for their naps, women sat at the carpet loom, often with their older children. In the early evening, the women often went en masse to fetch water, either strapping several gallons of water to themselves, or (for the fortunate few) loading them onto a donkey. Dinner preparations and cleanup then took up the bulk of the night.

About once a week, the women washed clothes in the frigid spring feeding the village, and if there were no young boys in the household, ranged far afield to gather dry brush for cooking purposes. While they roamed freely within the village grounds, women reported leaving the village only once or twice a year, usually to go to hospitals in nearby towns. Many were married by the age of 13 to males aged 18 years or sometimes much older, and began childrearing soon after that.

Women complained that there was little to look forward to in the tedium of their repetitive daily chores, with only occasional marriages, funerals, or sicknesses to break the monotony. "You just go through the days from this Friday to the next, wash your clothes, do your work. You have to work, or you don't eat." They said that "life is hard, there is no proper life" and that "days pass" – expressing a lack of hope or interest in the future, as it was bound to be only more of the same. They recognized that living in the village made them different from urban women: "if we were in the city, we'd become young, but we wander in the mountain, and have become old."

The radio set was not an integral part of the women's lives. It was on primarily when husbands or elder sons were home. The women saw their own lack of education as the

major block to using the radio set. They seemed to equate their illiteracy and “mountain woman” identity with stupidity: “The school headmaster tried everywhere to find female teachers for our school. He went this way and that, but all he could find, with difficulty, were male teachers. People of the mountain are this stupid.” As stewards of the domestic sphere, women were responsible for the storage and safety of the radio set as they were more generally for all household goods, but otherwise generally had a limited relationship with the radio.

I decided to talk with the senior educated girls in the village to gain a sense of generational differences and the impact of education on female attitudes towards the radio. In a number of households, the women stored the radio in a plastic bag that was hung from a nail high up in the wall in a position of relative importance, outside the reach of younger children. Two focus groups of educated girls in the village confirmed the radio set’s importance. The girls felt that people who had radio sets were “enlightened” or “knowledgable” relative to those who did not. They said that the radio was the means through which “all the people of the government spoke” and “all the good talk of the world is broadcast.”

They also reported that children were usually not allowed to touch the radio dials, and that they were forbidden from making noise while the radio was tuned to news. The majority said that their mothers didn’t touch the radio sets, and waited for others, males mostly, who “knew how to turn on the station.” All perceived the set as belonging to the male head of the household.



*Girls in Ghambar*

The girls said they understood the broadcasts in bits and pieces, but had particular trouble with newscasts. They confirmed that their mothers had trouble understanding the radio.

When asked why their mothers didn't use the radio more, one group felt that it was because their mothers had too much work, and the other felt it was because they were illiterate. Both groups reported, however, that there was no difference in listening between girls and boys in their homes, and that they believed the radio was for both men and women.

There is a difference suggested here in the radio listening of mothers and daughters that could be the result of generational, class-based, or educational factors, among others. The schoolgirls I interviewed were attending a free elementary school in the village sponsored by an Afghan NGO. The school had promoted the importance of education through awareness raising campaigns and even a visit by the Afghan Minister of Women's Affairs. Unfortunately, there was no opportunity to interview uneducated girls in the village to compare their radio attitudes with that of the schoolgirls. However, it seems reasonable to suggest that the education of the schoolgirls, their more developed "Kabul Dari" skills, and their exposure to progressive gender messages via the school increased their radio listening potential relative to that of their mothers.

The man or men of the household usually controlled the radio set - women said they did not know how to use the radio or were not interested in broadcasts as their main reasons for not controlling the radio set. I began to understand some of the subtext underlying women's attitudes towards the radio set as I observed one man's use of the radio set in his home:

I sit and watch as he fiddles with the dials. Something has captured my attention about the way he is concentrating so intently on the radio set as his shrieking children and busy dinner-preparing wife move and flow around his stillness. The sound of the 8 o'clock broadcast fills the air and without looking up he tells his wife to quiet the children; he is listening to the news.

Suddenly it dawns on me.

"Men use the radio to shut out their family!" I blurt out.

He looks up, astonished. "What?"

"Look at you. You bring that radio set out and put it in front of you, and when it's on you don't have to talk with anyone else."

He looks at me wordlessly for a beat, then looks down. Something about his reaction tells me that I've hit the nail on the head. This impression is reinforced the next day, when he brings up my comment again and tries to deny it.<sup>32</sup>

Jo Tacchi studied radio listening in domestic spaces within the United Kingdom and found that the radio set filled gaps in her subjects' social lives. Listening to the radio allowed for a "pseudo-social" relationship in a "non-public social space," offering companionship in the disconnected isolation of an individualistic society. My reading of some rural households in Ghambar suggests that the opposite may be true in Afghanistan.

There was often a substantial gap between husbands and wives in terms of literacy skills, age, and range of experience. A significant number of men in the community could read and do sums, but had illiterate, innumerate wives.<sup>33</sup> Where men often left the village to work or conduct trade in outside towns or cities, women for the most part only knew the village environment. Husbands and wives often could not hold equal conversations. Thus, the radio set could fill silence when husband and wife had little left to talk about, and preoccupy the husband as his wife went about her domestic chores. One woman said ruefully of her husband that, "if you're talking, sometimes he listens; sometimes if the radio's on, he doesn't listen."

The phenomenon I am describing here resonates with Herman Bausinger's observation of a man using the television to effectively express his wish to his family that he wanted to be alone (1984) and Radway's formulation of romance novel readership as a vehicle for shutting out domestic worries and taking time out for relaxation (1984). In the highly social context of Afghan rural life the radio set was able to create a bubble of individual space and concentrated male privacy.

The radio filled silence, but also created silence. There may have been domestic functions underlying the clearly male ownership and control of the radio set. Positioning the radio

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<sup>32</sup> Mental snapshot, Ghambar, October 2003.

<sup>33</sup> According to the United Nations Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), "a UNICEF survey in 2003 showed that the male literacy rate was 49 percent while female literacy was only 19.6 percent." Source: *UN Helps to Improve Literacy*. September 9, 2004. Retrieved September 10, 2004 from <http://www.afgha.com/?af=article&sid=45778>.



set within the male domain increased its aura of authority and importance. When I spoke with young girls in the village, they reported that they were not allowed to make noise while the radio was turned on, especially when it was tuned to the news. For men entering the bustling household, the radio set facilitated an established, routine way to create order and enforce silence on unruly children.

I found that the women I spoke with often perceived the radio set to be a tool of the educated and mobile and outside the scope of their own lives. Thus, to some extent, women themselves may have contributed to the positioning of the radio set as part of the male domain. Regardless, the radio's circle of chatter in most households excluded women, and appeared to be a physical mechanism for creating tranquil male space within the bustling female domain of the household. Some women may not have minded, as this would have left them free to pursue their work while their husbands were occupied. Others, however, may not have liked the degree of male power the radio symbolized in a space that was otherwise their domain, resulting in certain feelings of antipathy towards the radio set.

### **Rural Women's Genre Preferences**

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Women's disinterest in/antipathy towards the radio was, I think, more a function of its perceived failure to contribute anything of value to their lives than lack of interest in external information flows. The radio was often associated with news in my quantitative survey interviews, partially because I had an early question asking where women got their news, and partially because the overwhelming majority of radio-owning households listened to radio around 8pm, or during the nightly newscast. The main reasons the women expressed lack of interest in "radio=news" were frustration over not understanding, lack of time/opportunity, and the remoteness of Ghambar. Women expressed this as follows: "I like work better than news;" "I would like to listen to the news, but I have many children;" and "we're in the mountain – what news should we listen to?" To rectify the "radio=news" equation I had unthinkingly coded into my

quantitative questionnaire, I conducted two focus groups and a series of informal interviews in the village to ask women what, in their ideal world of perfectly understandable radio broadcasts, they would want to hear via the radio.

All the women heads of household (ie major female decision-makers) in the village were illiterate. Indeed, the best-educated female in the community was the only girl in the village school's grade four class. Lack of education, along with restricted mobility, offered few opportunities for women's intellectual stimulation and growth. The women felt this lack keenly, and believed that "people who go to school progress," and that "good husbands read aloud so you can hear, otherwise they read quietly." Very few women had the opportunity to study the Koran the way men did, and thus were interested in programming that would allow women to "understand [their] own Muslimness."

Women identified external information flows as being effective in bringing about changes in their social status. Men, they said, do not dare beat them as much now that international actors in Afghanistan's urban spaces have raised awareness of women's rights. Iran's progressive radio programming on men and women's household rights and responsibilities was also praised several times by the women, because Iran's standing as an authority on Islam imbued its radio shows with high credibility and authority. In their requests for radio programming, the women were explicit in demanding shows that express "how the home should be calm, [with] no more fighting in the house:"

Otherwise it's like we're animals. Otherwise men beat you beat you beat you enough to break your bones. If only women understood their rights! If only someone would come and educate women and men that women also have rights. That she works hard in the house and has rights, but we don't even have the right of wandering freely from this house to the next...here, women's rights are completely forgotten. We are illiterate people.

They were quite animated and specific in expressing their radio programming preferences. If they were to influence radio programming, women wanted broadcasts of "good news." They generally expressed a preference for "happy news" and "news that they could understand." They wanted music, news about a peaceful world, and justice.

They cited preferences for educational programming, which could help them out of their *Koohi* (which means mountainous, but also connotes primitive and uncivilized) state.

Because of the costliness of transporting and treating women, and their low income earning potential, women's health was often given low priority: "by the time they take you to [a clinic] they may as well have taken you to a cemetery." Women identified access to health information as a major issue for radio broadcasts:

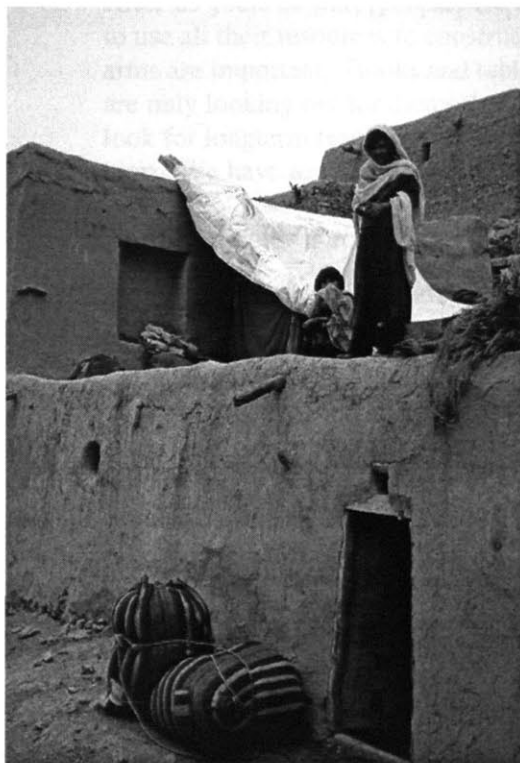
To the extent of men, our women also work their hearts out. Then on top of this work they also get pregnant, and give birth. After all this trouble of childbirth, the child is sick, there's no medicine, the child dies, and all this has been for nothing. We are the people of the mountain, and this is the way.

The women wanted radio programming to help them "learn something about raising children." They were adamant that the radio emphasize "not to marry girls early." A recurring theme was the need to understand their rights and "wife and husband roles" as practiced outside of Ghambar and its immediate neighbours: "Some men say: sit, woman, what do you know? They talk like that, but this is from the stupidity of people, isn't it. From their lack of knowledge and illiteracy...everybody is a human person, right?"

The women's emotions began roiling over towards the end of one focus group I conducted. A woman "shouted her pain" at having only daughters – her husband was getting a second wife because of her failure at delivering a son. Not having children was a source of great shame in the community, as was failure to bear a son. Both were considered the woman's deficiency.

Poor nutrition was also seen as a problem. The nutrient value of the community's food was poor – high in starch and oil, and essentially devoid of vegetables. However, lack of meat was seen as the diet deficiency by women – vegetables were not valued. Household practices were such that women often ate after men and guests had eaten. "If there were good food, I would have had 12 boys," said the sonless mother.

One mother of 12 later told me in a quiet aside that pregnancy prevention was important. “I have had children one after another. I have eye problems because of this. I have asked my husband for medicine to stop having babies, but my husband tells me to keep having more.”



*Mother and child in Ghambar*

I conducted two discussions with the daughters of the women in my focus groups. When asked what their mothers would like to listen to, schoolgirls mentioned radio programming that had lots of music, was funny, understandable, and had stories, like the BBC soap opera *New Home, New Life*. They recommended “a good program that they could listen to and be happy” rather than discussions on “things about farflung countries that they don’t get.” It would be useful, they felt, for their mothers to learn “how to raise children,” and be informed on “the importance of children going to school.” Programs that guided were seen positively.

Finally, I conducted a focus group with male leaders in Ghambar to see what the male point of view was on women’s programming needs. Their views echoed some of the ideas of the girls with whom I had spoken. My informants felt that women needed programming about tuberculosis, stories, recreation, and laughter. They could benefit from programs on hygiene, and raising children. The men said that political news, and news of the world was not immediately relevant to women in their community.

The men felt that their community could benefit from learning the importance of school and education, and adult literacy programs. The men occasionally lapsed into privileging male education over female education. One informant reported that in village life, the

winter is a time of relaxation for men, and it would be a good time to broadcast literacy programs at that time to allow men to improve themselves. In general, however, their ideas on radio content were more community-oriented than targeted towards any particular gender:

After 23 years of war, [people] are more likely to destroy than build. They should know to use all their resources to construct, and send their kids to school...For our people, arms are important. Books and tables and the school building are not important. People are only looking out for themselves. People should learn to stand on their own two feet – look for longterm results rather than the food distribution. The NGOs are here short term. We have to think of building our own future.

My aim in this chapter is to explore the context of and tastes inherent in women's radio consumption. Before I extrapolate from my study of listening habits in Ghambar, however, I would like to briefly present some information I gathered on women's radio listening from nearby urban centres. To better contextualize my Ghambar data, I conducted two in-depth interviews with women in Aybak and Mazar (the town and major city closest to Ghambar, respectively) to gain some sense of the variation in women's radio use across rural-urban, media exposure, and education lines.

### **Profiles of Urban Media Consumers**

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Aybak is the town closest to Ghambar and acts like a commercial trading centre and travel hub for the villages in the district. I spent two days and one night with 3 women in an affluent Uzbeki<sup>34</sup> household to contrast their radio use with that of the women in Ghambar:

I sit with the women and children in the livingroom. A large-screen television dominates the room, and Maryam is flipping through the many satellite TV channels, passing particularly quickly over the heavy panting and squeals of a porn channel. She settles on a French news magazine-style show describing the lengths to which people will go to pamper their pets. The contrast between fluffy Fifi being paraded in a "pet spa" and the well-appointed but modest Afghan room in which I am sitting has me mentally covering

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<sup>34</sup> The Uzbeks are a Turkic ethnic group that comprises an estimated 8% of the Afghan population.

my face, but Malika rocks her swaddled baby beside me and seems to take it all in stride.<sup>35</sup>

There was a dramatic difference in lifestyle between this household and those I had visited in Ghambar. Less than half of the Ghambar households owned working radio sets, and of those, only two households owned two radio sets. One household owned a TV but it was only used on special occasions, as its power came from the village's only generator. This household, on the other hand, had two radios and a satellite TV located in the women's quarters. While I was there, the TV was on almost constantly.

Maryam, a 25-year-old unmarried woman, was the cousin of the male head of the household. She was illiterate, but unlike the unilingual Ghambar women, spoke both Dari and Uzbeki. Maryam had spent time as a refugee with the "much more advanced" media in Pakistan and was also familiar with the computers in her cousin's computer training institute, and as such had some understanding of high tech media.

Perhaps, in keeping with Kottak's theory on education by media, Maryam's relatively fluent handling of my quantitative survey despite her illiteracy was a result of her considerable exposure to different media forms. She answered my questions with some hesitance but with evident comprehension, and had a good vocabulary in describing her radio consumption habits. Like the Ghambar women, Maryam did not listen to the radio. Her reasons, however, were different: she did not like the fact that the radio broadcast in Dari and Pashto instead of her native Uzbeki. During the Taliban era she had been "glued to BBC radio" for news but now that they had a TV, she had set the radio aside.

I was struck by the very different relationship Maryam seemed to have with the media in comparison with my female informants in Ghambar. Maryam was comfortable discussing and critiquing media schedules, forms, and stations. She explained that Radio Samangan (the provincial government radio station) was played on loudspeakers in the bazaar, but she tuned it out because despite its being a local radio station in a majority Uzbeki community, it broadcast in Dari only and she felt this was unacceptable. As for Samangan TV, it broadcast "from 7-9:30 every night, except Fridays, when there's a

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<sup>35</sup> Mental snapshot, Aybak, October 2003.

Hindi film on until 10:30 or 11” and was not very interesting. Samangan TV began with what she described as “unimportant” news broadcasts that detailed how “this commander went here, and spoke to so-and-so.”

As far as she was concerned, TV needed to reflect the desires of people, and TV stations needed a system that would allow people to vote for the films they wanted broadcast. People needed more fun, music, and happiness in their media rather than news: “we listened to the news to hear where the Taliban had reached before, but now that things are calm, we’re no longer interested.”

In my discussions with Maryam I obtained a sense of historical context and longterm relationship with the media that was generally absent in my discussions with Ghambar women. Further, Maryam spoke in terms of days and hours of TV scheduling and different stations whereas Ghambar women were vague and appeared not to keep track of time in hours or even years. Illiteracy as a marker did not apply equally to their two circumstances. Finally, Maryam was able to conceptualize production processes and was critical of media content from a populist perspective while Ghambar women did not seem to feel a high degree of ownership towards the media reaching them.

My interview with a woman from Mazar, the closest major urban centre to Ghambar, offered a few additional points of contrast. Sima, a 38-year-old mother of 8, was an avid radio regular and had 4 radios in her house and a broken television set. She had completed grade 12 and her native tongue was Dari.

I watch Sima rise gracefully to her feet and gather her prayer mat. As usual, I feel a twinge of guilt at being so obviously secular in the face of heartfelt religious devotion. It feels like an insult to her faith.

Radio listening in her home has a ritualistic quality to it. In the morning, her 11-year-old daughter turns on the radio set for her, and they listen to an Iranian radio station and comment on their daily dose of news and the on-air reading of letters written by youth (which her daughter loves to hear). There is a comfortable feeling to this daily routine that makes it seem as smooth and soothing as her fervent whispered prayers.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Mental snapshot, Mazar, October 2003.

The time I spent with Sima shocked me into a renewed awareness of the importance of religion in Afghan society. I have not focused on religion in this chapter as strongly as the Afghan context might require to parallel the overwhelming presence and yet invisibility of Islamic faith in my data collection. Religion was continually present in women's language at such a basic level that it remained unnoticed and was taken for granted in our discussions.

I will not be able to provide an adequate much less a comprehensive treatment of religion's impact on women's radio listening. My upbringing is too secular for me to understand faith-based motivations easily. One observation I can make based on my interaction with Sima, however, is that her identity as a Shi'a Muslim was very important to her and was likely the reason for her regular consumption of Iranian radio programming. The Shi'a are a religious minority in Afghanistan and have often been subject to persecution. A logical programming choice for many Shi'a therefore, may be to tune their radio sets to Afghanistan's only predominantly Shi'a neighbour, Iran. Such reasoning also resonated with some of the comments I heard from the women in Ghambar (all of whom were Shi'a) that the Islamic programming from Iran was more "pure."

In his study on the role of religion in defining media in Pakistan, Akhtar argues that "religious leadership first rejected modern ways of politics and mass media on the basis of divine injunctions, but later accepted them in practice without repudiating their original edicts. This created a sort of resistance and disdain for means of mass communication...among Muslim masses" (2000:xi). Akhtar's observations are historical and speak to reactions of the Pakistani clergy to the introduction of more modern political and journalistic practices. In Afghanistan, however, the Taliban's bans on pictures, photographs, musical instruments, singing, and video attempted to outlaw *existing* modern practices. Their edicts were not viewed as legitimate by many Afghans, especially adherents of other religions and sects, and therefore did not invoke a comparable widespread disdain for the media.



As a former teacher and highschool graduate, Sima was among the elite of Afghanistan's 80% illiterate female population. She claimed to listen to the radio "all the time" and her radio listening habits reflected a degree of interest in radio programming that fit my original assumptions of women having positive attitudes towards the radio. She described the importance of the radio during the Taliban regime:

Please don't ask about the Taliban time. When I think about it, my skin – [she interrupts herself]. Nobody went in the streets because they were afraid. My son would trim his beard, and this would terrify me that the Taliban would touch his beard and realize he'd done this. Until he came home at night, I was sitting at the door....

During the time of the Taliban, I slept with the radio above my head. If a song played we were worried people might hear because of course songs were forbidden.

We had an antenna that we put outside so we could listen to news, Radio of Iran, BBC, Radio Liberty, Voice of America... In that era, nobody was without a radio. Anytime someone didn't have a radio, they heard from neighbours. If our radios were off, if our sisters heard news, they would run and ask us if we'd heard. At that time, nobody was after music. They all wanted news. Now it's different. It's a difference of the earth to sky.

In a survey of radio listenership in Balkh Province, it was discovered that in volatile situations, news helps people assess their security situation - and thus the highly persecuted Pushtun ethnic minority in Northern Afghanistan were the most frequent radio listeners in the region (Von Seibold 2002). A recurring comment I have heard from Afghan women has been that during the civil war, time of the Taliban, and US-led bombing of Afghanistan, people had been "glued" to the radio set.

Their comments and Sima's "earth to sky" framing of radio listening then versus now suggest that Andrew Skuse's characterization of radio as a frequent "lifeline" was correct for the Taliban-dominated era in which he conducted his study. Sima's household suggests to me that communal radio listening can take on multiple configurations in Afghan households. In Sima's home, communal radio listening often meant members of the household listening with interest and attention together, and clarifying or speculating on the radio's meaning in discussions with one another during and after the broadcast. While such practices were ritualistic and pleasurable now, in the turbulent past they may have been part of a coping or even survival strategy. In contrast, in a number of the

Ghambar households I visited, the women reported not listening to or understanding the radio during its nightly broadcast, making communal radio listening a much more fragmented affair representing a time to be quiet for children, background noise for women, and a mechanism for creating privacy and order for men.

## Extrapolations

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In this chapter I have described the way in which women in the rural area I studied engaged with the radio set, contextualizing and also complicating my discussion of the rural environment with urban examples of women's radio consumption. I linked rural women's alienation from the radio with linguistic issues: radio language was too citified, too formal, and also fundamentally based on a "print" as opposed to "oral" culture. While more widespread literacy is one means through which oral/print culture incompatibilities could be reduced, greater exposure to media in some cases could increase illiterate women's comfort with print culture-style communication.

The idea of increased comprehension through repeated media exposure is interesting to me and feels quite relevant to Afghanistan in general and Afghan women in particular. My sense in Ghambar was that women who could understand and engage with external discourses were generally valued more than those who could not. The Dari term *fahmideh* (having common sense, being intelligent, judicious) captures the aura and feel of heightened respect accorded to such people without making any comment on their level of literacy. For this reason, I'd like to use *fahmideh* to describe a certain category of men and women who have attained a degree of learning that lies between illiteracy and literacy. While the *fahmideh* are illiterate with respect to formal education, informal education via sustained exposure to the media accords them a wider spectrum of knowledge, tools, and competency for dealing with the world. Maryam in Aybak is an example of a *fahmideh* woman.

With the abysmally low levels of literacy in the country, the concept of the *fahmideh* offers an additional level of categorization to describe some of the educational variation in the Afghan population. A tentative comparative profile of the illiterate versus *fahmideh* woman follows:

Illiterate profile	<i>Fahmideh</i> profile
Time is unimportant	Observance of date, time, age
Formal language incomprehensible	Functional understanding of formal language
Limited and very local perspective	Wider ranging sense of the world
Less critical skills	More critical skills
Limited sources of information	Multiple sources of information
Lack of relationship with local media	Sense of ownership of local media
Discomfort with literate, information-processing culture	Some ability to engage with literate, information-processing culture

*A comparative look at illiterate and fahmideh characteristics*

From the standpoint of Hall's encoding/decoding model, the concept of the *fahmideh* is relevant to the moment of decoding. In the discussion I have presented in this chapter, the imbalance between the number of radio messages sent to and comprehended by women reflects a lack of equivalence in the codes used in producing and receiving Afghan radio broadcasts. As interpreted by Hall's model, Afghan women's inability to decode radio messages suggests that the cultural competencies they bring to the interdiscursive encounter are incompatible with the code of the radio text. Were they *fahmideh*, their ability to decode meaning from radio texts (particularly formal, city language broadcasts) would increase.

The interdiscursive moment is not only influenced by cultural competency and being *fahmideh*, however. The logics of choice also play a part. A number of the women I spoke with impressed me with their intelligence, and my sense was that they would have been able to become *fahmideh* (or learn the language of the radio despite their illiteracy) if they had felt so inclined. I believe they chose to expend no or limited energy into engaging with radio texts, however, as they perceived Afghan radio to have little relevance to their concerns and activities.

As I thought about decoding processes, cultural competence, and the *fahmideh*, I returned over and over to one conclusion: producers of women's radio programming were choosing and encoding their texts very poorly. I became curious about the concepts of audience and production processes radio broadcasters harnessed in the studio room. I also wondered about the decision-making processes that resulted in programming of such limited interest to women like the ones I had interviewed. I felt that there were likely systematic reasons for the lack of equivalence at the production and consumption levels, and entered the women's radio production community in Afghanistan to learn more. I present the observations and findings of the production phase of my research in the following chapter.

## Chapter 4 – Women and the Culture of Legitimized Tastes

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Akhtar argues that “the role of mass media in the politics of developing countries, especially in those of the Muslim societies, seems to oscillate between the two poles of the ‘fourth estate’<sup>37</sup> and a willing tool in the hands of the establishment” (Akhtar 2000:x). His observation resonates with Afghanistan’s media context. As I argued in Chapter 1, radio in Afghanistan has to balance advocacy for women’s rights with concerns for women’s honour, and conform to short-term Western funders’ expectations while conceding to longterm governmental power. This chapter attempts to delve into the negotiations and contestations that occur in the production of women’s radio texts in more depth.

### The Effectiveness of BBC Soap Opera *New Home, New Life*

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I stand just inside the BBC’s production compound. The grizzled guard seated close to the gate talks to me as I wait to be ushered into the compound offices. Something about the way he holds himself causes me to suspect that he is a former *Mujahed* (soldier of holy war) who fought against the Soviet Union. His dark eyes gleam and his pride in his job is apparent:

“ You see how we are here? We live among people, and people trust us, they love us. 90% of the people of Afghanistan listen to our show. We have nothing to fear from them, unlike all the other media organizations that have armed guards and live in the good parts of town!” He pauses to greet another guard with warmth and a comrades-in-arms familiarity, then turns to me and gestures expansively. “We can live here safely. We *are* the people.”<sup>38</sup>

Skuse argues that BBC radio, “in an example of the global becoming local,” took on the place of national broadcaster in the minds of many Afghans. The obvious bias and propaganda in Soviet-controlled Afghan state radio from the late 1970s onwards eroded Afghan trust in Radio Afghanistan, leading them to turn outwards and rely on international broadcasters, particularly the BBC World Service (Skuse 2002b). From

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<sup>37</sup> The fourth estate is often used to refer to journalists, the press, or the media in general. The first, second, and third estates refer to the clergy, nobility, and commoners, respectively.

<sup>38</sup> Mental snapshot, Kabul, October 2003.

what I saw and heard in Ghambar, the BBC continues to be perceived as the dominant and most trustworthy radio station in Afghanistan despite the growth of independent post-Taliban local media.

I was curious about the production processes for the BBC. While the women in Ghambar were generally very vague about radio stations and programs, two chose, unprompted, to mention the BBC's *New Home, New Life* soap opera by name. Such recognition likely reflected the BBC's success at branding its radio products, but also pointed to the BBC's effectiveness at reaching female audiences in rural areas. Consequently I visited the BBC Radio production compound in Kabul to interview the head of the Drama Department responsible for *New Home, New Life*.

I was struck by the way the guard at the front gate exhibited a personal sense of ownership of the BBC that he also extended to Afghan society in general. He spoke of the BBC radio "we" that he then equated with "the people," reflecting a degree of interdependence between the station and Afghan society that was consistent with Skuse's framing of the BBC as "national broadcaster." As I later discovered during my interview with the manager in charge of *New Home, New Life*, the guard's formulation proved to have a reasonable basis in production processes.

I learned that consultation with rural communities was a vital element in the BBC soap opera production cycle. The soap opera team would go to a rural community and ask the community to list everyday problems they had recently encountered along with their solutions to the problem. The team would then return to their production office, choose one of the problems listed and gather expert advice on its optimal solution. Their scriptwriting team would in turn develop a storyline using the soap opera's stock of characters, enacting the problem and its best solution in the show's village setting. After airing the resulting episode, the team would return to the "rural community consultees" and ask how the community would now deal with the problem. If the villagers replied with the optimal, soap opera enacted solution, the team would return to Kabul, satisfied that their episode had been successful. If not, they re-enlisted the help of the scriptwriters

to model again the way in which the problem could best be solved. *New Home, New Life* was quite rare in its thorough and time intensive feedback model. Its “rural community consultee” method helped to ground the show in relevant, topical subjects, ensure its effectiveness, and develop an accountability and credibility that likely contributed to the BBC/we/the people sense of ownership I described earlier.

### **Notions of Audience in a Local Women’s Radio Station**

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In comparison, when I immersed myself for a month into the activities of a local women’s radio station called Radio Navid, the first and quite evident observation I made was that the radio station I had entered had limited resources for determining the way its audience listened to the radio. The few audience research reports that existed in Afghanistan were generally only available in English and to those who could find the small, essentially invisible research community in Afghanistan.

Given this lack of information on their audience, I decided to investigate where the radio station’s producers (all of them Afghan women) located their audience. Ang (1991), speaking from a Western perspective, theorizes that public broadcasters define and in effect construct the final desired audience for their programming. Was this the for Radio Navid? To whom, if anyone, did the radio announcers speak while on the air? Did they speak with, at, for, or around their audience? What relationship did they envision with their audience – were they teacher, friend, entertainer, consoler?

The women radio producers are sitting in a circle, trying to decide on the pre-taped programming they will air tomorrow. Beautiful 25-year-old Shamila, immaculately dressed and made up as always, draws what my Canadian colleague calls her “intense” eyebrows together in a frown.

“Throw all the [a current affairs show] CDs aside. That stuff is too political. Women don’t want to hear that at home.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Mental snapshot, Radio Navid, October 2003.

For all her education and family wealth and freedom to hold a job, I knew that Shamila had often lived in a kind of gilded cage. She seemed to me to be drawing from memories of her own days as a bored housewife in voting on the station's programming. In the absence of information on her audience, I felt Shamila was projecting herself and her own dislike for "too political" current affairs programming onto the audience, perhaps designing radio shows to suit and serve a version of herself that she believed existed on the other side of the radio divide. Another radio producer, Seddiqeh, similarly gravitated towards producing the poetry readings and Koranic verses that she herself clearly enjoyed. Youthful Zohreh giggled as she pored through books of riddles and jokes for "cute, interesting material" to read on the air.

I soon learned, however, that my hypothesis was highly simplistic: the audience, it seemed, was a nuanced, shifting, and multi-dimensional entity in the minds of the women I observed. Zohreh would report on feedback she received from her friends and relatives on the radio station, injecting the variously enthusiastic, querulous, and disdainful voices of the radio station's actual audience into production decisions. She also reported that "people say we have a much more fresh, interesting format"<sup>40</sup> than their local radio competition, who were both an adversary against whom the women developed an explicit oppositional programming stance and (as I later discovered) a knowing listener before whose phantom ear they quailed on their less technically seasoned days. Shamila at one point also complained that the station was broadcasting as though its "audience [were] all really conservative mullahs." Her impatience stemmed from her disgust over what she perceived to be the station's self-censorship: the women were playing minimal music and shunning controversial topics to avoid criticism from local male political and religious leaders they believed to be monitoring their station. While they generally only referred to women as their audience during production decisions, they were aware of and played to the larger community within reach of their airwaves.

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<sup>40</sup> Quotations in this chapter are, unless attributed otherwise, my English translations of Dari quotes from women at Radio Navid and a women's radio production unit in Mazar-e-Sharif.



## Notions of Audience in a Local Women's Radio Production Unit

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Another element of complication arose in the fact that Radio Navid interspersed in-house radio programming with pre-packaged shows developed by an essentially unrelated women's production unit located in another city. Therefore conceptualization of the audience for the programming they broadcast was multi-sited and multi-authored, and, as I discovered on traveling to Mazar-e-Sharif to join the production unit, subject to quite a different perspective on the audience:

Shahgol sits and speaks with her colleague as the other members of the team busily tape a show. She has a part-time job with a local magazine, it seems, and is suffering from "job problems:"

"I'm being paid only \$100 per month, and that's without a car [to drive me back and forth from home to work].<sup>41</sup> I had a possible job offer at another paper, and they paid well, but I didn't like the person in charge. So I am tolerating things at the magazine until things get better. Things are so boring here – I really need to get my work out there so that people can see it and right now the magazine is good for that."<sup>42</sup>

The production unit's radio shows were not very popular and Shahgol, concerned that her work barely ever reached the airwaves, had turned to other media forms to bolster her journalistic career. The production unit did not broadcast any material on air, but rather recorded, edited, packaged and distributed women's programming to radio stations across the nation for *possible* broadcast.

I followed the production unit through their daily 9-5 radio routine for 10 days as a simple observer and evaluator. Only one member of the 7-person team was of an age and level of experience to know what life was like outside of Kabul: the other six were 18-22 years of age and had limited traveling experience. I asked the older woman how she defined her audience, and she replied that she felt radio was a very important vehicle for reaching illiterate women. She said she wanted to "survey illiterate people" and gain a sense of their needs to better serve them. Her words were at odds with the programming

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<sup>41</sup> Afghan women usually receive dedicated home-to-work transportation from their NGO employers. This service is necessary to facilitate Afghan women's travel and work while respecting the country's culture.

<sup>42</sup> Mental snapshot, radio production unit in Mazar-e-Sharif, December 2003.

the unit produced, however, which tended towards political issues and used abstract terms like “civil society” that, while popular within certain elite circles in government and the development community, certainly had little tangible meaning for most Afghans.

To be fair, the unit’s programming choices were often influenced by their Western bosses and trainers, for whom political coverage and the electoral process were of consuming importance; however, the ability of the women to argue as local experts for more ‘average Afghan female’-relevant content was hampered by their own circumscription in the realm of privilege. The women, as urban, high school graduate, dollar-earning radio professionals, were among a tiny elite of the 80% rural, 80% illiterate, overwhelmingly ‘housewife’ Afghan female population. Their ability to conceptualize the needs and perspectives of the Afghan women around the nation they aimed to serve was limited by their restricted mobility and experience.

There was a general consensus among the women that they wanted to broadcast live instead of producing taped programming – the few times they had heard their material broadcast locally, they reported “feeling encouraged,” and wanted more of the same. The women’s lack of control over the final broadcasting decisions at radio stations forced them to produce for a split audience. While trying to serve their final female audience, they had to adhere to local concepts of journalism or areas of interest that they felt would raise the likelihood of their product being put on the air in the first place. They were, in essence, caught in the “institutional matrix,” that Radway argues causes texts to be “at least partially controlled by ... a socially organized technology of production and distribution” (1984: 20 in reference to novels). Their material had to be filtered to please Western funders and urban, educated, usually male Afghan radio station managers to increase its chances for broadcast.

The multi-authored audience for the women’s radio station and production unit, then, was rather involved. The intended final audience of self-as-other or dimly understood “illiterate women” was often confounded with the competition, with radio broadcast decision-makers, and/or with funders, local power interests, and “conservative mullahs.”

The women radio journalists I shadowed were aware of and played to these multiple audiences to varying degrees at different times and in different programs. While designated for ‘women audiences,’ the programming that resulted was often in reality developed with a much more complex and contradictory listenership in mind.

Notions of audience fed the similarly complex and contradictory decision-making processes in the radio station and production unit environments. I observed the production processes at both sites to try and sort out the system of pressures and constraints within which encoding processes for women’s radio worked. What was the production environment like? How did women decide on scheduling and program content? What constituted good and bad programming? Where and why did biases occur to package radio content in a way that women in rural areas had difficulty accessing?

### **Good and Bad Programming in the Studio Room**

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The red “ON AIR” sign is lit in the radio station’s hallway. I am in the control room, sitting with Leila in one corner as she practices a short speech. Seddiqeh is at the far end of the room at the mixing board, regulating the live feed from Zekya who is dimly visible on the other side of the glass partition, reading into a microphone in the studio. The gas capsules ran out two weeks ago so everyone is wrapped in several layers of clothing. As usual a power outage has left the room dark except for a few dim lamps powered by the same generator feeding the radio equipment.

Radio host Zekya finishes introducing a song that technician Seddiqeh fades in. Seddiqeh cuts the feed from the microphone and nods to Zekya that she is now off the air. Zekya tromps into the control room, banging the flimsy studio door behind her, and the women convene to continue planning their next day’s schedule, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

“We have 4 minutes,” Seddiqeh announces as she hunts for a pencil. “Where’s the weekly schedule?”

“I’ve got it,” says Leila, and flips around a paper she is holding so we can all see. “Tomorrow we have ‘The Best Elements of Islam,’ ‘A Bright Tomorrow,’ ‘Women and Society,’ and ‘Request Music.’”

“I’ve spoken with the professor, and he’s willing to come again tomorrow [to lecture for the ‘Best Elements’ show],” says Seddiqeh, to murmurs of approval from the rest. She flips through a stack of CDs in a drawer behind her. “Has anyone listened to ‘A Bright

Tomorrow' number 4 to find out what it's about?" There is a slight pause. "Has anyone even seen it?" she asks, lifting paper and burqas off chairs to find the misplaced CD.<sup>43</sup>

The muddled production/planning environment I describe above was fairly typical of the live-to-air broadcast at Radio Navid. In what I privately characterized as the "subsistence scheduling" chaos of the radio station, there was very little time for decision-making.

The women would use the time available to them during the playing of songs or pre-packaged programs to plan for the next day (and on all-too-frequent bad days, for the next half hour) of radio broadcasts. The designated host would pre-script introductions to shows when she could and practice excerpts of poetry to declaim on the air, while the designated 'helpers' would call guests to invite them to lecture or participate in occasional roundtables. During their non-stop eight-hour schedule, the women were live to air for six hours and able to plan and program for two. They took turns praying during pre-taped shows. They had very little time to prepare programs, and hence tended to rely on music and pre-packaged programming to ease their heavy workload.



*Technician Malika and host Zekya*

Despite the fairly haphazard and last-minute nature of the women's planning, the radio station's broadcasts were quite professional and followed a fairly standard daily 6-hour format. The broadcast began with the station's theme music and station ID followed by a narrated listing of the programs for the day. A pre-recorded reciting of a selected Koranic verse followed, then the pre-packaged and live programs of the day were broadcast, interspersed with music and occasional "man on the street" taped interviews.

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<sup>43</sup> Mental snapshot, Radio Navid, October 2003.

At the end of the broadcast, the host thanked the audience for listening and the station's theme music played for a few seconds until the ON AIR sign switched off.

The women's attitudes towards what constituted "good" and "bad" programming became clearer in the course of their work. In one instance, I realized that while I had presented myself to the women as a researcher, collaborator, and friend, my cordial relationship with the Western media development agency funding Radio Navid was an important component of the identity they read in me:

I idly glance over the next day's schedule. "What's that?" I ask Zohreh, pointing to a barely legible scrawl listed in the second programming spot.

"Not yet – don't tell her about that yet. It's too soon," mutters Shamila warningly, not looking at me.

Zohreh tells me anyway, her eyes reflecting her honest, somewhat habitually pained expression, "It's a program on the deeds and life of the Prophet Mohammad that we've started up." She looks at me steadily.

"Oh." There seems to be an expectant pause, and I register their suddenly watchful faces, mildly confused. "Well, good," I say. The tension eases.<sup>44</sup>

I realized later that the subtext for this encounter stemmed from the women's awareness of my secularism. If it hadn't been clear from my more relaxed style of dress or my independent travel, the women observed my ignorance of Koranic verses, lack of prayer, and close relationship with Western organizations and identified my secular bias (despite my Iranian background) easily. Some of the team members responded by shielding their heavily religion-inspired programming, I believe in large part because they were worried that I would transmit that information to their also clearly secular Western donors, who would in turn cut off their funding. Their worries were unfounded – their donors wanted the radio station to operate independently and serve the female community's interests, religious interests included. However, I found this episode interesting for highlighting the importance of religious programming to the women, as they were willing to engage in somewhat furtive and, in their minds, risky behaviour to ensure its broadcast.

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<sup>44</sup> Mental snapshot, Radio Navid, December 2003.

According to the women, poetry, traditional music, and lectures by local professors and high-ranking figures of “authority” constituted good programming. Their weekly schedule, while still mutable and subject to last-minute scheduling problems, included established slots for pre-packaged children’s shows and educational programming for women. Their broadcasts were quite creative, featuring lectures on dental hygiene by a dentist, prayer verses interspersed with music, literature readings, request music shows, and an “increase your knowledge” segment filled with general knowledge and unusual facts.

Bad programming, from what I gathered, seemed to fall into one of three broad categories:

1. illegal,
2. legal but unacceptable to local power interests, and
3. programming the women themselves felt was inappropriate.

Illegal media content was set out in Afghanistan’s most recent press law as “matters contrary to principles of Islam and offensive to other religions and sects” and “matters leading to dishonoring and defamation of individuals.”<sup>45</sup> During my one-month observation of the radio station, I did not observe any tension between the women and the legal boundaries set out by the Afghan government on appropriate radio content.

Legal content that was likely to incur the wrath of local interests, according to the women at the radio station, included “playing too much music” - more than two songs an hour (they feared) would be labeled as corrupting and they would get shut down - and criticizing the local militia. The women discussed these restrictions as social constraints to which they acceded consciously as external to them as producers. The exact nature of these constraints was sometimes a contentious issue in their meetings: for example, the “two songs an hour” restriction was not based on any solid evidence that, say, three or four songs an hour would upset members of the community. In fact, their competitor often played up to four times that much music. However, believing that they were

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<sup>45</sup> Chapter Eight “Prohibited Publications,” Afghanistan Law on Mass Media, enacted April 2004.

subject to heightened scrutiny and potential censure as a women's radio station, the women producers chose to proceed with care and focus on women's "safe" educational programming for the bulk of their content.

The third category of the women's own programming tastes was the most interesting to me. As argued by John Tulloch, "selectivity and 'bias' are not simply matters of omission and distortion. They are profoundly embedded in our view of 'the real', and deeply determined by one's *own* 'pleasures and politics' - that is, by the amalgam of daily desires, practices, assumptions and discourses which make up one's agency as an author" (Tulloch 1990:6 italics in the original). I wanted to understand the choices and logics women brought to the production room themselves. I spent time with the women in their homes, meeting their families and to whatever extent possible learning about their lives outside of the radio studio to gain a sense of their histories and worldviews as it influenced their production processes.

We twist and turn through the uneven dirt side streets, our taxi manoeuvring around potholes and ditches carefully. Leila lives with her husband and two daughters far away from the radio station compound, and I am on my way to visit her family. The neighbourhood I am entering presents a dramatic shift from the clearly wealthy, upper-class urban settings of the other women's homes: although Leila lives within the city limits, her home is in the "provincial," under-developed area of town. She's a handsome woman, but something about her clothing or large, coarse, loofah-rough hands mark her as unsophisticated, backward, slow. Likewise, her house, though well-appointed, clean, and also signifying wealth, is derided by the other radio producers for being in the wrong part of town.<sup>46</sup>

Bourdieu argues that elements with a "determining influence" on linguistic habitus<sup>47</sup> include gender, level of education, social position, and social (rural/urban) origin (Bourdieu 1984). Leila's rural background appeared to be a major factor in distinguishing her radio hosting practices from the work of the other women. I believe it also accounted for the diminished value assigned to her contributions in the radio station.

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<sup>46</sup> Mental snapshot, Radio Navid, December 2003.

<sup>47</sup> Habitus is a concept defined by Pierre Bourdieu as a culturally predisposed way of acting, perceiving, and conceptualizing. Habitus is usually "naturalized" or assimilated into the unconscious, and limits the scope of a person's action and thought.

Leila was the only Pashto-speaker<sup>48</sup> in the team, and was often marginalized during the team's job assignments – partially because of her own lack of motivation and confidence, and partially due to the attitudes of the other women, who felt her work was of poor quality. She was considered a poor radio host both by her colleagues and the community: when she was on the air, listeners phoned in and complained. The complaints revolved around her accent, grammar, and reading style, all of which the other women on the team also disliked and often tried to correct.

Some scholars have hypothesized that the cultural hierarchy societies use to classify the world are resistant to violations of their demarcations of place and identity, and as a result rustic people in the city are “often blamed for eroding the quality of life there” (Ching and Creed 1997). I interpreted the incidents inside the radio studio as suggesting a similar urban/rural cultural tension. In fact, while I sympathized with Leila's plight, my own urban upbringing and sense of what language “should be” resulted in lack of patience on my part towards Leila's radio hosting. For all of us, her voice-overs and narratives meant unambiguously “bad” radio.

As I thought more about our reactions to Leila's work later, I began to realize that any material that sounded uneducated, uncouth, improper – or in a word, uncultured – was either conspicuously absent or weeded out as a matter of course by the women I observed. Such a policy would be perhaps self-evident for a radio station interested in maintaining a degree of professionalism and quality and conscious of its status as a model for women in the region. However, I believe something more fundamental was at work – after all, the people in the community also acted as vigilant scrutineers on grammar, pronunciation, and intonation. *What* Leila said was not at issue so much as the *way* she said it. It seemed to me that the uneducated, uncultured-sounding radio voice was sufficiently outside the realm of what was considered appropriate for Afghan radio that well-meaning members of the urban audience felt compelled to call and register their dismay and displeasure.

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<sup>48</sup> Pashto is often considered more prevalent in rural Afghanistan than Dari, which is more usually associated with learning and literature.



My ten-day study of the women's radio production unit that developed pre-packaged women's programming provided related insights. I was able to join the unit while they were producing daily thirty-minute debates on issues pertaining to the drafting of electoral law and observed that a young woman named Basira faced similar difficulties in her radio hosting duties. The work environment for Basira and her colleagues was more or less as follows:

First thing in the morning, several team members would visit a central newsroom in their media development compound to hear the latest news and be assigned a topic to cover in the day's debates. From there, they compiled a list of potential guests and debate questions with help from the central newsroom. Then, back at their radio studio, they prepared for the day's show. They conducted research and wrote appropriate questions for the show, and invited guests knowledgeable on their assigned topic to the radio premises for the afternoon. In the afternoon they taped their one-hour debate, thanked their guests, and submitted their raw show to a station technician for editing. The technician then burned the show onto a CD for possible broadcast at radio stations around the country.

The women's radio production unit had limited decision-making power on the issues and format of their show. Male Afghan or Western newsroom colleagues suggested their daily debate topics, and a journalism trainer from Europe had designed a standard Western radio debate format for them to follow in their show. The women struggled at their jobs as a consequence: not only did the theme for the debates involve highly confusing and obscure political and legal matters, but the presentation of the show was also out of their hands and usually outside of their zone of comfort. Very often, on being assigned a topic for the day, the women had essentially no ideas on whom to call and invite as knowledgeable guests. Nor did they have much background on the subject at hand or feel comfortable writing the questions for the show. Every day that I observed their work, the outcome was the same: the women had to visit more experienced,

established male journalists for a very quick background on their assigned topic and coaching on the people and questions they would be wise to use.

The guests and Basira are inside the studio room, seated around the microphone-laden table. I, along with the technician and Nilufar who is today's designated producer, watch the debate through the glass partition in the control room wall. Basira is struggling in hosting the show. Nilufar is barking frustrated commands into a microphone that feeds into Basira's headset. I don't understand what the guests are talking about – their speech is dense and filled with jargon – and from the look on her face I would guess Basira is in the same situation.

Nilufar's interventions as producer fluster Basira even more and her voice flattens to a lifeless monotone. I wince inwardly as an even more infuriated Nilufar begins gesticulating to Basira through the window.<sup>49</sup>

Schirato and Yell suggest that speech can be characterized as being transient, spontaneous, and employing paralanguage.<sup>50</sup> Writing on the other hand is referenceable, permanent, and able to hide the processes like first drafts and editing that produce it (Schirato and Yell 2000). It seemed to me that the "legitimate radio voice" idealized by the production unit inhabited a nether space between the two.

Basira, like rural-sounding Leila in the radio station, was not very gifted in literature and as a consequence was viewed with disfavour relative to the rest of the group. Unlike Leila, however, her error was not so much in improper grammar or a poor accent, but in the fact that she *sounded* like she was reading while she read on the air. At the production unit, two important rules seemed to be in place for radio hosting duties: first, that everything said on the air had to be pre-prepared in a script, and second, that when the script was read it had to sound as though it was not being read. Basira, with her stilted reading that flattened to a monotone under duress, had strayed far away from the production unit's perception of correct radio hosting, and thus incurred the wrath of her producer colleague. The unwritten code at both the radio station and production unit seemed to be such that to be considered valid and "good," the radio voice had to sound cultured, effortlessly literate, and urban. Neither Basira nor Leila fit these requirements.

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<sup>49</sup> Mental snapshot, radio production unit, December 2003.

<sup>50</sup> Paralanguage includes tone, pitch, rhythm, pace, volume, and other nonverbal vocal elements that nuance spoken texts.

## **Legitimate Radio Voice and Cultured Radio**

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The production unit's idealized legitimate radio voice was similar to speech in that it was transient for the audience and layered with paralingual cues. However, it was also similar to writing because of its scripted nature: legitimate radio voice lacked spontaneity, was permanent and referenceable for the producers who held the script, and hid the processes that produced it through pre-scripting, "natural" reading, and post-editing.

Legitimate radio voice (in other words, scripted and read as though not read in a cultured, effortlessly literate and urban accent) presents numerous implications in Afghanistan, some of which I will highlight briefly. First, its literacy requirements raise an effective barrier against the participation of illiterate people in the studio room. With illiterate people excluded from the radio production system at a basic and rather "common sense" structural level, the radio communications process in Afghanistan is confined to a "literate urban elite to illiterate rural majority" dynamic despite the fact that radio production technology has no literacy requirements per se. Second, pre-scripting radio texts causes them to be generally more formal and distanced in tone than everyday spoken communications. Meaning production does not occur in a spontaneous and fluid moment of speech, but rather via a deliberate self-conscious iterative writing process. Scripts tend to require, in both of Afghanistan's two official languages, the use of the formal language used for writing rather than the everyday cadence of colloquial speech. It is possible to write in the informal, spoken mode, but it is in some ways jarring and artificial to write and read a linguistic style that normally does not appear on paper. For the most part, radio scripts are written using the more literary, formal mode of language. Third, reading from a script adds a layer of separation between the radio hosts and their audience. Radio hosts do not so much speak to as read to their audience, changing the flavour of their encounter with the listener from a more social and conversational contact to a more formal, official speech delivery. In essence, returning to the Chapter 3 discussion of Ong's theory of orality, I would argue that the scripted radio text resonates with literate culture rather than oral culture.

I would like to take a few steps back now for a review of some influences I have presented so far on women's radio production. I have spoken about the multi-sited, multi-authored conception of the women's radio audience. I have also linked notions of audience to self-censorship and a bias towards urban-centric, political programming favoured by Western donors and radio station decision-makers. I have suggested that actual audiences can and do intervene to enforce the adoption of the urban/educated/cultured voice in radio presenters. Further, I have detailed how women themselves reflect similar preferences for the urban and educated, tending to choose legitimate radio voice over spontaneous conversational dialogue in their programming.

The formal and privileged voice and content that emerges as a result of the above influences lead to radio that is invariably divorced from the everyday, in effect achieving Bourdieu's bourgeois distancing (1984). As I put forth in Chapter 3, within the context of a very poor, Muslim, overwhelmingly illiterate nation, such distancing can and does defeat the objective of women's radio: that is, to produce educational and relevant programming for its intended audience.

As I analyzed my observations of women's radio production, I found that many of my conclusions were resonant with Western cultural studies theory.<sup>51</sup> I frequently heard and inferred (and occasionally observed in myself) attitudes towards media reflecting what I believed to be a socially constructed hierarchy of taste privileging Horkheimer and Adorno's "high" media over "low" media forms (1987). Embedded within those attitudes was a frequently unconscious acceptance and naturalization of the established social order and power structures.

I found numerous instances of naturalized class<sup>52</sup> hierarchy in my study. As I mentioned earlier, illiterate people were excluded from the production environment on the "common

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<sup>51</sup> John Tulloch characterizes the defining preoccupation of cultural studies to be the investigation of mechanisms that "naturalize and universalize the class interests of the bourgeoisie" (1990:6).

<sup>52</sup> Please note that socio-economic status is a fairly tricky social indicator in present-day Afghanistan. Years of drought, forced migration, and war have caused severe changes and disruptions in income, property, and occupation, and as a result economic markers do not offer a very satisfactory way of categorizing people into meaningful culturally discrete groups. As a

sense” basis of literacy requirements. Urban/central viewpoints and issues dominated the airwaves due to the basic structure of the pre-packaged women’s radio programming network, which distributed programming from one of Afghanistan’s largest and best educated urban centres to radio stations around the nation. Finally, perhaps most obliquely, in a context where learning is a luxury, education and literacy by convention had to be presented in a way that made them appear “natural” via legitimate radio voice.

The class hierarchy I observed seemed to be conflated with gendered power structures and a rural/urban dichotomy. Women and rural populations in Afghanistan, for cultural and infrastructural (and many other) reasons, have generally had limited access to education or political discourse. Their participation in radio production was often “naturally” subsidiary or allowed, in a way, in spite of themselves. In one instance, the one rural journalist in my study was marginalized and moved away from hosting duties at the radio station due to the need for having an acceptable accent conforming to the expectations of the audience. In another instance, the women’s radio production unit was often assigned to covering political matters on which they knew very little. The end results was often only achieved through through intensive coaching and the use of approaches developed by male colleagues.

Of course, the tendencies and examples I describe are not absolute. My description of Radio Navid in this chapter and its creative dental hygiene, request music, and “improve your general knowledge” programs offer a successful example of appropriate programming by women for women. In general, however, elite, educated, male, and urban centred interests could be said to dominate societal conceptions of “high” culture and consequently demarcate the bounds of good and appropriate programming for Afghan radio.

It would be very difficult to produce a complete categorization of cultural hierarchy in Afghanistan, and I do not propose to attempt to do so. For the purposes of this paper,

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result, education is my admittedly problematic but to my mind reasonably practical primary indicator of class for the purposes of this paper.

however, I would like to summarize the hegemonic “high culture” tendencies I observed in the studio room.

First, while I like the sense of social stratification implicit in the “highbrow” and “lowbrow” terms, I am cognizant of the fact that my study is situated in a very different non-Western culture. I prefer to use what I believe to be more contextually resonant terms to convey the sense of Afghan cultural and social valences. The Dari terms *bâ-farhang* and *bee-farhang* have a similar feel to highbrow and lowbrow and connote divisions along the lines of learning, class, ethnicity, and nationality. *Farhang* (culture) and its prefixes *bâ-* (with) and *bee-* (without) are resonant terms in Afghanistan. *Farhang* means “dictionary” as well as “culture.” Families with more *farhang* enjoy a higher socio-economic status, while common Afghan stereotypes accord differing levels of *farhang* to different ethnicities and nationalities. Tajiks, for example, are often considered to be more *bâ-farhang* relative to Hazaras. Similarly Iran is frequently given a higher cultural standing relative to Afghanistan, which is thought to have more than Pakistan. The taste hierarchy I observed permeating local women’s radio production in Afghanistan could be characterized by the following series of oppositions:

<b>bâ-farhang (cultured) characteristics</b>	<b>bee-farhang (uncultured) characteristics</b>
Islamic	Irreligious, immodest
Formal language	Colloquial language
Urban	Rural
Political, newsworthy	Everyday, trivial
Educated, effortless literacy	Uneducated, struggling literacy
Abstract	Practical

*The bâ-farhang/bee-farhang taste hierarchy*

I am not fully comfortable with these divisions as they generalize cultural norms and values across ethnicity, region, gender and socio-economic class. They also suggest that value judgments on radio programming operate as either-or binaries when in fact there is a spectrum of intensity within and interactivity between the characteristics I have listed. Further, I have insufficient evidence to include other oppositions that I suspect may also be present, like “didactic/entertainment-oriented” or “official, expert/informal, lay.” I

stress that the above formulation should be taken as limited in scope and very tentative.

Looking from the standpoint of Hall's encoding/decoding model (1980), I would argue that the *bâ-farhang/bee-farhang* hierarchy I have described is a societally entrenched filtering mechanism embedded in the encoding processes of radio texts. Influenced by conceptualizations of the audience and intervention by the actual audience, the *bâ-farhang/bee-farhang* hierarchy of tastes systematically encodes radio texts into forms and meanings more generally appropriate for elite, educated, urban males. Female preferences like those I encountered in Ghambar tend to be viewed as *bee-farhang* and are generally filtered out of radio texts.

The formulation above does not apply to all radio broadcasts in Afghanistan, as I demonstrated at the start of this chapter with my discussion of the BBC. *New Home, New Life* is a program that successfully inverted production decision-making processes from being determined by elite producers and urban audiences, to being fundamentally informed by a rural community. In contrast to local Afghan programming, the BBC's unconventional practices resulted in programming that was more accessible and appealing for a larger segment of Afghan audience. In fact, Andrew Skuse argues that the producers at *New Home, New Life* often knowingly produced "a vague representation of society and culture that [allowed] the widest possible opportunities for the production to strike a familiar chord within an ethnically, linguistically and culturally diverse audience" (2002a:409).

The BBC's counter-hegemonic and broadly appealing practices are not necessarily easy to emulate in local Afghan women's radio, however. The BBC's wealth of experience, resources, and authority as Afghanistan's pre-eminent radio station afforded it the leeway necessary to produce unconventional programming. Afghan women have no such leeway. Patricia Holland's study of women television newsreaders concludes that women involved in the "seriousness" of the news are not accorded the respect and credibility their male colleagues enjoy. Women are defined as being "outside both the political consensus and the masculine structure of language" and dismissed as such: "themselves

trivialized, they [could] be blamed for trivializing” (1996:198). The Afghan women journalists I observed occupy a similar space outside of the locus of power and communication structures. The logic involved in their production efforts is fairly simple: should they be able to counter external and internalized belief systems to produce programming that women in Ghambar would appreciate, accusations of “trivializing” or corrupting the respectable realm of radio production with *bee-farhang* content would quite likely undermine their efforts.



## Chapter 5 – Methodological Postscript

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I alluded to some fairly fundamental oral culture - literate culture difficulties in conducting the quantitative questionnaire in Chapter 3. I would like to now expand on some of the methodological complications and findings from my study. The points I sketch below outline some limitations on the validity of my data as well as chronicle some of my learning and experimentation on encountering what was, for me, a fairly difficult fieldwork environment.

### Phase 1: Women's Radio Consumption

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My study of women in Ghambar presented a number of data collection wrinkles, particularly during the quantitative stage of my fieldwork. In piloting my quantitative survey in Kabul, for example, I immediately noticed that the women I was interviewing felt some discomfort in answering my questions: in keeping with the way radio surveys had been done with male heads of households in Kabul,<sup>53</sup> I had asked opinion questions first and left demographic questions until last. The women I interviewed struggled a great deal with the opinion questions and appeared to lose confidence in themselves in encountering such difficult questions at the start of the questionnaire. They brightened perceptibly during the final stretch of demographic questions in the survey, as these were questions to which they knew the “correct” answer.

Here I realized the ethnocentrism of my radio survey. In keeping with traditional Western survey methods, I had assumed that it would have been “rude” to ask personal information at the start of the survey. I had thought that my respondents, having warmed up to answering questions through the rest of the survey, would be more likely to share their personal information with me at the end of our encounter. Among the Afghan

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<sup>53</sup> InterMedia. 1998. *Radio Listening by Afghan Male Heads of Household 1997-98*. InterMedia Memorandum 1508/1998.

women I surveyed, however, I found that such reasoning did not apply. Clan and tribal markers were often an important element of identity and pride, and not bound up in Western sensitivities regarding skin colour and privacy. I changed the order of my questions and modified a few instances of problematic wording in my questionnaire as a result of the piloting exercise.

I had to modify the questionnaire further on reaching Ghambar. Initially, my questionnaire had a list of local and foreign broadcasters and the hours they broadcast so that specific listening times and stations could be prompted for and recorded on my coding sheet. The original task of the questionnaire had been to get a snapshot of women's listening on the day before speaking with me, and also to gain a sense of what they identified as their regular listening regimen over a full week. The women were very poor informants of radio listening, however. Their immediate answer to questions on the station, hour, and programming of radio listening was usually "I don't know." At best, they labeled the stations as "the radio from Kabul" or "the radio from Pakistan," and so on. I gave up after a while, thinking that I could return and ask men about household listening habits and thus gain a sense of the kinds of programming to which women were exposed. Unfortunately, I had to leave the village before managing to do so.

Many of the survey questions I had prepared were scale questions such as "Question: is understanding current events important to you? Possible responses: 1 - very important; 2 - quite important; 3 - important; 4 - not very important; 5 - not important at all." The women did not seem to understand that they were to express the intensity of their response, however, and often said "I don't know" or gave binary responses despite my prompts for a scale from 1 to 5. I was not very comfortable with the results of these questions or the way I had administered them, and de-emphasized them in my analysis.

The precise wording of the survey questions, which had piloted well, was often lost in explanations and simplifications required to draw answers from some interviewees. I focused more on the women understanding and answering questions correctly than on strict word choice.

The women had very low numeracy skills. The majority of the women did not know their own ages, and guessed to the nearest decade. Women who to my eyes looked over 50 would say, “well, I am probably past 30 years of age...” and as birth certificates in rural Afghanistan are often rare, their ages actually were a mystery. For those who appeared to guess very far off the mark, I would estimate an age based off the approximate age of their eldest child, plus 15 years. The women were generally not in the habit of thinking about time: when asked when the radio set was on, women would speak of landmarks during their daily routines “when it’s dinner-time” or “when my husband comes home” and often would be unsure of the numerical hour.

As many of the villagers had previously benefited from humanitarian distributions, they often felt it in their interest to present themselves as destitute when asked their economic situation directly. Thus, I conducted a subjective scan of household furnishings and clothes and livestock (if any) to rate the level of wealth in the households I surveyed.

The survey administration was far from ideal, as the highly social context of rural Ghambar had crowds gathering every time a questionnaire was administered. Husbands and neighbouring women would interject and give answers occasionally, although they would stop after polite requests that they not interject. On the other hand, the presence of community members during survey administration may have ensured more accurate responses.

As this was the first survey of this sort in the village, in the words of one community leader “there was a party the night the survey began” as the women compared notes on what was said and word spread about the ‘list-taker’ in their midst. As such, on the second and third days of the survey, the women already had some idea of the survey questions, and occasionally seemed to give unusually quick answers. This was unavoidable: I was conducting the survey as rapidly as I could, but with 70 households in the village and only seven hours of acceptable visiting hours during the day, my mini radio census of the community stretched across 3 days.

My choice of the “household” as basic unit of investigation was problematic for Afghanistan. As suggested by Morley and Silverstone (1990), a family can extend over several households. A more appropriate frame of reference in the Afghan context would likely include analysis of lineage and inter-marriage relations, which are more often used as markers of identity and “home” in Afghanistan. For reasons of convenience, however, I used household matriarchs as my study subjects.

Around the midpoint of my mini radio census, when it became clear that women did not tend to listen to the radio, I decided to incorporate a more hands-on interactive session in the middle of the interview. During the more interactive session, I would request that women teach me how to use their household radios. Luckily, it was harvest season and most able-bodied men were hard at work in the field, so I was able to ask questions and observe women handle the radio while men were not around. These “teaching” sessions were useful for indicating where the radio set was stored, whether women knew how to tune the set, turn it on and off, etc. The radios I saw were made in the Soviet Union, Japan, China and bore Cyrillic, Japanese, or English script on them. I found it interesting that none of them had Dari markings, although this would not have had much bearing on illiterate users. I became somewhat curious about whether the colour, number of knobs, and markings on the set make a difference to the comfort level of women handling them?

My “teaching” sessions were too brief and haphazard for me to draw definitive conclusions on the physicality of the radio set, other than to note that radios with tape decks appeared to be more highly regarded by women. If I were to redo my study, I would spend more time on the physical aspect of the radio set to see if women’s low use of the radio could be linked to possible gender biases embodied in the physical “thing” of the radio set.

I would also spend more time exploring the financial side of radio consumption. The radio sets I saw were all battery-powered and usually required two to four AA batteries.

At the time of my study, the village store charged 10-12 Afghanis<sup>54</sup> for two Chinese-made AA batteries; for the sake of comparison, two and a half flatbreads or two eggs could be bought for the same price in Kabul. None of the women I interviewed suggested that financial cost compelled them to ration radio consumption. One household removed the batteries from their radio whenever the set was not operating to reduce drainage of their batteries, but their practice was related more to what they considered to be their radio set's unnecessary digital clock and display than radio consumption itself. My host told me several times that the cost of batteries was negligible and did not impact radio listening, but studies I had previously read suggested otherwise. Regrettably, investigation into the economic costs of radio consumption remained on the periphery of my study and finally remained inconclusive.

The qualitative segment of my data collection was generally more successful than the quantitative, but was still not problem-free. An unfortunate consequence of staying at the house of the village elder was that I was restricted to his home for the most part. My original plan had been to stay in 3 or 4 different households and gain a sense of a range of domestic conditions fairly intimately, but the village elder did not allow me to leave his house. Nor would he would not allow me to do household work like helping his wife to do dishes, cook, and clean.

He was a wonderful and very hospitable host in general and we had many interesting philosophical conversations, but his restrictions on my movements and ban on helping his wife (unlike him, she had no objections to either of my requests, but both of us were overruled) became the topic of several heated debates between us. I was perhaps getting more of the "experience" of being an Afghan woman than I would have liked! Van Zoonen argues that in such situations, women researchers are forced to choose between acceding to "sexist treatment" for the sake of research, or risk "blowing their cover as unobtrusive participants" (Van Zoonen 1994:136). I acceded (albeit under protest) for the most part out of respect to my host and his generosity, and on my final day in the

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<sup>54</sup> The Afghani, reconstituted from its highly devalued state under the Taliban regime, is the official currency of Afghanistan. 1 United States Dollar (USD) was valued at 45 to 50 Afghanistan Afghani (AFA) during the course of my fieldwork.

village he set up a one-night stay for me at the home of one of my schoolgirl translators, where I gained valuable insight into the workings of one other household.

I felt focus groups in Ghambar were very useful for drawing out information. The girls I interviewed were somewhat hesitant informants because of our age difference, but provided a valuable perspective nonetheless. The women in my focus groups spoke at length and towards the end, with strong emotion. My discussion with male leaders was instructive in providing a village-wide perspective on radio uses and needs and complemented women's more domestically grounded points of view well. Had I remained in the field longer, I would have taken the opportunity to conduct more discussions in group settings with segregated and mixed men, women, and children of various educational and social backgrounds.

I am generally pleased with the outcome of my "cross-fertilized" or mixed quantitative-qualitative study. The approach I have often seen espoused for such studies is that of using qualitative research to establish background and identify issues of interest that would then be tested for systematically using quantitative methods (Mytton 1999:94; Abdullah 2002; Kottak 1990). I am glad that I conducted my study in the opposite direction, however. I used a quantitative survey to gain a "quick and dirty" sense of the community and then investigated emerging points of interest using indepth qualitative techniques. This permutation worked well in Ghambar, as the women's oral culture was such that a study that depended on strong results from quantitative methods may have been limited in its effectiveness.

In looking back, I feel some chagrin at the number of assumptions I had carried with me into Ghambar. The most embarrassing error I made was in my educational elitism. For example, while I had accounted for the illiteracy of Ghambar women in piloting my questionnaire, I had completely missed illiteracy's more fundamental implications on communications culture (as I described in Chapter 3 in contrasting oral versus literate culture). Social science literature does speak of the importance of adapting research tools to different cultures: market researcher Scarlett Epstein, for example, has developed a set

of what she terms “Key Cultural Variables” for use in modifying Western-derived questionnaires for less developed, non-industrialized countries (Epstein 1988). Such theories are very useful for creating culturally appropriate questionnaires for literate or *fahmideh* populations but seem to assume a base cognitive comfort with Western-style information processing traditions.

I think my immersion in Ghambar, building of relationships, and active participation in the daily lives of women was very instructive and indeed humbling. I was frequently amazed at my privilege at being allowed into the inner world of women while free to talk with men and travel independently. My movements were restricted to some degree within the village but that did not severely damage my data collection processes. Within the context of Afghan culture, I seemed to be a privileged 3<sup>rd</sup> gender.

## **Phase 2: Women’s Radio Reception**

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The “methodless method” of my production ethnographies is harder to analyze for its lack of structure. I felt the most important element in my data collection was likely the time I spent outside of the studio, observing women in their alter egos as students, teachers, mothers, and wives. The brief glimpses I had of the complex histories and multiple personas of the woman at Radio Navid gave me stronger insight into the dynamics of the production room. Unfortunately, my interactions with the women in the production unit in Mazar-e-Sharif were restricted to the studio and I did not have as many opportunities for learning about their non-professional lives.

My concern in entering the domestic and personal spaces of my informants, however, was that I often wondered if I was crossing a boundary, moving too close. I struggled to find an appropriate balance between participant and observer, advocate and academic. In my role as volunteer at the radio station and direct link between the Afghan women producers and the Western agency funding them, I often found myself in awkward dilemmas of conflicting loyalties and unequal power relations. As a media ethnographer,

I was “usually engaged, sometimes complicit, rarely neutral” in engaging with my subjects (Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002:21), and focused on muddling my way through as best I could in what I hope was a minimally harmful way.

As in Ghambar, I felt very privileged at being allowed to enter the world of the Afghan women. With my Western education I was able to enter the inner compound of Western NGOs, but also spend time with Afghan women, visit and stay with their families, and participate intensively in their everyday lives. Neither fully Western nor fully Afghan, here I was like a privileged 3<sup>rd</sup> *nationality*.

### **Notes on Presentation**

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In writing about my fieldwork experiences, I have been worried about portraying women’s lives and the cultural differences in Afghanistan sensitively and responsibly. Women inhabit a very politicized space in Afghanistan, and I felt Edward Said’s scathing accusations of the Orientalism of many anthropological texts to be relevant to the topic I was addressing. Said argues that Western scholars have often approached Arab societies with an agenda of defining themselves positively in opposition to the exoticized and stereotyped “Other” of Arab societies (Said 1978). While his text has been criticized for questionable scholarship (Kerr 1980, Marcus and Fischer 1999, among others) I do feel that the moral questions involved in portrayals of Eastern society remain.

As a result, I have tried to portray women’s lives with an adequate balance of what is undoubtedly the exotic side of their reality to Western eyes along with the mundane and familiar. I have altered names and details to protect the identities of the people kind enough to speak with me, and have tried to make my limited, subjective point of view very explicit in my writing style. I have used quotes from others, but also included short, vivid descriptive paragraphs illustrating my own experiences as “mental snapshots” in the text. These mental snapshots focus on my perceptions, reactions, and emotions in my role as dual insider-outsider among foreigners and Afghans, men and women, and present



data culled and reworked from fieldnotes as dramatized snippets of memory. They have been helpful in allowing me to portray a scene without the use of photography which, while very visually rich, would possibly have revealed too much of my Afghan informants. They have also allowed me to intersperse my discussion and analysis with “impressionist writing” (Van Maanen 1988), allowing my writing to parallel the idea of participant observation as a “peculiar amalgam of intense personal experience and scientific analysis” that “serves as a shorthand for a continuous tacking between the outside and inside of events” (Clifford 1988). In other words, I have been able to express fairly concisely in my discussion of the data collection experience, moments of memory that offer my impression of the “inside” of a significant event that lead me to a general understanding “outside” of it.

Appropriate presentation of my material has been a struggle, as the Afghan media environment is very rich and complex. Many important points were beyond my ability to grasp or explain. In choosing how and what to write, I have made many simplifications and omissions. My main aim, however, has been to offer some semblance of the “feel” of the Afghan women’s radio reception and production contexts, and thus my decisions on content and style throughout this paper have been made with that goal in mind.

## Conclusions

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Reviews of concepts of culture formation in Nigeria and in most parts of the world show that women are ascribed a subordinate status. This view is rooted in social, economic, and political structures and is reproduced by the socialization process. Consequently, even though as some have argued, the traditional view of the gender question may be premised on the African preference for a harmonious balance between the sexes and equality in essence of all human beings before the supreme deity, there is, in practice, a lot of prejudice, attitude and custom that negates this philosophy. (Odejide 1996:vii)

I began this paper with a description of some of the changes I observed in Kabul between my first and second trips to the city. I explained that in post-Taliban Afghanistan, women are no longer required to wear the burqa by law, but many continue to cover their faces by choice. Afghan women's relationship with the burqa, for me, symbolizes an underlying theme for my study of Afghan women's radio that is suggested in the Nigerian feminist quote I have presented above: that is, superficial shifts in gender practices and codes tend to be undermined by deeper customs and rules maintaining a certain status quo in the country.

In this thesis, I have tried to convey the sensitive space women inhabit within Afghan culture and explore the impact of radio within the woman's world. My assumption has been that radio could potentially be an important tool for women's knowledge and health in Afghanistan. My viewpoint is infused with the inherently political spirit of Western feminist research (Van Zoonen 1994) and I have tried to answer calls for a more applied feminist cultural studies as "a pre-requisite for engagement in certain kinds of political discussion" (McRobbie 1997:170).

In Afghanistan, women's media production is in itself political and influenced by many forces: Western donors and trainers, conservative elements in the country, women's personal philosophical and ideological constructs, to name a few. Gender inequalities in Afghan society were a source of concern for the vast majority of my informants, and Afghan radio was understood to be socially constructed as a tool for men. On the reception side, men often used the radio in anti-social ways that were less easy for women, with their multiple household duties and child-rearing responsibilities to mimic,

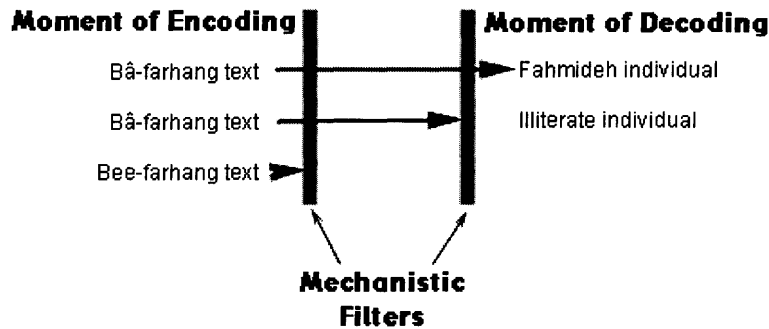
and I suspect that some women may have deliberately refused to engage with the radio set as a result. On the production side, radio programming's legitimacy was bound up in elite urban male tastes, and women often had to produce programming foreign to their own interests and knowledge base.

Ironically, I found that the counter-hegemonic radio messages Western agencies attempted to disseminate across Afghanistan were packaged in genres and codings that acceded to hegemonic norms, neutralizing their message as a result. In many ways, this outcome was unavoidable: the women I observed in the production room were compelled to use *bâ-farhang*, male-oriented encodings as a "legitimizing force" (Brunsdon 1997) ensuring that their messages would be broadcast in the first place. In other words, from the perspective of the women I studied, cultured media products were allowed onto the airwaves without dispute, while uncultured programming tended to be blocked and/or provoked censure.

Returning to Hall's encoding/decoding model, I would argue that the local Afghan women's radio station and production unit I studied used an the encoding process that was subject to a *bâ-farhang/bee-farhang* filter. The filter tended to block uncultured radio texts from reaching the airwaves. It was not absolute, as evident in the brief "uncultured" hosting duties of Leila and Basira, but did represent a fairly systematic and mechanistic barrier to the flow of non-elite radio texts. Consequently, local women's radio programming tended to be *bâ-farhang*, that is, based in literate, male-centric culture and embodying elite notions of effortless literacy and urbanity in the legitimate radio voice.

On the other side of the equation, a *fahmideh*/illiterate filter mechanistically blocked consumption of radio texts on an individual level. The filter disallowed *bâ-farhang* texts from reaching illiterate individuals because such individuals lacked the cognitive framework and cultural competencies required to engage with and even begin to decode *bâ-farhang* texts. *Fahmideh* individuals were better equipped, albeit not perfectly, to "see" and receive incoming radio texts, and as such the filter allowed *bâ-farhang* texts

through to *fahmideh* individuals. Seen at a systemic level, the moment of decoding was subject to two filtration processes that tended to deliver *bâ-farhang* texts to *fahmideh* individuals, and essentially nothing at all to illiterate ones.



*The bâ-farhang/bee-farhang and fahmideh/illiterate filters*

The graphic above applies to the local women’s radio station and programming unit I investigated in this thesis. As I suggested earlier, the BBC, as an established authority in Afghanistan, was able to disregard the *bâ-farhang/bee-farhang* hierarchy in its *New Home, New Life* radio soap opera. According to Ong’s theory of literacy and orality, repetition, the manifestation of concepts in everyday images and events, dialogic communications, and exaggerated emotion are all characteristic of oral culture. These are the same characteristics that are often prevalent in soap operas, and I believe represent one of many reasons why *New Home, New Life* has been so successful at reaching the majority illiterate population, both male and female, in Afghanistan.

The fundamental resonance of soap opera conventions with oral culture presents an important opportunity for radio in Afghanistan to communicate effectively to the Afghan population. Championed by the BBC as an educational format, the soap opera in Afghanistan has avoided its Western counterpart’s fate of being dismissed and devalued as a woman’s genre. In the BBC’s hands, informal language, practical information, and story-telling could be elevated to the realm of, if not high, then acceptable and appropriate culture. Such power to forge or break societal ideological codes is very

difficult for local Afghan women radio producers to attain, however, as Afghan women have much less permission to work, let alone act in non-conformist ways.

In my study, women's genre preferences, being on the "uncultured" side of Afghanistan's radio taste hierarchy, were less likely to be broadcast relative to male radio preferences in the self-consciously serious local radio ethos of post-Taliban Afghanistan. It seemed to me that women producers bought into this ethos as much as they were compelled to abide by it. Illiterate women at the receiving end of male-oriented texts were less likely to put in effort to become *fahmideh* and engage with the radio texts reaching them. Nor were they very interested in demanding change in a communications system that was of little interest or use to them. The main logic of this system was perpetuation of the status quo.

I believe that greater mobility of women between the production and consumption contexts (using something similar to the BBC's "rural community consultee" feedback loop) would have been one way of beginning to repair the breakdown in women's radio communications. Unfortunately, women in Afghanistan, even urban women in less conservative households, are culturally restricted from traveling on their own. As a result, it is very difficult for female producers of women's radio to contact and interact with their rural audience directly. Male producers of women's radio, if any, would have to consult with women via their husbands or sons, as men do not normally have access to non-kin Afghan females. Consequently, producers of women's radio programming face significant barriers to reaching and understanding large segments of their audience.

Likewise, rural women in the consumption sphere generally have limited opportunities for visiting cities to inform the women's radio production process or to become *fahmideh* by virtue of travel and interaction with urban spaces. Thus, on a practical level, bridging the radical disjunct between the production and consumption environments is very difficult. Due to existing Afghan constructs of knowledge and power, but also due to mobility restrictions, the *bâ-farhang/bee-farhang* and *fahmideh/illiterate* filters on either side of the local women's radio communications model remain entrenched.

My analysis, admittedly, is based on a very small and flawed empirical investigation. I have conducted only a brief study of a rural listening community and some urban informants on the consumption side, and on the production side, looked at one local women's radio station and one women's programming unit. I was unable to track a single text as it progressed from the production to consumption environments because my choice of sites was restricted to what was feasible and available. The women's radio station I investigated did not have a large enough broadcasting range to reach the listening community I studied - in fact, Ghambar was so remote that only state radio and international broadcasters on shortwave and mediumwave were able to reach it. In essence, rather than looking at an encoding/decoding system bound by specific radio texts, I looked at a system bound by a *category* of radio text, that is, radio broadcasts aimed at a female audience.

My study is limited in many ways – I have not discussed ethnicity, age, class, nor language and religion in particular detail. Ethnicity, language and religion are very complex issues in Afghanistan, and as a result my simple gender-oriented paper can only be seen as an initial baseline study. There have been calls among feminist scholars to broaden studies of gender to include nuanced exploration of the multiple implications of multi-faceted identity, both male and female (Ang and Hermes 1996, Brunsdon 1996, among others), and such calls would certainly apply to the study of radio in Afghanistan.

At the time of my study, independent Afghan radio was still very new: in the year that I conducted my thesis work, the number of local independent radio stations exploded from 2 to 15. My investigation only provides a snapshot of the early development of a start-up woman's radio station after the fall of the Taliban, and will need longitudinal analysis to present a more complete picture of the internal dynamics and processes of independent Afghan women's radio as it expands and matures more fully. Longitudinal analysis will also be valuable for observing any changes in women's consumption of radio. As Moores suggests, the position of early radio in England "was not assured in advance – it had to be won" (1988:39). Perhaps the same will hold true for Afghan women's radio in Ghambar households.

It is not only important to look at women's radio programming in newer production environments like local independent stations, but also in state radio historically. Notions of ideology have undoubtedly shifted and changed throughout the widely disparate reigns of Afghanistan's monarchy, the Soviet invasion, the Mujaheddin civil war, and even broadcasts by Northern alliance radio during the Taliban regime. For instance, writing during Afghanistan's civil war, Razi suggests that "Afghanistan's philosophy of communication has traditionally been highly centralized and paternalistic. The media has been heavily regulated and controlled...Most of the media is directly financed by the government, with little or no outside advertising revenue..." (1994:2). In contrast, post-Taliban centralization, regulation, and finance of Afghan media are self-consciously more market-driven than government-controlled and suggest corresponding shifts in constructs of and relations to content, power, ideology, and gender.

The debates and developments of radio as a technology will be interesting to observe in Afghanistan. During my fieldwork, I was struck by the popularity of the "reverb" audio effect. The use of the reverberation effect was widespread to the point of being exhausting to my ear, with (from my perspective) radio pronouncements echoing and booming with portent over the airwaves. Colleagues of mine suggest that the popularity of reverb was linked to notions of authority, as reverbed radio voices were reminiscent of a sermon resonating within a mosque. I remain uncertain over its origins and motivations, but popularity the reverb technique along with other Afghan-specific uses of radio technology seem to me to present interesting studies into notions of culture and legitimacy by technological convention and innovation.

Finally, I believe there is a wealth of knowledge to be accrued on the place of independent Afghan radio relative to other forms of communications. State radio operations embody numerous contextual differences from the independent radio production environment and I believe Afghan state radio deserves indepth analysis in its own right. The place of gender and radio relative to informal oral modes of communication like gossip, cassette culture, religious sermons, and word of mouth

facilitated by commerce networks presents additional room for study, as does comparative analysis of radio against newer forms of communication like the Internet, cable television, and satellite communications.

For myself, I am grateful for the opportunity I have had to observe and be moved by the situations of many Afghan women over the past year. During my time living and traveling with occasional success as an “Afghan” woman, I was struck by glimpses of what became for me fairly fundamental elements in my understanding of the female Afghan context. One incident remains fairly vivid in my mind:

I am traveling overland to cross the border into Iran from Afghanistan. I have not been able to find a male escort for my trip, and so have arranged to travel with a family who are strangers to me as they journey in the same direction. The original plan had been for both the husband (who is driving) and wife and their children to accompany me the entire way to the border, but midway the husband stops the car and ushers his perplexed wife and children out to visit relatives along the way. My heart sinks.

The husband returns to the car, and begins driving again, glancing at me periodically in the mirror. I grow more and more nervous, as we are traveling through dusty, empty land and the route is unknown to me. His stares grow longer and more bold in the mirror.

“Do you have a husband,” he asks. (What’s the right answer?!!) “Yes,” I reply.

“So come sit in front.” “No.” I am silently cursing myself for not wearing the burqa to conform more with conventions of modest womanhood.

There is a slight pause. He reaches around and tries to touch my leg. I shift and squeeze into a tight corner on the other side of the back seat. He tries again and I block his groping hand with my backpack.

“Does it matter if we have a little fun?” he asks. “Yes!” I reply indignantly, “Let me out of the car!”

He glances at me sardonically in the mirror. “What, are you worried about your husband? He’s not here...”

(Damn, I gave the wrong answer earlier) “It’s not my husband I’m worried about, it’s hell,” I retort. We have reached and are driving through some sort of settlement. “Stop the car. I want to find another driver.”

He watches me in the mirror as he keeps driving, so I open the door and try to gauge how to jump out, dragging my backpack across the seat.

“Don’t do that, don’t jump, it’s not right, it looks bad,” he says quickly, turning around and looking anxious.



“Stop trying to touch me,” I say, keeping the door open.

“If you’re so worried about hell, why are you traveling alone?” he asks.

“I’m traveling alone because I thought Afghans were good Muslims just like Iranians!”

He hunches his back over the steering wheel and returns his attention to the road. “Don’t be mad, I was just kidding,” he says. I watch him carefully for a few moments, but something tells me the crisis is over. He is silent and keeps his eyes focused ahead. I close the car door and try to relax as we drive silently the rest of the way to the border.<sup>55</sup>

The experience above, aside from making clear my poor judgment in traveling without an appropriate companion (my excuse is that I was tired and desperately wanted to go home), was instructive in demonstrating the consequences of behaving in culturally unsupported ways. Independent travel was not something in which Afghan women could engage, and coupled with my uncovered face, my behaviour was quite reasonably read as immodest and deserving of an equally immodest response. Through pure chance, I hit on the right series of culturally resonant words or concepts – Islam, hospitality, and nationalism, perhaps? – for the driver to deliver me to my destination without embarking on the kind of social exchange that I would have found very unwelcome.

I certainly should have known better, having observed Roya’s difficulties with her shipment of Spanish medicines and watched Radio Navid’s careful accounting for “conservative mullahs.” I am still unclear on Afghan notions of feminism, and continue to feel perplexed and ambivalent over the interactions of radio, culture, and societal mores in impacting women’s lives. My four months in Afghanistan have brought home to me, however, the imperative for deeper and more concerted critical attention to the gender and culture dynamic in Afghanistan. Despite the grim realities – grinding poverty, decimated infrastructure, crippled economy, and political strife – facing Afghanistan, Afghan men and women are persevering and working to build a peaceful and just society. I can only hope that at some point, the Afghan communications system will allow female voices intrinsic legitimacy, and the deep roots of unwelcome and harmful cultural practices in Afghanistan could gradually erode away for a people and nation that certainly deserve to see better, happier days.

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<sup>55</sup> Mental snapshot, near the Afghanistan-Iran border, January 2004.

## Appendix – Rural Radio Reception Questionnaire

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*Administered orally to female head of household, as identified by the household*

[Ritual greeting: older woman holds and kisses the forehead of younger woman, then younger woman turns her head to kiss the older woman's right palm. Or in women of equal age, kiss each other's hands]

Hello, good morning. My name is Sarah, and I'm trying to understand how women listen to the radio. I want to speak with you a bit, and if you give me permission, ask you some questions about the radio, and record your answers. You don't have to give me answers, and if you don't know the answer it doesn't matter. I will not give your name to anyone. Will you speak with me today?

[*If permission granted:*] Very well. So let us begin:

1. What is your name?
2. What is your age? (**Prompt:** how old is your oldest child?)
3. What language do you speak at home?
4. Do you speak any other languages? (**Prompt:** do you know Pashto? Uzbeki?)
5. What is your ethnicity?
6. What is your religion and sect?
7. Have you studied?
8. Do any of your family members live outside Afghanistan? (**Prompt:** do you have brothers or sisters etc. in Pakistan or Iran?) Where are they?
9. Have you ever migrated? Where? How long? How long has it been that you are back?
10. Do you work? What do you do? (**Prompt:** do you weave carpets?)
11. [*Subjective scan of furnishings, clothes, and livestock to grade relative economic situation as one of:*
  - a. **very poor:** occasionally go hungry
  - b. **poor:** have food, but live very basic lives
  - c. **average:** own a few chickens or a donkey
  - d. **well-off:** own a cow, use luxury soap

- e. *extremely well-off: own extremely scarce items in the village (a horse, a television, a herd of sheep)*]
12. How important is it for you to know what is going on in Afghanistan?
  13. Where do you get your news from?
  14. Do you own a radio? [*If yes, ask:*] How many? Can I see it/them?
  15. [*Examine the radio(s), if any. Note the following:*
    - a. *if they are broken or in working condition*
    - b. *if they operate on batteries or another source of energy*
    - c. *if battery operated, are the batteries good or do they have to be replaced*
    - d. *ask the woman to turn the radio on, and tune it*
    - e. *if they are only radios, or radios with a tape deck*
    - f. *The quality of the reception*
    - g. *The frequencies that work*]
  16. Do you listen to the radio? [*If yes, ask:*]
    - a. What times do you listen?
    - b. What programs do you listen to?
    - c. Do you know the stations that they are broadcast from?
  17. How many people live in your house? Who are they?
  18. Who listens to the radio?
  19. Do you/they listen together or separately?
  20. Who switches the radio on and off? Anyone else?
  21. Who chooses the channel? Anyone else?
  22. Where do you listen? (**Prompt:** in the house, at the carpet loom, outside...?)
  23. What kinds of programs would you yourself like to hear on the radio? (**Prompt:** if the language were simple enough on the radio for you to understand, what kind of things would you want to hear?)

[Thank the interviewee for her time, present her with a small package of candy with warm wishes for her family and comment that in my culture, it is rude to enter someone's home without leaving a tiny token to sweeten the family's mouth.]

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