

## TITLE

**Is the BBC Urdu Service becoming Pakistan's national broadcaster? An enquiry  
into the causes of BBC Urdu's success in Pakistan**

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Dear James Tracy,

I would like to submit an article for publication in the Democratic Communiqué. The article is entitled: *Is the BBC Urdu Service playing the role of Pakistan's national broadcaster? An enquiry into the causes of BBC World Service's popularity in Pakistan.* The article has 5600 words including abstract and bibliography.

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## **Is the BBC Urdu Service functioning as Pakistan's national broadcaster?**

### **Abstract**

Excessive control of state-owned radio broadcasting by various governments in Pakistan has diminished its credibility among the people of the country. The state broadcaster, Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation lacks the credibility to efficiently convey information and ideas to the home and overseas audiences. Pakistani governments often rely on a foreign radio station, the Urdu language programming of the BBC World Service, to transmit their messages to Pakistanis. The practice on the one hand erodes the authority and credibility of the national radio broadcaster and on the other, increases the influence of BBC World Service in the national life of Pakistan. The BBC Urdu Service thus seems to function as the national radio broadcaster of Pakistan. The interests of the country as indeed the nation-building project itself may be partly under the influence of a radio station whose basic operating policies are determined by the government of Great Britain. This paper explores BBC Urdu Service's role in the national life of Pakistan. Additionally, the paper studies the state's media policies and its interaction with BBC Urdu.

### **Introduction**

Freedom of expression is antithetical to authoritarian rule. Pakistani governments – civilian or military – often display their bias against developing institutions helpful in establishing democracy. The institution of mass media is critically important for sustaining

democracy. The Pakistani civilian and military governments routinely undermine the country's media. Various regulations and laws hinder the work of the country's independent print and electronic media while the state-owned radio and television (Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation and Pakistan Television Corporation, respectively) remain under strict government control. News is a particularly important output of the mass media. The collection and dissemination of information about the various features of society including the governments and the people (or the rulers and the ruled) on the one hand can show the workings of the government and on the other hand, provide a channel for the expression of the will of the people. The conveying of societal information through news thus help establish and sustain basic democratic values and institutions. The situation threatens autocratic rulers who take an oppositional stance towards news and the mass media producing it. Ultimately, authoritarian governments seem opposed to broadening the base of information, making it more diverse and discursive. Since the mass media are the basic vehicle for the diversification of information, and eventually the empowerment of the people, the authoritarian rulers apparently consider them an oppositional force needing to be checked. Thus both information and the conduits of information, i.e., the mass media are the target of suppressive government actions. Siebert (1956) posits (as cited in Al-Obaidi, 2007) that in an authoritarian state legitimizes the direct involvement of governments in the operation and control of mass media. Regardless of whether parts of the media are independent or under the control of the state, governmental suppression targets both. In the case of the former, their freedom of expression is curbed while in the case of the latter, their freedom is annulled. The national broadcaster, Radio Pakistan is one such media organization whose freedom is annulled and whose status is increasingly downgraded. A national broadcaster performs the crucial function of propagating common values and discourses in society. News programming is perhaps

the most important mechanism used to perform that function. A national broadcaster suffering from diminished status and lacking credibility arguably cannot fully perform that vital duty. The vacuum of an authoritative national voice informing citizen about their society and important issues is increasingly filled by the national broadcaster of another country. The Urdu language programming of Great Britain's British Broadcasting Corporation (henceforth the BBC Urdu Service) seemingly has more listenership and credibility than Radio Pakistan among a large proportion of the Pakistani public. Is the BBC Urdu Service functioning as Pakistan's national broadcaster?

### **Radio Listening in Pakistan**

The electronic media, particularly radio, is often the only source of news and information for the majority of the country's population of over 165 million. With a 54% literacy rate, almost a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line (World Bank, 2009). Pakistan's former Information Minister Javed Jabbar, noting the low literacy rate and high poverty rate, stresses that "radio deserves the highest priority" (Jabbar, 2003).

Radio and its news programming play a very important role in their everyday life. With a per capita annual income of about \$840, radio is often the only information device the average Pakistani can afford. In remote areas, it is generally the only way to access the outside world. People in rural areas, often lacking electricity and the infrastructure necessary for receiving the channels – besides having lower incomes – are generally not exposed to the relatively free coverage of the Pakistani society by Pakistan-based private television channels. The television channels reach mainly the urban audience having the financial means to subscribe to them.

There is no reliable data on the current radio audience in Pakistan nor the number of radio receivers in the country. The Government of Pakistan's Board of Investment (BOI), puts radio listenership at 23 million (Board of Investment, 2003) without satisfactorily explaining how it arrived at the figure. In 1997 the country reportedly had 13.5 million radio sets (UNdata, 1997).

### ***BBC Urdu Service***

The low credibility of Radio Pakistan's news programming and the non-existence of an alternate independent national radio apparently induce a large number of Pakistanis to listen to foreign radio services to fulfill their information needs. The most popular of such foreign radios is arguably the British Broadcasting Corporation's World Service broadcasting in the Urdu language commonly known as the BBC Urdu Service.

The BBC Urdu Service is part of the BBC World Service which offers 42 other language services. The World Service claims a weekly world-wide listenership of over 183 million, about 82% of whom are in the so called developing countries of Africa, the Middle East and the Asia and Pacific regions. (BBC World Service Annual Review 2006/2007). Over half of BBC World Service programming comprises news and current affairs.

Although the BBC World Service is part of the British Broadcasting Corporation, it is funded separately by a grant-in-aid by the Parliament. According to the *BBC World Service Annual Review 2005/2006*, the amount of the grant-in-aid in 2005-2006 was 239 million pounds, increasing to 245 million pounds for the year 2006-2007 (BBC World Service 2006). The agreement between the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the BBC World Service posted on the broadcaster's website states that the FCO the grant-in-aid "to provide services defined in the agreement". The agreement makes the Foreign Secretary responsible for "agreeing with the

BBC World Service its objectives and medium term priority target audiences...” (Foreign and Commonwealth Office/BBC World Service Broadcasting Agreement, 2005).

In operation since 1949, the main fare of the Urdu Service’s thrice-daily broadcasts totalling two hours is news and current affairs programming about political and social issues in Pakistan and world events. The programming also covers sports and entertainment, again keeping in with the particular interests of the country’s audience. BBC Urdu uses news reports filed by its correspondents in Pakistan and other countries.

Most of BBC Urdu Service’s staff is made up of former journalists from Pakistani and Indian print media. Due to their lack of experience in radio broadcasting, the quality of their production is appears lower than that of the English language BBC World Service programming.

It is BBC Urdu Service’s news programming which primarily draws-in the information-hungry Pakistani audiences. The Service reveals in its Annual Review 2005/2006 that its reach in Pakistan was 9% of the population segment over 15 years of age. The figure translates to roughly 8.5 million listeners.<sup>1</sup> The Urdu Service’s audience base may be boosted by its plans to “shortly” deliver brief news bulletins on mobile phones in Pakistan (Parliament of the United Kingdom, 2007). BBC Chief Executive Mark Byford claimed in June 2000 that the BBC Urdu Service had “at least” 16 million listeners in Pakistan. (Dawn, 2000)

### ***Radio Pakistan***

Radio Pakistan was founded in 1947 at the time of the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan. Operating as a department of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, it started its external service in 1949 broadcasting programming on 100 kilowatt short-wave transmitters. In 1972, the national broadcaster was reorganized as a statutory corporation under

the federal government and renamed the Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation (PBC) but it continues to use its old call sign of Radio Pakistan.

Radio Pakistan has 25 broadcasting stations equipped with some 40 transmitters having 250 kilowatts to 1000 kilowatts power and broadcasting 300 hours of programming daily. The programming can also be heard on the Internet. Radio Pakistan claims to reach 80% of the area and 95% of the country's population or 95.5 million listeners (Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation, 2009). It is financed through a government grant which covers 80% of its expenses. The rest of financial requirement is met through advertising and radio licence revenues.

Radio Pakistan operates under the *Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation Act, 1973* amended through a Presidential Ordinance in 2002. Radio Pakistan's mandate includes (among others): "To present news of events in as factual, accurate and impartial manner as possible and to carry out instructions of Federal Government with regards to general pattern of policies in respect of programmes." It is interesting to note that the radio's assigned task for impartial reporting is mentioned in the same sentence with its responsibility to follow government instructions. (Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation, 2007).

The Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation is governed by an eleven-member board of directors including seven ex-officio members belonging to various government ministries with the Secretary of the Government of Pakistan Ministry of Information and Media Development as Chairman.

Radio Pakistan broadcasts 149 daily news bulletins in 31 languages for a duration of 900 minutes (Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation, 2009). Its news gathering is done by its network of correspondents in the country. It also uses domestic and international news agencies and foreign radios which it monitors round the clock. However, much of its news seems to be based on

government news releases supplied to it by the state-owned news agency, Associated Pakistan of Pakistan (APP). Besides government activities, the national news bulletins cover very little general domestic happenings in the country. Among the issues almost never covered by the radio are crime, conflict among ethnic, tribal, religious groups, labour unions and labour issues, etc. The radio news bulletins also avoid general political activities as well as opposition politicians although criticism of those politicians by government officials is broadcast. It is not unusual to hear the government reaction to an opposition politician's statement without hearing the details of the statement itself.

For instance, on May 13, 2007 the top story in the BBC Urdu news bulletins and the Pakistani newspapers was the violent clashes between supporters and opponents of the government which left six dead and nine injured. The Radio Pakistan news bulletins did not carry any coverage of the violence. The violence on that day was a continuation of the violence of the previous day in which 34 persons were killed in various parts of the city. Pakistani journalists often complain about the routine lack of coverage by Radio Pakistan (and Pakistan Television Corporation) of issues important to Pakistanis. When a particularly significant incident of violence in Pakistan's largest city Karachi killed ten persons resulting in the imposition of curfew, Radio Pakistan, "as usual, provided re-assuring statements – no news," writes veteran Pakistani journalist Zamir Niazi. (Niazi, 1986, p. 218). Niazi argues that the excessive government control of Radio Pakistan has resulted in people turning to foreign media "particularly the BBC" to receive news of important events rather than rely on the home-based media (1986, p. 185).

Ardeshir Cowasjee, a newspaper column writer recalls telling an information secretary of Pakistan's information ministry: "no one, just no one believes one word uttered by PTV [Pakistan Television Corporation] or Radio Pakistan." (Cowasjee, 1999, Internet).

In short, Radio Pakistan's news bulletins mainly inform listeners about what is happening in government circles but not what is happening in the country. As for foreign news, including developments in neighbouring countries such as Afghanistan, India, Iran, etc., the radio relies on Western news agencies, AP, AFP and Reuters and foreign radio news.

### **Government Media Policies and Practices**

In August 2000, ten months after seizing power in a coup in Pakistan, General Pervaiz Musharraf was the guest in the radio show *Talking Point* of the BBC World Service. During the programme, he verbally answered questions in English put to him in phone calls or through e-mails. Most of the questioners were Pakistanis living in the country or abroad. The event was noteworthy on two counts: Firstly, because it was the first time the military ruler had answered live questions from the general public, albeit the English-speaking general public. Secondly, he chose to interact with the people through a foreign radio service, ignoring the state controlled Radio Pakistan.

Three years later, on December 2003 General Pervaiz Musharraf participated in yet another *Talking Point* show, this time hosted by BBC Urdu Service. This time he answered listeners' telephonic questions in Urdu. From his office in Rawalpindi, he took calls from mainly Pakistanis who asked questions about matters that concern them: Pakistan's internal political situation, its policy towards India and Kashmir, US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, Pakistan fight against terrorism, etc.

It was the first time any Pakistani head of state or a high government official had participated in a phone-in show on the electronic media in the national language. Ignoring Radio Pakistan the President chose to speak to his people through the BBC Urdu service whose target audience are the Urdu speaking Pakistanis. As Musharraf took the phone calls in Rawalpindi, BBC relayed his conversations to London from where they were relayed back to Pakistan via the BBC transmitter in the Persian Gulf. He could have found a less convoluted way to talk to Pakistanis mostly situated in the same country as he was. And he wasn't even getting the ear of the 'important' Western audience for he was neither the guest of the BBC English service nor was he speaking in English. Granted there are Urdu speaking callers living in other countries but they could have also talked to Musharraf if the show was hosted by Radio Pakistan. The show was a coup for the BBC Urdu service. Weeks before the show, the Urdu service publicized the event in its Urdu and Hindi services as well as announcing it on their website.

The BBC Urdu Service once again demonstrated its superiority over the entire Pakistani media who were reduced to merely covering the President's call-in session. The state-run news agency *Associated Press of Pakistan (APP)* next day ran stories picked up dutifully by Radio Pakistan and broadcast all over the country. Newspaper covered the event. The top two English language newspapers, *Dawn* and *The News* published on the front page Musharraf's disclosure that Pakistan was willing to withdraw troops from Kashmir, the border with India. (Dawn, 2003; News, 2003) A host of other English and Urdu newspapers either ran an APP copy or monitored BBC Urdu.

The Pakistani media, not having this kind of an opportunity with their own president were arguably shown to be 'inferior' as far as access is concerned. It was definitely not a situation helpful for the Pakistani media's self-image nor its image in the minds of the public. And neither

was it helpful in strengthening confidence in the local institutions of democracy. If the president of the country gives less importance to the local media, the chances for democracy itself would not be too bright.

BBC Urdu Service's had managed to surge ahead in the Pakistani public's estimation as being a media organization with access to the highest authorities in Pakistan. At the same time, arguably, they could not have helped reflect on the relative lack of access of the Pakistani media to their top leadership.

Musharraf could have helped the credibility and prestige of Radio Pakistan and indeed the prestige of Pakistani journalism by using an indigenous media organisation for his phone show. He could have shown some respect to the country's media. Instead he chose to privilege BBC Urdu while seemingly ignoring the Pakistani media; as though it was not worthy of his attention.

A few months earlier, in May 2003, the then Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali gave an exclusive interview to BBC Urdu announcing Pakistan's willingness to hold talks at any level with India and to foster "people to people contacts". His conciliatory offer was important in the tense political state of affairs existing at the time between the two rivals. It is important to note that Jamali chose to make this important offer first on BBC Urdu rather than conveying it through the Pakistani media.

Recently, on December 29, a senior Pakistani official made the important admission for the first time that the surviving terrorist involved in the Mumbai terrorist attacks in November 2008 "could be" a Pakistani citizen. The comment was made to the Indian television channel CNN-IBN on December 29 last year by Pakistan's national security advisor Mahmood Ali Durrani. Durrani did not give the information directly to the Pakistan state or the private media.

Pakistan until then had been strongly rejecting Indian claims that the terrorist was of Pakistani origin. Later on 7 January 2009, Durrani broke the news to CNN-IBN, that Pakistani investigators have found that the terrorist was indeed a Pakistani national. The Pakistani media, official or private was not informed about the development. The same day, Pakistan Information Minister Sherry Rehman confirmed the finding to BBC World Service. The Pakistani Prime Minister immediately dismissed Durrani over the revelation. Radio Pakistan did not report Durrani's admission nor his firing by the prime minister.

There are several other instances where Pakistani rulers have chosen to communicate their messages through foreign media rather than the national media. A pertinent question arises: Why do Pakistan's civil and military governments routinely undermine the credibility and importance of the state controlled media while enhancing the stature of the BBC and other foreign media? Why do the rulers not strengthen the state media which can then become more efficient at influencing the people at home and abroad? What advantage do the rulers see in keeping the state media down?

The main reason for the counter-intuitive practice of Pakistani rulers seems to be their opposition to the idea of sharing power. Power is held mainly by three groups in Pakistan: The military, the bureaucracy and the elite belonging to rural and urban areas. Since political parties are headed by the elite, the formation of 'civilian' governments does not threaten the basic power sharing partnership among the groups. The democratization of the society threatens the perpetual dominance of the three groups. Institutions that lead to democratization therefore need to be kept in check to maintain the status quo. The mass media serve as a vehicle for expressing the aspirations of the common citizen – the rightful wielder of political power and – as well as a device for mobilizing them. It is not surprising that the power groups are engaged in

undermining the mass media. In undermining the mass media, the power groups seem to have a deeper objective: To suppress the generation and availability of information itself. The practices and institutions that create information and normalize its usage are antithetical to autocratic rule. Thus information whether it is produced in a controlled or free state is harmful to such rule as it sustains the institution of the mass media. The objective to hinder the creation and dissemination of information is achieved through three means: Firstly by controlling the content that the media carry, i.e., restraining information that negatively affects them and propagating information favourable to them. Secondly, they by restricting the spread of media coverage, i.e., restricting the publicising of certain issues in an attempt to deny legitimacy to special interests as well as alienating certain segments of the populace. The strategy can hinder mobilization moves. It also prevents the mass media from establishing deeper and wider connections with all societal groups. Thirdly, by controlling the volume of information to 'starve' the mass media, information being the diet they live on.

The subject of the strategy are both the private and the state controlled media. The rationale for suppressing the latter is not merely to control their information flow and content – it already is controlled. The purpose is to prevent them from becoming efficient, viable and capable of acquiring power. Because they are close to power and operate on public funds, their gaining credibility in the eyes of the common people can infuse them with political power. That eventuality is pre-empted by the autocratic rulers by not letting them become effective observers and commentators of society by minimising the information they handle. As a consequence, while the rulers want to periodically communicate with the Pakistani people, they do not want to strengthen the national information media.

A credible national media, expressing national concerns can be a destabilizing force for the autocratic rulers. The danger posed by a strong national media has been much in evidence in the last few months of former President Musharraf's rule. The national private news media, particularly some private television channels were arguably a potent force behind the agitation over the dismissal of the Pakistani Chief Justice. The Pakistani government officials called the agitation media generated. The agitation and the media reportage increased Musharraf's unpopularity and possibly contributed to his downfall in August 2008. The national media being a national institution and representing the opinion of the people can adopt an activist role and challenge government authority and stability.

The BBC is a relatively safe institution for rulers. It can put rulers under pressure but its coverage of national issues is selective lacking criticism that can disturb the fundamental power structure of the society. While the BBC covers civil disturbances in Pakistan, it does not go into the fundamental causes destabilizing society. It neither has the inclination nor the time. Its two-hour daily transmission in a magazine format leaves little room for extended social and political comment. Talking to the people through BBC has the advantage of restricting the message within a two-hour limit. On the other hand, messages on Radio Pakistan can be repeated around the clock. Radio Pakistan broadcasts news broadcasts 149 news bulletins in 31 languages for a total duration of 900 minutes every day. Its broadcasts reach even remote areas of Pakistan.

Besides suffering the indignity of successive Pakistani government ignoring them in favour of the BBC World Service-Urdu, the Pakistani media are further disadvantaged by repressive media laws hindering their work. For instance on 26 October 2002, the President issued five ordinances related to the media: *Press, Newspapers, News Agencies and Books Registration Ordinance, 2002*; *Press Council of Pakistan Ordinance 2002*; *Freedom of*

*Information Ordinance; Defamation Ordinance 2002 and; Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation (Amendment) Ordinance, 2002.*

Earlier in September, he had issued the *Contempt of Court Ordinance – 2002*. The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (Pemra) was launched under the ‘Pemra Ordinance’ promulgated in March 2002. These laws were enacted on top of the restrictions already placed on the media under the country’s constitution of 1973 which makes it a crime to publish anything bringing hatred upon the military. That means that nothing about the military can be published even when the matter is of corruption or similar misdemeanour.

Additionally, General Musharraf’s government made several attempts to pressure private television channels to stop covering certain issues. Pakistani journalists are prevented from covering the tribal insurgency in certain areas bordering Afghanistan. ( Intermedia, 2007)

The suppression of the independent media and the stifling of the state owned radio and television has arguably hindered their proper growth. For columnist Irfan Husain the censored news and discussions on state media is it has taught the people “not to believe anything radio or television tells them.” (Husain, 2004). Journalist Omar R. Quraishi argues against the continued broadcasting of Pakistan Television Corporation’s prime time news show (*Khabarnama*) due to its routine poor coverage of important developments. Quraishi refers to the story of the disappearance of Wall Street journalist Daniel Pearl and complains: “All the action is happening in Pakistan... but how many Pakistanis turn to *Khabarnama* news show if they want the latest update...?” (Quraishi 2002)

*Dawn* writer Hafizur Rahman, makes a case for *Free radio & television!* and wonders if Radio Pakistan and the Pakistan Television Corporation, can “ever be completely free?” (Rahman, 2003.) That’s a pertinent question. In the past few years the government of Pakistan

has allowed the establishment of several private radio stations and TV channels. While the TV channels have some freedom to cover social and political issues, none of the private radio stations are permitted news programming. The reason perhaps is radio's geographic reach and financial accessibility by the common man. Political and social ideas carried by the radio can empower the masses. Empowerment fosters freedom and freedom – whether of the media or of the people – undermines authoritarian rule.

It seems as long as authoritarian rulers remain in Pakistan, radio's freedom will be suppressed. The rulers want to heighten its importance in the national life for two reasons: Firstly, because it belongs to the country with which the past Musharraf government and the present governments are in alliance and partially gain legitimacy for their rule. Secondly, the privileging of BBC Urdu automatically serves to give it more prestige while showing the indigenous media in a bad light to the people. In this way, the growth and power of the indigenous media is checked so that it does not become too much of a bother for the authoritarian rulers.

### **BBC's Presence in the National Imagination**

A national broadcaster not only exists in the national imagination, it helps create that imagination and its discourse. Programs presented by national radio and television become part of the national conversation and life. They become, in the words of communication scholar Andrew Skuse “part of the social fabric of society...” Skuse, who studied the place of BBC World Service radio (Pushtu and Darri language service) in Afghanistan likens the radio's role to that of national broadcaster for the country because the BBC World Service was dominant due to its large audience. (Skuse, 2002). The Service's dominant position according to Skuse is due to

the failure of Afghanistan's own radio to establish itself as a reliable source of information, preventing it from developing a relationship of trust with its audience. The BBC World Service was perceived by the Afghans to be more credible than their own national broadcaster and was therefore able to gain the trust of the Afghan audience. Because the Afghan radio could not be trusted, it could not influence the imagination of the majority of the people of Afghanistan. That place was taken by a radio that the audience trusted. For the audience, the 'national' broadcaster is one who can be trusted; not one who carries the nomenclature of the national broadcaster. What place does the BBC Urdu Service occupy in the national imagination of Pakistan? To what extent does it play the role of the national broadcaster?

In the absence of an audience survey, the position of the *BBC Urdu Service* in the Pakistani society could arguably be estimated in two ways: Firstly, from its discussion and reflection in the national media, primarily the private newspapers. Secondly, from the listeners' relationship with the broadcaster. That relationship is discernable in the listeners' letters to the *BBC Urdu Service*. The letters are broadcast by the radio.

### **Comparative Coverage of BBC and Radio Pakistan in daily Dawn**

The daily *Dawn* is perhaps the most authoritative of all English newspapers of Pakistan. Its on-line edition (available at <http://www.dawn.com>) has an archival search facility going back to five years, or from October 2001 to the present, i.e., May 14 2007. A simple search for the term *BBC Urdu Service*, *BBC World Service* and, *BBC Radio* gives 60, 129 and 488 results respectively. The search for *Radio Pakistan* and *Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation* returned 99 and 166 hits respectively.

The frequency of the mention of BBC by Dawn and other influential print and electronic media points to a disproportionate notice of the broadcaster while the state owned *Radio Pakistan* is not considered deserving of that attention.

### ***Listeners Letters to BBC Urdu***

BBC Urdu receives annually about 22,000 letters in Urdu. The volume of the letters is significant for they are not written in response to some competition as is the case with many international radio broadcasters' listener letters. For instance, in an e-mail message to the author on November 5, 2003, *Deutsche Welle* revealed that it receives about 70,000-80,000 letters but "many of these are just competition and quiz entries" and so do not reflect a spontaneous and varied response.

It is not known if the letters broadcast by BBC are representative of the total letters it receives. BBC letters are received in Islamabad and Delhi where they are selected for onward transfer to London where the final selection is made. (BBC World Service, 2003). Between September 2003 to April 2004, 76 such letters broadcast on BBC Urdu Service were monitored. (The letter reading segment of programming is usually of 2-3 minutes duration.) The content of these letters, in Urdu, is analysed and categorised according to the following nine topics: India, local development issues, local politics, local sports, neighbouring countries, the Muslim World, international politics, entertainment and BBC.

Of the 76 letter writers, four were women. Five letters were from India and three from Canada. The volume of letters falling under each of the nine topics is given in percentage form.

1. BBC 46% : The highest number of letters (35) were about the BBC programming or organisation. Most letters were requests to increase program duration, to repeat certain

popular series, to requests for BBC to start certain kinds of programs, etc. A listener reminded that a famous *Baluchi* singer had died but the BBC did not report his death.

2. Local Development issues 11.8% : Nine letters drew the attention of BBC towards issues affecting their local/regional community. One letter requested the broadcaster to do a program on the underdevelopment of the province of Balochistan. Another wanted it to prepare a special program on his tribe. A third letter writer complained that his village was burnt in a huge fire but the BBC did not cover the incident. A fourth letter reported sexual victimisation of school children in his area.

3. International politics 10.5%: Eight letters talked about world political issues such as ‘US imperialism’, World War II, Peace, British weapons expert Dr. Kelly’s suicide, etc.

4. Entertainment 6.6%: Letters about entertainment referred to the state of Pakistani cinema, music shows, etc.

5. Local sports 5%: Comments on cricket matches, etc.

6. Muslim World 2.6%: Two letters were broadcast regarding the Muslim World. One letter referred to the suicide bombers and the other US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq.

7. Local politics 2.6%: A listener mentioned problems in joining the army for people living in the Sindh province. Another listener brought up a local council issue.

8. Neighbouring countries 1.3%:\_A single listener wrote about the Kashmir dispute between India and Pakistan.

It not known how representative the broadcast letters are of the total letters received by BBC Urdu, but it is significant that by far the biggest volume of letters is about BBC itself. The engagement of the people with the broadcaster is remarkable in that there is nothing in it for them materially. They just appear to feel very connected with the organization and how it works.

If BBC is deliberately broadcasting more letters about itself, it could indicate its desire to be seen as an organisation close to the Urdu Service listeners, appealing to the imagination of the listeners.

The connection of the listeners to the BBC and their understanding and expectation of the role of the broadcaster is indicated by the letters about local development issues. It seems that listeners imagine that by bringing up local developmental issues such as health and general underdevelopment to the attention of the BBC, the problem could be addressed in some way. It appears that people expect that the BBC enjoys some influence with the state authorities. This is similar to what people might expect of a national broadcaster; that it should be able to bring some pressure on local authorities to solve a local problem. Despite the relatively small size of the sample, it can be discerned that BBC Urdu arguably has a special place in the national imagination of Pakistan.

### **BBC Urdu in the Context of Globalization and Cultural Imperialism**

The 1997 *'World Communication Report'* of the United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) noticed an imbalance in communication flows between the industrialized western countries (the global North) the developing countries of the global South: More communication was flowing from the former to the latter and the report thought the gap in reciprocal communication seemed to be widening.

The imbalance in communication flows is exacerbated due the underdevelopment of mass media institutions in many developing countries. The relative lack of media freedom partly acts as a barrier to media development. The people of many developing countries, not having reliable mass media information sources of their own, try to satisfy their need to receive

information and express opinion by turning to mass media institutions of other countries. The most popular of such media institutions are the international radio services of the developed countries such as Britain, France, Germany, USA, etc. These radio services fulfill (to some extent) the information needs of the people in information deficient countries. This communication relationship between the international broadcasters and their audience in the developing countries is part of arguably the most pervasive form of media globalization considered by many media scholars as an illustration of the process of cultural imperialism. There is wide consensus among a number of scholars that international broadcasting carries out propaganda and agenda setting among audience in foreign countries (Brown & Parrish, 1990; Browne, 1992; Hale, 1975; Hendy, 2000; Mowlana, 1995; Price 2003; Outhwaite & Bottomore, 1993; Schiller, 1976; Wood, 2000; Wu, 2003). Schiller defines cultural imperialism as the processes pulling traditional societies into the modern world system and then pressuring the influential segments of those societies to shape their policies to align or to support, “the values and structures of the dominant centre of the system.” (Schiller, 1976, p. 9)

Nations are imagined communities, says Anderson (1991) and a process seriously threatening that image is a matter of grave concern. When the tools of image making are made less effective, nations feel without sufficient power to maintain their self-image. It is this erosion of power and control over actions and decisions that is resented by nations. What is opposed then is disempowerment and the incapacity to execute political and social will.

International radio broadcasting from Western countries can have a similar effect on the ability of indigenous radio broadcasting and other media institutions to form a self-image This is particularly harmful for the developing and formerly colonized countries for whom the idea of nationhood is instrumental in developing a cohesive society that can work towards independent common national goals. Communication scholar Mowlana (1995) is of the view that by

monopolizing the global information system, Western powers harm the development plans and cultures of nations that hold less power in the global information system. In the field of media, international radio can render national media markets and projects in subservient positions or reduce their capacity to serve national interests. Babe (2000) quotes an article written by high-ranking officials of the US military-industrial establishment in the magazine *Foreign Affairs* to the effect that the soft power of information and communication was more effective than military armaments over a long period. (84-85).

As noted earlier, more than half of international radio programming is taken up by news and current affairs. Wu (2003) quotes Hopkins and Wallerstein as proposing that news programming is important because it reflects, and is itself part of, the global systems constructed by politics, economy and cultures.

It is not known precisely how international broadcasting affects the listener's mind but Wu maintains that studies point to "discrete but solid" effects of news on audiences for whom such news is often the main or even the only source of information. The author refers to several studies revealing that foreign media news engage in "significant agenda-setting." He concludes that international news' power was greater than generally perceived. A 1990 study of BBC World Service's Portuguese listeners thought the programming positively predisposed listeners toward Great Britain. (Brown, Michael & Parrish, 1991)

The controlling function of international broadcasting does not merely have ideological and political implications for the listener societies. Capitalism needs "autocratic powers in the peripheries" or the so called Third World countries. Samir Amin contends that autocracy in the peripheries is not a remnant of the past but a "consequence of modernization operating in the frame of global polarization of wealth and power. (Amin, 1997, p. 22).

It is difficult to determine the overall benefit of international radio broadcasting to the Western countries. But it would be naive to imagine altruism as the driving force in spending substantial sums of money on providing information to the people of developing countries.

The BBC World Service fiercely competes with other international broadcasters for international media markets. It has the will and the skill to dominate other nations' outperform indigenous media organisations, and is often apparently 'helped' in the process by authoritarian rulers in the developing countries. The result is that it seems to be operating as a national broadcaster in some countries including Pakistan.

### **Footnotes**

1. The proportion of Pakistan's population between the ages of 15 and 64+ was 57% of the total population of in 1998 (Population Census Organization n.d.). If that proportion is maintained in the latest population figure of over 165 million persons in 2009 (according to Pakistan's Population Census Organization), the number of persons in that age group come to about 94 million. BBC Urdu Service's 9% listeners would translate to a weekly audience number of roughly 8.5 million. However, Mark Byford, BBC's Chief Executive told Pakistan's Dawn newspaper in June 2000 that the BBC audience in Pakistan was over 16 million listeners.(PBC to Replay BBC Programmes (2000, June 6). Dawn the Internet Edition. Retrieved 24 September 2004 from <http://www.dawn.com/2000/06/24/nat12.htm>)

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