

Commercial TV Brings Cultural Change to Afghanistan

By Michael Curtin

13-17 minutes

Since 2004, television has spread quickly in Afghanistan, so that today more than 75 television stations are transmitting from major cities, such as Kabul, Herat, Kandahar, and Mazar-e-Sharif. Satellite services are also becoming popular in rural areas that cannot be reached by terrestrial signals. Besides commercial and government channels, some services are run by religious and ethnic groups, some are supported by Iranian and Pakistani interests, and some are funded by [warlords](#) that use the airwaves to promote their political interests and extol their military exploits. Yet most popular of all are the commercial channels that generate a surprising amount of local programming that has fostered Afghan pride as well as ongoing debate about a range of social issues. In a country that is renowned for political corruption and foreign interference, commercial television is the most vibrant public face of modern Afghanistan.

Here are five reasons why Afghanistan is a place to watch:

1. Local Broadcasting is one of Afghanistan's biggest success

stories.

2. Daily viewing has become the norm in most Afghan households.
3. Commercial TV is innovative and popular.
4. Commercial TV has stimulated debates about governance, human rights, and gender equity.
5. Local Broadcasting is succeeding despite global geopolitical pressures.

1. Local Broadcasting is one of Afghanistan's biggest success stories.

Radio began during the 1920s and television arrived in the 1970s, but only a small percentage of the population had access to either medium. After the Soviet invasion in 1979, the occupying regime employed broadcasting for propaganda purposes, making transistor radios and cheap batteries widely available. As a result, radio ownership spread quickly, but despite Soviet efforts, the [Dari](#) and [Pashto](#) services of the BBC became the most trusted and popular sources of radio news and entertainment during the occupation era. Following the Soviet withdrawal, the Taliban took charge in 1996 and again broadcasting became a tool of the ruling regime. Radio content was closely monitored, and television and music were strictly forbidden. Accordingly, radio services from sources outside the country continued to be more popular than those from within.^[i]

The fall of the Taliban in 2001 then ushered in an era of liberalization that dramatically expanded the number of services.

The new government revitalized [Radio Afghanistan](#) as a national public service broadcaster and dozens of [community stations](#) took to the airwaves as well. Both government and community radio were seeded by [overseas donors](#) seeking to support services that would deliver timely information about development, governance, and security issues. Commercial radio also entered the scene in 2002 and quickly achieved a leadership position among urban listeners by providing a mix of news, talk, and popular music. The most successful commercial operator, run by the [Moby Group](#), then launched a television service in 2004, which was soon followed by a raft of competitors. Today, advertising sales inject roughly \$50 million per year into the TV economy. With the [Moby Group](#) earning almost half that total, many stations must rely on government and NGO support, while others depend on patronage from religious or political factions.

2. Daily viewing has become the norm in most Afghan households.

Over half of Afghanistan's [30 million](#) people watch television on a regular basis. Television is extraordinarily popular in cities where electricity is widely available, but only 23% of the population is urban. Most Afghans live in the countryside where more than 80% of homes lack [access](#) to an electrical grid and therefore must rely on generators and batteries to power their radio and TV receivers. The audience is also ethnically diverse with 42% of the population identifying as Pashtun, 27% as Tajik, 9% as Hazara, and 9% as Uzbek. Although Pashtuns are the largest group, the Dari language (a version of Persian) is most

widely spoken in public life because it is the first language of Tajiks, a group that has historically played a leading role in commerce, industry, and government. Accordingly, Dari is the lingua franca of television, but some stations offer a mix of programming that includes Pashto and Uzbek, while others specialize in one of the three. Television has overcome cultural and linguistic differences in part because it offers attractive audio-visual content to a country with a literacy rate of 28%. Television is therefore far more accessible than newspapers, magazines, or the Internet. Radio is similarly accessible, but in areas where both media are available, television increasingly enjoys a decided edge, especially during family viewing hours in the evening. [Audience research](#) suggests that although Afghan viewers are quick to acknowledge the importance of news, public affairs, and religious programming, entertainment shows draw the biggest and most diverse audiences.

3. Commercial TV is innovative and popular.

The most popular television service in Afghanistan is [Tolo TV](#) (“Sunrise”), which is based in Kabul and owned by the Moby Group, headed by [Saad Mohseni](#) and his three siblings. Although locally owned and operated, it has at times tapped support from USAID, News Corporation, and former MTV chief, Tom Freston. Tolo attracts over 40% of the audience throughout the day. It self-consciously targets urban viewers—who are considered most attractive to advertisers—and skews its programming towards younger audiences (ages 12 to 25), who comprise an estimated 70% of the country’s total population. Tolo and its Pashtun-language sister service, [Lemar TV](#),

generate more than \$23 million per year in advertising. The biggest advertisers are banks and cell phone companies, followed by consumer goods distributors. Advertising revenue helps insulate Tolo from powerful patrons and government officials, but in turn it requires programmers to focus relentlessly on audience tastes and preferences. Some accuse the Moby Group of pandering to audiences with foreign programs, formats, and values. Initially, Tolo attracted large audiences by telecasting imported dramas. Especially popular were Indian soap operas, which showcased modern lifestyles in the context of multigenerational family sagas (e.g., [Because the Mother-in-Law Was once the Daughter-in-Law](#)). Although controversial, the shows were extraordinarily popular, which meant that competitors soon began importing (or pirating) foreign programs as well. In order to maintain its lead with audiences, Tolo began to distinguish itself by developing a robust production studio that currently produces over 15 hours of local content per day. Although it still imports dramas from India, Turkey, and other parts of Asia, Tolo now fills much of its [schedule](#) with local productions in all genres, from news and talk shows to family dramas and police procedurals. Many shows are adapted from television formats that circulate globally, but each has distinctive elements that make them more popular than most imported shows.

4. Commercial TV has stimulated debates about governance, human rights, and gender equity.

Tolo TV is the leading television news service in Afghanistan and its nightly [630 Report](#) is renowned for keeping an eye on

government performance, thereby inspiring debates about everything from corruption to censorship to social mores. Tolo is also renowned for [opening doors to female talent](#) in both news and entertainment. In 2005, Tolo premiered, [Afghan Star](#), a local adaptation of the Pop Idol singing competition, and it quickly rocketed to the top of the ratings, drawing two thirds of the evening television audience. Like its counterparts in China and the Mideast, the program became a pretext for viewers to support ethnic or regional favorites via text messaging. It also incited passionate debates about the appearance and comportment of female contestants. Young women literally risked their lives to claim a public voice on the airwaves and their performances continue to spur lively discussion about changing gender roles. Gender and generational topics also circled around [The Secrets of This House](#), a weekly family drama launched in 2007 and directed by Roya Sadaat, one of Afghanistan's first female filmmakers. The story focuses on an [intra-familial struggle](#) over a house in Kabul that was relinquished by the original owners when they fled the country during the turmoil of the Soviet occupation. After returning to Afghanistan, the owners try to reclaim the house from their cousins who sustained it in their absence. They of course resist and the struggles among the family elders are contrasted with a blooming love affair between children of the opposing sides. The story is an allegorical account of the connections and tensions between various groups and generations of Afghan society, both at home and abroad.

Many of Tolo's popular shows have an explicitly political edge.

For example, the station stepped into the breach when backroom deals and dirty politics undermined the 2009 Presidential election, giving Hamid Karzai and his cronies an insurmountable edge during the campaign. Consequently, Tolo mounted its own mock election by launching a reality show called [The Candidate](#) where contestants pursued SMS votes for their policy positions on important issues confronting Afghanistan. The program forbid campaign appeals based on personality, connections, or ethnic identity, pressing contestants to deliver what the political system had failed to produce: an issues-based debate about the future of the country. The show proved enormously successful. In a satiric vein, Tolo's sketch comedy show, [Danger Bell](#), also keeps a close eye on Afghan politics, regularly attracting accolades, criticism, and even threats from outraged officials and viewers. Most recently, Tolo launched [The Ministry](#) (an adaptation of BBC's The Office), a mockumentary that follows the misadventures of an overbearing minister of garbage and his incompetent staff in mythical Hechland ("Nothing Land"), where corruption and nepotism are pervasive elements of everyday governance.

Niqab, or The Mask

Other stations that have achieved substantial commercial success are [Ariana TV](#)—owned by the CEO of a major cell phone company—and [1TV](#), which launched in 2010 and quickly established some of its shows as top competitors, especially with young audiences. Most controversial is [Niqab](#), "The Mask," a talk show that features masked victims of spousal abuse recounting their experiences on camera to a studio audience. Like Tolo, 1TV has generated both audience enthusiasm and passionate criticism, including threats of violence. Interestingly, competition in the television marketplace seems to be

engendering relentless experimentation with the boundaries of acceptable discourse in Afghan society. As stations struggle to attract attention, they must invest in innovative and often controversial programming.

5. Local Broadcasting is succeeding despite global geopolitical pressures.

National and local broadcasting has expanded rapidly since the fall of the Taliban, but much of the growth has been shaped by forces from afar. Led by the U.S., various NATO allies and NGOs began funding Afghan radio stations in 2002. They saw radio as an important outlet for information about security issues and development projects. Television was jumpstarted in 2004 by a [USAID](#) grant to the Moby Group for transmission towers and equipment. Such initiatives are part of a longer history of media development projects supported by wealthy countries with strategic interests in the Global South.

During the 1950s, U.S. foreign policy makers first began to use mass media for development projects in poor countries, especially those considered vulnerable to popular unrest and Communist subversion. In 1958, Daniel Lerner, the author of *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East*, argued that media could help to [alter the perspectives](#) of populations that were steeped in local culture and tradition by providing them with information about new technologies and social opportunities. Media could also broaden perspectives, making audiences feel connected to others outside their village or clan, thereby helping them to assume new roles as national citizens and modern workers. Media were considered essential to the nation building process and therefore became

fundamental components of development initiatives throughout the 1960s and 70s, most of them designed by university researchers and development officials. Numerous criticisms arose in the 1970s, however, and a shift in political tides led to the demise of development assistance, as the Reagan administration began to promote structural adjustment and private enterprise rather than nation building and social uplift. Nevertheless development communication campaigns supporting health and agriculture projects continued to operate, often with the support of local governments, non-profits, and NGO partners, such as the [World Bank](#).

Moreover, the U.S. government continued to support another area that was pioneered by Lerner known as Psychological Operations (PSYOPs), now known as [Information Operations](#). A division of the Department of Defense, IO seeks to influence the flow of information in conflict zones, aiming to achieve military objectives, undermine enemy operations, and enhance security. It has been seen as a crucial component of the media landscape [in Afghanistan](#), with operations deployed via radio, television, print, online, and mobile media.

After the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, American policymakers turned their attention again to technologies of nation building. Using both development and IO approaches, the NATO allies pumped tens of millions of dollars into media campaigns targeting Iraq and Afghanistan. The media landscape in Afghanistan today is therefore a mix of services that reflect a range of influences and agendas, many of them tied to the geopolitical interests of foreign countries, NGOs, and

transnational corporations. Yet within this complex field of foreign interests local talent and entrepreneurs have carved out a media system that is surprisingly innovative, diverse, and controversial.