

## **Designs, devices & development: Audience research as creative resource in the making of an Afghan radio drama**

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### **Abstract**

This essay analyses the role of audience research as a change agent in media development interventions in Afghanistan. It analyses how audience research in transnational contexts involves a complex set of intercultural negotiations and translations that contribute to the enduring relevance and sustainability of the highly popular Afghan radio soap opera *New Home, New Life*. This is a 'development drama' that has been broadcast across Afghanistan since 1993. It is based on BBC Radio 4's *The Archers* and produced by BBC Afghan Education Projects (BBC AEP). Audience research has been vital to forging a dynamic relationship between the creative teams who make the drama, the donors who pay for it, and the audiences who consume it. The article addresses three broad themes. First, we outline how data gathered in formative audience research, prior to the creation of the drama, provides the creative team with the dramatic raw material for the radio serial. The extensive qualitative data gathered by Afghan researchers in local milieux is translated so as to enable culturally diverse teams of writers and producers to ground the serial narratives in the lived experiences of its audiences, and to introduce multiple local perspectives on development issues. Second, we show how evaluative audience research, data gathered in the post-production phase, plays a key role in providing critical audience interpretations of *New Home, New Life*'s dramatic themes. In so doing, it creates feedback loops that allow audiences to become active participants in the ongoing creation of the drama. The research designs and devices, developed over the last two decades to document the changing life-worlds of Afghan citizens-cum-audiences, are part of an ongoing set of transcultural encounters that contribute to strengthening the social realist appeal of the drama and to calibrating how far any given storyline can be pushed in terms of cultural propriety. Third, we examine how during periods of military conflict, when routine audience research becomes dangerous or impossible and audience feedback loops are disrupted, the writers and producers have to rely on their own

personal and political experiences, often with unpredictable ideological consequences. We draw attention to the limitations and challenges of making dramas for development in highly charged politicised and postcolonial contexts. While, development dramas may be a cheap and effective way of dealing with certain informational needs, such as landmine awareness, they cannot redress social and structural inequalities or, as Western donors wish, eradicate opium cultivation.

**Keywords:** Drama for development; BBC World Service Trust; formative and evaluative audience research; the performativity of audience research; cultural translation; intercultural communication.

### **Introduction**

Mass media are commonly perceived as one-way media with highly active producers and passive audiences (Crisell 1986; Hilmes 1997). Though commonplace, such a conception fails to recognise the significant efforts that media producers put into forming meaningful and ongoing relationships - through formative and evaluative research processes - with their audiences. It also fails to recognise the potential for audiences' voices and perspectives to become active agents of change that are integrated into radio broadcasting. The active and performative role of audience research as an intercultural communication process has long been recognised among practitioners of media and development, but these processes have not yet been adequately theorised in the field of Communication for Development (C4D). This field of enquiry has witnessed a shift over the past four decades in how we understand intercultural communication processes from 'top-down', didactic, modernist approaches to a more 'bottom-up', needs-based and participatory approach in the form of 'communication partnerships' at community level. Consequently, audience research and community engagement now lie at the heart of C4D practice (CFSC 2002; Gumucio Dagron 2001; Lerner 1958; Rogers 1962; UNAIDS 1999). Significant interest is evident within the practitioner and donor communities in developing 'evidence based' C4D interventions that respond to actual needs and local development issues. The aim of this approach is to work in partnership with communities to understand local media cultures and adapt media content in an iterative way through an ongoing process of formative research and evaluation of impacts and outcomes at regular intervals (Batchelor and Scott 2005; Inagaki 2007). From this perspective, audience researchers can be understood to occupy a critical interstitial space that exists between creative teams (writers and producers) and the local audiences and communities (cf. Long and Villareal 1994). Audience research in this context can be constructed as an incubator of social change (Skuse, Gillespie, Power 2011).

In examining the practices and performative nature of audience research, and the designs

and devices used to elicit insights into the life-worlds of audiences-cum-citizens, this paper focuses upon a hugely popular radio drama established at the height of the Afghan civil war in 1993. In its early days, according to in-house BBC data, 60-70% of the Afghan population would regularly tune in, often to village or community radio sets, to listen to the latest episode. Even the Taliban were among its most ardent fans and for that reason, according to BBC Pashto staff, radio was permitted while they banned television and cinema, (Gillespie, 2005). Even if the media environment of Afghanistan has changed significantly in subsequent years, *New Home New Life* remains among the most popular of radio soaps, especially among the poor with limited access to alternative media (Torfeh and Sreberny 2010).

The BBC Afghan Education Projects' (BBC AEP) production *New Home New Life* has been at the forefront of the humanitarian information response of the international development community in Afghanistan for over eighteen years. It is concerned with raising awareness of critical humanitarian problems, deepening the information environment relating to these problems and promoting positive social change relating to issues such as health, conflict mitigation, opium substitution, governance, livelihood security and sustainability. Faced with a daunting creative challenge, organisations such as the BBC AEP can be considered to be actively engaged in translating complex development concepts and issues, information and practices into intelligible local frames via the application of specific socio-cultural and political filters. These cultural filters include audience research data, and the discussions and negotiations that take place in the intercultural production partnership forged between the BBC AEP, its funders and associated advisers.

In illustrating aspects of audience research practices in transnational milieux this paper draws out just a few of the many dramatic themes that are interwoven in the multilayered serial narrative of *New Home, New Life*. The themes of opium cultivation, the related impacts of drug addiction, drug-related conflict and open conflict of the type associated with the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 represent ideal narrative strands through which we can examine the designs and devices of audience research with particular clarity and precision. In the face of chronic poverty, opium cultivation within Afghanistan provides a good economic return relative to investment for many farmers. However, cultivation of this crop butts up against donor sentiment, such as that promoted by the UK Department for International Development and USAID, who favour substitution of opium for other crops. Alternative income generating schemes are actively being developed to try and help farmers offset the potential losses associated with not growing the crop. In the face of poverty, disaffected youth, water scarcity and chronic uncertainty, the *New Home, New Life* drama must tread a careful line between recognising the realities of economic dependence on opium production in Afghanistan while addressing some of its more deleterious effects. Equally, examination of drug-related conflict and the 'hot conflicts' of the Afghan civil war (1989-2001), the US-led

invasion (2001) and post- invasion period allow for further insights to be drawn from the production process that highlight periods when audience research becomes dangerous. When this occurs, the personal experience of scriptwriters and producers comes to the fore in the absence of sustained audience research, therein constituting the primary creative resource for the drama. The themes of opium production and military/political conflict represent useful foils against which audience research, its scope, role, successes and constraints may be assessed as it stands in relation to other ideological and creative forces.

### **Closing the gap! Audience Research as a Creative Resource in the Making of 'Development Dramas'**

The article draws upon and interprets a wide range of qualitative data collected over the period 1996-2007 by BBC and academic researchers. The arguments draw on insights gleaned from several hundred in-depth interviews and more than 50 focus group sessions carried out and later translated from the original Dari and Pashto languages into English by BBC Afghan Education Project's (BBC AEP) Afghan audience research staff. Ethnographic field research was also conducted (by Skuse between 1996-1998) in Afghanistan and Pakistan (then the location of production), with a further field visit to Afghanistan in 2002. This fieldwork was complemented by more recent analysis (2007-10) of synopses (n=36), scripts (n=6), consultative notes (n=6), BBC AEP focus group material (n=8) and individual interviews (n=43) conducted in a number of provinces within Afghanistan such as Helmand and Ningarhar in 2006/7. Due to the sensitivity surrounding the conflict all informants' all informant names have been removed in this paper.

The article also draws upon a long-term research partnership (2007-2010) established between a number of academics (the authors included) interested in understanding the social implications of drama for development and research staff associated with the BBC World Service Trust (BBC WST) and the BBC AEP (the BBC AEP is incorporated into the BBC WST, but maintains a separate identity in terms of branding and project implementation). This partnership evolved in the context of a broader research project entitled which analyses the BBC World Service as a space of cross-cultural encounter translation. This research project provides the analytical framework for the current article (see Baumann and Gillespie, 2007). In turn, this partnership draws upon a longer association between the primary author (Skuse) and the BBC AEP (1995-2002) during which the role of qualitative research within the organization, relative to quantitative audience research, was legitimated, developed and enhanced. The article therefore is based not only on the cultural encounters between British and Afghan producers and researchers but also between academic and institutional/commercial audience researchers.

These research partnerships can be understood in terms of a creative intellectual

collaboration designed to foster critical dialogue on a range of issues, including the role, practice and outcomes of BBC WST and BBC AEP audience research and evaluation. While intellectual tensions inevitably arise from the 'collision' of different perspectives and priorities within such research partnerships, one of the most significant outcomes associated with them is the focus brought to bear on the performative power of audience research in the BBC WST's institutional context in shaping outcomes. Institutional or commercial research – how it is done and how findings feed in to policy and practice in international broadcasting institutions - is an arena that remains largely closed to academic researchers (Power, 2011). However, there is much to be gained by such partnerships in terms of knowledge exchange, but there are also difficult challenges. We have been fortunate to have privileged insights into the research culture of the BBC WST. The sustained dialogue around qualitative methods between the BBC and our project's academic researchers over a three-year period has undoubtedly contributed to methodological innovation. But the financial and time constraints under which BBC researchers work mean that pragmatism over innovation in methodological designs and devices must take precedence (Skuse, Gillespie, Power, 2011).

Despite constraints of time and resources, not to mention the demands of training local researchers and the challenges of translations to and from various Afghan dialects, qualitative audience research is now beginning to 'close the gap' between audiences and media producers/writers in *New Home New Life*. Audience research in this context is a transcultural practice in which cultural translation is a pragmatic strategy for making the development dramas as relevant as possible to audiences. Relevance, rather than impact is the watchword for *New Home, New Life* and audience evaluation is heavily vested in the gathering of significant quantities of qualitative data to ensure its enduring relevance to the lives of its audiences. However, this has not always been the case. Initially, BBC AEP audience research (in the 1990s) prioritised quarterly multi-phase surveying in pursuit of impact measures of Knowledge, Attitudes and Practice (KAP surveys). Typically, three to four hundred adults (men and women) would be surveyed in two phases over a six-month period. Questions would be asked, for example, concerning changing levels awareness about the warning signs of landmines or health practices. 'Quarter on quarter' changes in awareness (assessed through identification of the 'correct' answer) were measured. The research sought to establish a direct, positive and measurable relationship between the media stimulus and audience response. While such data offered the apparent reassurance of number crunching certainties to the production team, and was useful in persuading donors to continue funding the drama, this approach failed to take on board the complexities of the audiences' relationship with the drama.

Early impact data from the mid-1990s shows women's awareness of red stones as a warning marker identifying the presence of landmines increased from 19% to 56% between survey

phases (during which storylines in the drama would address this aspect of knowledge or awareness). While significant changes in knowledge were shown in early BBC AEP surveying, a diminishing returns scenario quickly set in for this type of data, with less significant shifts being identified in quantitative surveying during the late-1990s. In recognition of this, the BBC AEP instigated the research partnership (with anthropologist Skuse) which resulted in less quantitative surveying in favour of qualitative methods capable of generating ethnographic audience data that could be integrated into *New Home, New Life*'s storylines. Although Skuse, an external academic 'agent' contributed to catalysing a change in BBC research methods, the BBC AEP had already recognised the limitations of their methods and were actively seeking to bolster the qualitative methodological capacity. As a result, from the late 1990 onwards, each quarter, a qualitative 'needs assessment' has been undertaken during which dozens of in depth individual interviews and focus groups discussions have been conducted to elicit listeners' perspectives on the problems that they face in their everyday lives.

Gillespie (1995) found in her ethnography of soap opera audiences, that when people recounted soap narratives to her ('soap gossip') they commuted with ease between their own social worlds and their media worlds. They used their media experiences to talk about their own lives and concerns, often in veiled ways, and to address difficult or taboo issues. In everyday discussions, gossip about soap characters and about real life transgressions ran parallel and served not just to pass the time of day but to negotiate social norms. Discussions about soap narratives take on particular social significance. Audience ethnographies of soap operas can provide rich social data (in ways that quantitative or survey data cannot) because they can capture and embed the emotional in the socio-cultural and political dimensions of everyday problems, and enable audiences to conceive of and articulate solutions (Skuse and Gillespie, 2011b). It is in this sense that we refer here to the performativity of audience research data. Data gathered from Afghan audiences is captured, recorded, translated and filtered through transnational creative and institutional circuits until its finds dramatic expression in an episode. But, as we shall see, there are also other ideological and creative forces that come into play which constrain the power and performativity of audiences to shape the agenda and priorities of themes addressed in the drama.

BBC AEP qualitative audience evaluation actively seeks to diminish the social and cultural distance between its drama writers/producers and their audiences, the primary goal being to realise an ongoing and representative set of voices and vistas for the 'national audience' within the dramatic narratives of *New Home, New Life*. Increasingly, qualitative and particularly ethnographic approaches to evaluation are being adopted in C4D interventions such as *New Home, New Life* as a tool for project development, a route to sustained evaluation, a device for dramatising development themes, and a resource for cultural

translation (Tacchi et al. 2008; Skuse et al. 2007; Skuse, Gillespie, Power, 2011). For example, in his work on drama-based 'edutainment' (E-E) interventions, Tufte (2002) stresses the importance of understanding how producers make and audiences take meanings from development dramas. Drawing on the work of Martin-Barbero (1995), Tufte highlights the complexity of intercultural communication processes, and the need to delve deeper into the 'set of influences that structure, organise and reorganise the understanding of the reality that an audience lives' (2002: 2). Adopting a focus on understanding the 'mediations' of drama narratives (or the dynamic and often unpredictable relationship between the making and taking of meanings in drama serials) shifts our attention away from the quantitative approaches of surveying changes in knowledge, attitudes and practices (underpinned by outmoded behaviouristic and overly psychological theories of communication) towards an appreciation of how knowledge is framed and negotiated in specific local, socio-cultural contexts and why certain narrative themes are accepted while others are rejected.

The work of Tufte (2003), as well as Mandel (2002) and Skuse (1999) on development dramas and communication from an ethnographic perspective, alerts us to the fact that: (i) audiences are inherently diverse and complex and bring many differing interpretations to the same development-oriented narratives; (ii) audiences are embedded in and constrained by socio-cultural, political and economic situations that affect their ability to act on development information or even interpret it (cf. UNAIDS 1999; CFSC 2002); and (iii) the 'meanings' derived from serial narratives tend to derive from collective dialogues and collaborative negotiation within specific social contexts. Such concerns support a qualitative approach to audience research and highlight why the gap between media producers/writers and their audiences needs to be closed. It is against this theoretical and methodological backdrop that *New Home, New Life's* dramatic treatment of the themes of opium and conflict is assessed.

### **Audience Research in Transnational Circuits of Production and Consumption**

BBC AEP audience research has two principal objectives: (i) *formative*: to feed back data concerning future storyline themes to dramatists; and (ii) *evaluative*: to collect data concerning shifts in knowledge, attitudes, behaviour or practices relating to the key development education themes of the production. Assessing the information needs of audiences, the 'efficacy' of the development messages it promotes or how messages are mediated and understood constitutes an ongoing challenge for audience researchers and drama writers alike. Galavotti et al. (2001) have suggested that in many developing world contexts 'alternative narratives' are urgently required to enable citizens to adopt beneficial changes associated with health, education, environment, gender equality and other development issues. In the Afghan context such narratives allow audiences to imagine new realities such as a functioning state and service delivery.

Inherent in such 'narratives' are notions of cultural translation, both in terms of development concepts and of audience mediations/interpretations. Here, the translation of 'western' and/or British formats has certain distinct advantages especially in containing serial drama productions within a workable aesthetic and narrational framework, and in 'hailing' and hooking audiences. But does the adaptation of a British radio soap opera for an Afghan audience also inflect or inflict British or 'westernised' perspectives concerning development on audiences (cf. Mandel, 2002)? We argue that while audience research mitigates the ideological power of donors and big media institutions like the BBC World Service Trust, a westernised framework of development and democratisation is inevitably invoked and is part of a wider politico-ideological agenda.

Moreover, audience research - numbers and narratives - has to be mobilised to satisfy donors that their money is well spent, and to put a positive spin on the impact of the production for marketing and communications purposes. The organisations and partnerships that make dramas for development, including the BBC World Service Trust, are often charities. Evaluative and impact data are crucial to securing a next tranche of funding and negative data may remain within the confines of the creative team's inner circle. We argue that the devices, designs and data of audience research are neither politically nor culturally neutral but are caught up in transnational circuits of production and reception that are constrained by the development imperatives and ideological presumptions of western neo-liberal states, donor priorities and continuing financial insecurity. The creative capital of dramatists and the ethical capital of development workers must inevitably be weighed against the financial power of donors to shape the research, the drama and its outcomes. These factors cannot be ignored in evaluating the ideological consequences of drama for development.

Turning to assess how qualitative audience evaluation relates to the production processes of *New Home, New Life*, what it informs and what influences and constraints are exerted upon it, analysis highlights first the key steps in the production processes and then moves on to identify how the theme of opium is treated. The production demands of a thrice-weekly 15-minute radio soap opera, produced in two languages (Dari and Pashto), over nearly two decades cannot be underestimated. Given the sheer volume of production it is essential that the BBC AEP have clear mechanisms to provide formative, consultative and evaluative input into storylines in a timely manner. The demands of the various donors of the *New Home, New Life* drama (UNICEF, DFID, UNESCO, WHO, UNOPS, ICRC) require that each is made aware of key plot developments so that they can provide their professional expertise, relevant information and technical advice in the development areas that each supports (typically donors support a range of themes relevant to their own activities). For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) have supported areas such 'the rational use of drugs' or 'mother and child health', whilst organisations such as UNICEF support 'children in conflict'. A strong



relationship with funders is essential to the sustainability of the production. Concerns over the ideological function of development discourse aside, the relationship between drama producers and technical experts plays out in interesting ways, as noted:

None of our funders is imposing anything; they're just coming up with the topics. They say for instance, nutrition. UNICEF says nutrition is one of our issues, coughs and colds is another, diarrhoea is another, 'educational for all', hygiene and sanitation, water is another. These are the topics. These are not ideas. What we do is create stories around these topics and they are just providing technical expertise. If there's a good way to treat diarrhoea and we are wrong a doctor comes from UNICEF and says 'you are wrong'. And he says 'this is not exactly the way you treat diarrhoea, this is the way'. We take that information from the specialist and then we *really* do the wrong thing in the drama so that we can highlight the need for the right thing. (Drama Manager, Individual Interview, 1998)

Audience research suggests that showing how things go wrong is a more effective narrational strategy than 'doing the right thing' because the consequences of failure not only make for dramatic impact but enable dramatic didacticism to really touch the heart strings of audiences and establish powerful points of identification where emotion and rationality converge in ways that can shape subsequent changes in behaviour, or enable listeners to imagine social and political change.

The wider production process typically take three months, from initial script development meeting to broadcast, and reveals relevant points of entry for audience evaluation. The production process has twelve discrete steps:

- (i) Script Development Meeting
- (ii) Consultative Committee Meeting
- (iii) Synopsis Writing
- (iv) Synopses sent to funders/advisers
- (v) Scriptwriting
- (vi) Typing
- (vii) Editorial Meeting
- (viii) Script Correction
- (ix) Production
- (x) Playback
- (xi) Lead-time (the gap between finishing production and broadcast)
- (xii) Broadcast

The most critical and influential steps are the script development meeting, consultative committee meeting, synopses writing process and editorial meeting as it is in these meetings that audience research insights are integrated into the drama. The script development

meeting, which happens monthly, enables scriptwriters, producers and audience researchers to build the broad themes that will be dramatised over the course of a month's worth of episodes and this meeting results in the development of a set of notes (in English) that are sent to funders and development specialists along with an invitation to the monthly consultative committee meeting during which technical and expert knowledge and the cultural propriety of storylines is fed into the scriptwriting process. Issues, from the moral economy of the household and local cultural mores around dowry to the temporalities of narrative events (e.g. the fit between storylines and seasonal diseases and agricultural cycles) are integrated into plot lines. Formative and evaluative data from audience research are consistently fed into the creative process providing rich ethnographic detail to enhance the realism of the serial narratives and cliff-hanger endings. Audience data also provides creative resources in the form of new ideas and real life narratives for future dramatisation by script-writers.

Like the script development process, extensive notes in English (though the actual meetings are multi-lingual, switching from Dari, and Pashto to English) are circulated to partners and attendees for comment. Translations are linguistic and cultural. BBC AEP scriptwriters, producers and managers depend on the translations of qualitative data by audience researchers to create the drama. The dramatists, in turn, must translate the genre conventions of the radio soap format into a dramatic form that can carry development themes and appeal to local audiences. Following this critical input of audience research and notes, the synopses of individual episodes are produced and again circulated amongst funders and advisers for comments. From this point on, the scripting is done in Dari and Pashto. Despite *New Home, New Life* being an exclusively Afghan staffed production for over 10 years, translations (cultural and linguistic) flow in all directions and are essential to holding together the partnerships that support the production, as well as to supporting the creative endeavour and development focus.

### **Dramatising Development: Opium Production and its Eradication**

The following extract from an early set of consultative committee meeting notes reveals how discussion of an opium-related conflict between the two villages featured in *New Home, New Life* would develop:

[Summary of discussion] It was agreed that since land disputes are rarely settled amicably in Afghanistan, it would be better to return the storyline to the initial reason behind the conflict between Upper and Lower Villagers, i.e. cultivation of poppy crops.

[Changes to storyline] *The death of Khair Mohammad will provide an impetus to settlement. The land dispute will be settled once there is recourse to the document which, it will be found, no longer exists. The matter will then come down to witness [adjudication] and it will be*

*agreed that the uncultivated land in fact belongs to Upper Village. Following quick settlement of this issue, the matter will come down to opium substitution, i.e. Upper Village will take the lead in finding alternatives to the opium crop of Lower Village which they had taken the lead in destroying. (Consultative Committee Meeting, 10<sup>th</sup> April 1996)*

The donor's agenda of opium eradication and crop substitution is clearly reflected in the consultative committee meeting notes above. However audience research conducted in the subsequent years revealed that farmers found it difficult or impossible to diversify their crops despite recognition that opium creates more social and health problems than the financial problems that it, albeit temporarily, solves. This highlights one of the limitations of drama for development. What is the use of promoting development goals that are impossible to achieve?

The serial drama benefits from long-term engagement so audiences can witness how narratives unfold over time and come to acquire a better understanding of, for example, how local political organisation and democratic procedures can work or how they might be revived or re-invented (Skuse and Gillespie 2011a). A significant and enduring sub-plot, associated with the production of opium and agricultural crops more broadly, is that of access to water. The huge importance of this topic to audiences is clearly reflected in feedback to *New Home*, *New Life*. For example, this listener from Khost Province recounts a typical response:

In the drama, bridges were blown up through mines in the waterbed - mines were planted – Rahimdad's [a character] sheep and cow were blown up. The villagers came forward and decided that Fateh Khan [one of the chief protagonists in the opium conflict] has to pay the cost of the bridge. Hats off for the village *jirga* [traditional council]! But the *woleswal* [district government officer] is sitting as a bottle [inactive] and has nothing to do with anything. If everything is destroyed he does not bother about it, so the *woleswal* should quit his job and the place he has occupied in this drama should be given to someone else. (Male Informant, Individual Interview, 1998)

The quote above highlights a positive response to one of *New Home*, *New Life*'s critical themes, namely the strengthening of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms such as local *jirgas*. However, the respondent questions the lack of administrative action on the part of the *woleswal*. With a perennially weak state, the indifference displayed by the administrator character is perhaps unsurprising; nonetheless, such concerns are routinely feedback by audience researchers through formal meetings, as outlined above, and through more *ad hoc* day to day contracts with scriptwriters and drama managers in the context of the fairly small *New Home*, *New Life* offices, first located in Peshawar, Pakistan, then Kabul, Afghanistan. Such *ad hoc* meetings are as important as the formal 12 step production flow outlined earlier.

In keeping with the tight production processes and requirement for significant forward planning to be undertaken to shape thematic content, audience research is proactive in the development of dramatic themes based on immersive fieldwork. This immersion is described by the BBC AEP as 'needs assessment' to provide 'grounded' input into storyline development. Its wider value and potential use is however unappreciated and underdeveloped. The routine (usually quarterly) knowledge, attitudes and practice (KAP) surveys discussed earlier, qualitative interviewing and focus group discussion work generate significant quantities of data that help inform creative processes but could also be used by other agencies to great effect. For example, recent qualitative interviewing undertaken in the provinces of Ningarhar, Paktia and Herat highlight some of the positive community responses to opium substitution storylines:

In most [focus] groups the people revealed that [after hearing the drama] they have stopped cultivating poppy and are cultivating wheat, garlic, onion, eggplant, carrot, tomato, radish, turnip, rice, ladyfinger, cauliflower, leek, spinach, sugar cane, and cucumber instead. They thought growing vegetables is better because besides selling them they can use them and give them to friends. They added that they don't have a problem transporting the crops to market but sometimes some of the produce gets damaged or decayed along the way because of the bad conditions of the roads. In this case, the farmers face losses. They said that they first take their share of the crop and then send the rest to market. The crops which grow quickly, leaving the land for the next cultivation, are cauliflower, string bean, cotton, sugar cane, rice, potato and leek. Cultivating onion has two benefits i.e. fresh onions can be sold easily and dried onions bring in more income. The people said they have specified land for cultivating vegetables, and that they cultivate vegetables every year. Some complained of water shortage and those they only have water for one season's cultivation. Some groups said since their district is far from the city they sell all the produce in their own district because transporting it would be too difficult. One group said they usually take their potatoes and onions to Kabul but if they know they are not going to get much benefit there, they sell the vegetables in the farm to merchants. (39<sup>th</sup> Needs Assessment Report Episodes 2053-2088, December 2006)

Although positive, other qualitative research undertaken in the poppy growing province of Helmand, finds listeners caught in a 'harder place' between poverty, drought and high levels of local drug addiction amongst young men:

... we can better prolong our life with money which is earned through poppy cultivation and also as we know that famine is in our country and we can't afford the expenses of other plants

like wheat [which requires significant quantities of water to grow].(Female Informant, Individual Interview 2006)

Whilst reference to high prices for opium, ease of growing on poor dry soil and ease of harvest are highlighted by listeners as 'positive' features of the crop, such sentiment is tempered by a raft of negative 'effects' associated with the drug, for example, concerning the extent to which opium-derived profits fuel the continued presence of the Taliban, local drug addiction, crime and violence. Despite negative consequences listeners highlight the fact that the Afghan Government does little to practically support opium crop substitution and that poverty and other political forces leave little choice:

The key factor is political affairs in Afghanistan, terrorism and Al-Qaeda's existence. Also people are compelled to grow poppy, because they do not have enough money to feed their family and for the needs of life. (Female Informant, Individual Interview 2006)

In advocating opium crop substitution since 1993 and in highlighting the dangers of drug addiction, trafficking and inter-village conflict, *New Home, New Life* alone has been unable to effect a meaningful reduction in opium production, especially in areas such as Helmand where the extension of the state is weak and the influence of the Taliban significant. Currently opium production is at a decade-long high and shows little sign of abating. Nonetheless, charged with reflecting the social realities of Afghanistan, opium and attempts to bolster opium substitution remains an enduring feature of this melodrama. The aforementioned Needs Assessment Report lists a raft of potential storylines relating to substitution for writers to take up in the scripting process:

How can we store vegetables?

How can we cultivate saffron?

How can we protect our lands from rats and diseases?

Using the cropping methods of cultivating two crops simultaneously, what other things can we cultivate together?

What are the most beneficial vegetable crops?

Advantages/disadvantages of using insecticide?

Any advice regarding insecticides?

(39<sup>th</sup> Needs Assessment Report Episodes 2053-2088, December 2006)

Seeking to promote positive development alternatives in its pursuit of social realism, the drama must inevitably temper positive storylines with negative plot developments designed to alert listeners to the risks associated with opium production, as reflected in a recent scene from an episode of the drama:

Adam Khan comes and seriously asks if Ghafar has prepared his money that he had given him for the exchange of opium. Ghafar warmly welcomes him. But Adam Khan says Ghafar has to prepare the opium instead of flattering him. Ghafar pleads with Adam Khan and stresses that he can't prepare the opium and asks Adam Khan to act according to his recent decision made with Said Muhammad. Adam Khan says he will face losses if he acts on that decision, and Ghafar should give his money according to the present day price of opium. Ghafar calls this demand cruel and unfair. Adam Khan argues that he has to pay his dealer and he will not accept excuses. Ghafar says that he can't give him that much money. Adam Khan seriously says he will get his right. Ghafar accepts he will give Adam Khan's right but Adam Khan should be fair. Adam Khan says if he had invested the money he would have got a lot of benefit. Ghafar becomes uncomfortable and says he will not accept the demand. Adam Khan angrily picks up the scale and starts beating Ghafar's head. Ghafar's screams are heard. (Scene 5, Episode 2097, broadcast 20/08/2007)

The production's 'social realist' credentials rely on audience research and in its attempts to resonate to the actual problems faced by Afghan people. Another significant aspect of audience evaluation is the audience commentary on the 'cultural fit' of the interweaving narratives and judgements about realism. With regard to realism, the former *Archers* producer, Liz Rigbey notes that despite its realist sentiments:

... [drama production] should probably be a few degrees more pleasant than real life. For all the misery you depict, there should be laughter and warmth and a feeling of belonging in the soap opera which sadly may be missing from the lives of people. (1993: 3)

In relation to opium substitution this presents a problem in terms of realist representation. The efforts of listeners to diversify their agricultural production by starting kitchen gardens or rearing chickens typically have been constrained by a lack of adequate local support. Some successes based on audiences' experiences have been dramatised. For example, there are cases where advocating rearing chickens has led to profitable businesses being established. However, in equal measure, failures in diversification are narrativised. For example, inadequate vaccination leads to high infant mortality rates. Equally, other small enterprise measures such as tailoring or embroidery are difficult to maintain in the absence of effective financial or local support, mentoring and marketing. Given this, audience criticisms of the drama tend to concern the abundance that the characters enjoy relative to themselves as listeners and this reflects the need for the drama to promote 'alternative narratives' of development in the sense described by Galavotti et al. (2001) that are practicable, realisable, appropriate. Audience research does allow for the presentation and qualification of 'alternative narratives' as well as the potential for 'listeners stories' and 'voices' to be

integrated into drama production, especially in the sense of how listeners actually deal with the problems that they face, be they opium, neo-natal tetanus, landmines and so on.

### **When Audience Research Becomes Dangerous**

Audience feedback throughout the creative process - during script development and consultative committee meetings and in post production - generally helps to refine the course of narrative flow, whilst at the same time acting as a key force for ensuring cultural propriety and localisation. From such a perspective, audience research can act as a very effective brake on the creative projections and imagination of scriptwriters. Within soap opera production (Allen 1985; Vink 1988) writers often feel an affinity with audiences and frequently suggest that 'they know' them as they would know their own families. They may even be very resistant to taking on board audience research data. The reality, as revealed through ongoing ethnographic work on *New Home, New Life* is somewhat different. The notion prevalent among scriptwriters that storylines can be treated in some 'value neutral' way denies the sociality and conflict that inevitably occur in transcultural circuits of production over how controversial issues should be dramatised. For example, representations of political realism during the Taliban era were especially problematic for the majority of liberal-leaning Afghan scriptwriters (Skuse 2005). Rather than tackle such realities head-on the production chose to remain purposefully vague and chose to root its narratives in the safety and relative anonymity of the *Muhajideen* era politics (1979-1994) when scores of diffuse groups vied for power across Afghanistan and conflict was ever-present, albeit of low intensity (Skuse and Gillespie, 2011 a) .

During the months of October and November 2001, the US military completed an emphatic victory over the *Taliban* in direct response to the attacks of 11 September 2001 in New York that had been attributed to Osama Bin Laden – a long-time guest, financier and supporter of the conservative Islamic regime. Following the US-led invasion, BBC AEP audience research became impossible due to safety concerns and in the initial period of conflict, occupation and uncertainty *New Home, New Life*'s objectives began to take on a new 'emergency' emphasis that resulted in the production being decoupled from routine audience evaluation and needs assessment processes, as recalled by a former BBC AEP manager:

... the US-led war was a difficult period emotionally and operationally for everyone in the project. At the beginning there was a sense of shock and no one knew what to do. There were voices coming from London saying that *New Home, New Life* wasn't relevant and that information – in other words news – was what was required. People in the BBC AEP were almost resigned to accept this view and agreed with stopping the broadcast [of the drama]. At one point the director of the project returned from Islamabad from a meeting where one of the DFID [UK Department for International Development] had summoned NGOs to persuade

them to work closely with the military. The official was accompanied by British Army officers and asked colleagues [at the BBC AEP] to reflect on their own experience of the civil war. That meeting determined a new direction for the whole team and people brought their own personal experiences to the table, which resulted in a number of storylines for the drama and a huge number of programme ideas for AEP's educational features. This was one of the only occasions where storylines were not based on needs assessment but on the personal experiences of AEP's people. (Personal Correspondence, 2008)

The extreme dangers posed by the 'war on terror' (or war on Afghanistan) meant that all audience research was suspended and scriptwriters were indeed forced to draw upon their own personal experiences of conflict and displacement during the Afghan-Soviet war (1979-1989) and Afghan civil war (1989-2001). They were faced with a wealth of material to draw upon. In this respect, a former project manager reveals his past experience of 'flight' in the face of military assault:

When the attacks started back in 1992 people would run for safety. Once beyond the range of rockets they would realise they have no water/food, nothing to keep warm with, etc. Then one member of the family would take risk to go back to collect a few essentials - whatever this one person could carry would never be sufficient for the entire family. As a result several dangerous visits had to be made each one could be at a heavy cost (loss of a family member). If a family planned it, then they would have these essentials somewhere to hand in manageable portions and carry them with them. (Project Manager, Personal Communication 2008)

In the heat of the US-led invasion in 2001 the notion of 'being prepared' and planning for displacement became a humanitarian priority, along with a host of other conflict-related stories. Importantly, in the same vague way that it has dealt with politics and conflict in the past, the US-led invasion of 2001 were simply portrayed in the drama as a period of conflict more intense than usual, as noted by a former project manager:

We did not reflect the US invasion as such. All we did was help people to behave as safely as possible under those circumstances. (Project Manager, Personal Communication 2008)

This strategy of 'vagueness' was driven in large part by the BBC's ethos of political impartiality but, given news media coverage of the war in Afghanistan, it did not require a great deal of imagination on the part of audiences to see that the drama was out of step with the realities on the ground.. Unlike the scriptwriters, the audience was living through the conflict directly and they were bringing their own experiences to bear on the narrative. Like all serial dramas, *New Home New Life* relies on the ability of audiences to forge credible



connections between textual and social experiences. Due to the upheaval during this period and the suspension of BBC AEP audience research, what audiences made of these 'conflict narratives' remains a story that is unlikely to be told in meaningful detail.

### **Conclusion**

This article has analysed the performative nature of audience research, It has examined how audience research is conducted and integrated into the fabric of *New Home New Life* – a radio soap that has enjoyed nearly two decades of unparalleled popularity across Afghanistan. In focussing on how the serial dramatised issues of opium production, and the war on Afghanistan and political conflict during and after 2001, we have highlighted the challenges of producing a radio soap opera that is both entertaining and educational and how audiences mediate and 'remediate' serial narratives to generate their own meanings which are sometimes at odds with those intended by development workers and donors. We have examined how media producers working in a transnational and development context are actively engaged in processes of intercultural negotiation and translation – seeking to reflect social and political realities as well as represent new and alternative ways of life. They create serial dramas using extensive audience research, constant consultation, but also draw on their own personal experiences. This is of particular importance when we bear in mind that the producers of 'development dramas' are actively seeking to integrate information and messages that resonate with the socio-cultural realities of their target audiences in ways to change awareness, attitudes and practices. How well they do so, depends on the quality of audience research and the everyday activities of translation in transcultural circuits of production and consumption which are, in turn, constrained by the financial insecurity of media production institutions and the development and ideological imperatives of donors and development agencies.

We have argued that qualitative audience research plays an active and performative role in the creation of drama for development. The devices and designs of transcultural research are not culturally or politically neutral or objective. Research designs and devices are shaped as much by pragmatic concerns as by the culture of objectivity in social scientific research. But no data is pure or untainted and we have tried to show how the contexts of research shape the devices available and the findings and the ways that data are used. We have argued that audience research and researchers can usefully be examined as change agents - caught up in unpredictable and messy processes that shape social realities and are themselves shaped by contingent factors. The push towards building evidence-based C4D interventions is resulting in increasing emphasis being placed on the development of more subtle qualitative evaluation designs and devices. In particular, an emphasis on the role of qualitative research can, in principle, enhance the performative potential of audiences in the creative and production process.

Formative audience research has long played a key role in project design, in communicating the information needs of target groups and audiences to planners and creative producers and increasingly, more systematic and ongoing forms of qualitative feedback are being sought, such as that evidenced in this discussion of the *New Home, New Life* production. This is because development dramas, which tend to be organised in national metropolises, inevitably result in disjunctures, differences and distance (spatial, socio-cultural, economic and political) between audiences, creative producers, actors, dramatists and presenters (cf. Long and Villareal 1994; Tydeman 1981). From this perspective, audience research constitutes one of the core processes by which social distance is reduced, transcultural competences in the transnational production teams is increased and the potential for social change realised.

We have highlighted the complexity of how audience research processes are embedded at each and every stage of the creative production process. But we have also argued that dramatists and writers exercise considerable creative freedom, despite being faced with the competing imperatives of donors and development experts who bring their expert knowledge to the task of crafting drama for development. Our wider research, upon which this article is based, has developed its own designs and devices (Skuse, Gillespie, Power, 2011). We have sought to develop an innovative integrated analysis of transcultural circuits of drama production in which audience research is an active agent of cultural translation. In engaging in a more holistic and 'connected' approach to C4D drama production and audience engagement, it is evident that audience research can generate far more than quantitative insights concerning the knowledge, attitudes and practices of listeners. But quantitative devices when closely aligned with qualitative data can be a powerful tool for tracking change. In revealing the complex 'craft' of drama for development production, BBC World Service Trust and BBC AEP clearly value 'audience voices' and go to great lengths to integrate their voices and views into the production in meaningful ways through regular and rigorous audience research. That much of this work remains in the shadows is a great shame, since comparative analysis of differing production and audience evaluation regimes would and should facilitate cross-institutional learning of wider relevance to the communications for development sector. However, all media organisations use audience data not just to inform production but also as a marketing tool and for PR and communications. Sometimes these different purposes become blurred. Clearly, audience research can be more than a tool for making drama and a resource for translating cultures. It also has the potential to be an active agent in the pursuit of positive social change.

### **Biographical Note**

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