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“Radio In a Box”: Psyops, Afghanistan and the Aesthetics of the Low-Tech ^[1]

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During research on media and conflict in Afghanistan, Professor Price came across the interesting phenomenon of "Radio in a Box," or RIAB. Captivated by the phrase and concept, he sought to find out more about it.

There are too few accounts—mostly newspaper stories—about this aspect of psyops, or psychological operations. RIAB is a technique used by the U.S. military, in part, for improving communication with the Afghan National Army. RIAB is already a large enough phenomenon to support various military contracts. Here, for example, is an advertisement for a “creative trainer” in RIAB content.

Fortuitously, Professor Price wrote a Marine he knew, then serving in Afghanistan, to ask him what he had heard about this small-scale technology and its implementation. Lieutenant Sam Jacobson, as he then was, turned out to be an excellent correspondent on the question of RIAB deployment. Jacobson had spent a good deal of time helping implement its roll-out at a remote Combat Outpost (COP), where he was attached as an adviser to an Afghan National Army infantry company. An extremely bright and creative officer, he was full of ideas and fascinating information about its use.

The exchange led to the following conversation with him about the process.

Sam, where were you posted when you administered the RIAB?

I was at COP Rankel in Garmser, a skinny little district splayed out along the Helmand River in Helmand Province. Over the last couple years Marines and Afghan soldiers have slowly been pushing south through the district, holding and securing one village after another. Safar is the southernmost area in that push, so the government presence here is brand new and in most ways still tenuous. COP Rankel was the first base built in Safar, just outside the bazaar, in September 2010, and is now home to a hundred Marines and a dozen Afghan National Army (ANA) soldiers. Another hundred Marines and Afghan soldiers are scattered throughout the area at smaller satellite patrol bases.

What kind of radio, telephone or other communications techniques were used by the community there?

There's no tweeting in Safar, Garmser District, Helmand Province, Afghanistan. No Gchat [Google's instant message service], no Facebook messaging, no texting. No newspapers or television. Many of the locals have cell phones, but they use them for photos and music. There's no cell phone tower in southern Garmser District; it wouldn't be profitable in this far-flung farming community, and even if it were, the Taliban might destroy it if it wasn't within

shooting distance of one of our patrol bases. And there aren't even any landline telephones—just a few storefront calling centers in the bazaar with unreliable satellite connections. So when we need to get a message out to the local people we use our Radio-in-a-Box, or RIAB, as our personal intercom.

It can't be overstated that before the introduction of the RIAB, the locals in Safar had almost no access to news other than word of mouth [though surely there's a contingent that follows Thoreau in preferring to "Read not the *Times*. Read the Eternities." If you roll the dial slowly enough, and don't mind a little static, there's some competition out there: BBC Pashto and Voice of America.

How did the RIAB process start at your outpost?

The Radio-in-a-Box, or RIAB, was one of the first pieces of gear to come down on a logistics convoy after the initial assault through Safar. We immediately started passing out little battery powered and hand-cranked portable radios to anyone who wanted one, and nicer models are still a hot item in the bazaar.

At first the RIAB was connected to a small makeshift antennae peeking out above our HESCO blast walls. It didn't reach very far, and the locals were reporting poor reception. So the Marines requested—and finally received—something bigger. It came with its own contractor to help set it up and teach a designated Marine how to use it. It sits now on a piece of high and dusty ground in the middle of our outpost. The antenna is the tallest thing in town, slightly out-climbing our camera surveillance tower for prominence in the Safar Skyline. It's an easy reference point for navigation. You can make out its outline from anywhere we patrol.

What were the programming relationships with the Afghanis?

The Marines run the RIAB, but the Afghan soldiers have played an active role since the beginning. At first it only broadcast for a few hours a day, when the Marine corporal in charge of its operation plugged something in to play. Now it's on 24/7, aside from some heat-induced outages as the temperature climbs. When the Marines or Afghan soldiers down here don't have anything in particular to play, we use the RIAB antennae to re-transmit content from a NATO-backed satellite station called *Tamadon* ('Civilization'), based in Lashkar Gah, the capital of Helmand Province, to our north.

Who decides what's broadcast?

For almost the entire year I served as the mentor and adviser to the company of Afghan National Army infantry soldiers in Safar, I encouraged the Afghan commander, Captain Abdul Gefar, to get his voice out to the locals. The RIAB is a good tool for him to communicate his thoughts directly to the people in a way that he can't through small *shuras* (meetings) with the elders, or patrolling from one village to another. He can even be over-reliant on the RIAB, neglecting more traditional forms of media—like talking face-to-face.

Do you actually implement text with the Afghan leadership?

When Captain Gefar has something to say we work to write it up, he reads it into a recorder, and the Marine RIAB corporal incorporates it into the day's [iTunes compatible] playlist. Captain Gefar begins his messages with a religious injunction: "*Bismi'allah rachman rahim, a salam aleychum warach matullah wa barakhat*

.” And then down to business.

Our RIAB corporal has downloaded recitation of the Koran, kids programming, comedy—which I tested out on the Afghan soldiers, who didn’t so much as crack a smile—and poetry; lots of poetry: classic ghazals and newfangled government poetry invoking “*sola, sola, sola*” (peace, peace, peace). The mp3s all start off with a light wind instrument intro followed by the verse, intoned by men with accents—according to Captain Gefar—from Jalalabad and Oroozghan. When my Afghan interpreter found a poem he especially liked, I asked him when it was written. “About 150 or 200 years ago.” “And what is it about?” “Oh, this guy is like complaining about his girlfriends.”

What are the subjects—either of Marine or ANA broadcasts?

Marine and ANA messages have hit the following topics in recent months:

- Details of the district government’s current stance towards poppy harvesting in Safar
- You may protest the poppy eradication campaign, but make it a peaceful protest
- Drugs are against Islam; we are distributing seeds as part of our poppy alternatives campaign
- Local contractor’s truck is stuck; come with your tractor and we will hire you to get it out
- The time for next week’s *shura* is changed
- The newly rebuilt shops have opened in the bazaar
- Our operation to the south this week brings even greater security to the region; the Taliban have all fled to Pakistan
- The Taliban must reconcile with the government, surrender, or die
- The Taliban do not fight for Islam. They fight for power and greed.
- The Taliban IED attack in Safar today killed innocent Muslim children; tell us where the IEDs are before they hurt more of your sons and daughters
- The Taliban we killed today were in the middle of placing an IED that could have killed your sons and daughters
- The explosion you just heard was a controlled detonation by Marine engineers
- The shooting you hear today is an Afghan National Army training event
- Parents, send your children to the new Safar school, for religious and secular education
- Kids, don’t play with toy guns or get too close to Marine vehicles
- Happy Now Ruz (New Year); come celebrate with us in the bazaar
- We are offering incentives for the return of missing ANA and Marine equipment

I know that a certain amount of programming—not that much—came from higher up the chain of command. What was in these messages?

Our RIAB corporal plays pre-recorded mp3 messages he downloads from a centralized RIAB website. There are hundreds of tracks to choose from. For example:

- As you know the cowardly Taliban are using explosives made from Ammonium Nitrate fertilizer to cause death to our innocent brothers and sisters. Ammonium Nitrate is illegal. If you are in possession of Ammonium Nitrate, turn it in now to the Afghan National Army or Afghan National Police. Please purchase a legal fertilizer such as Urea or Diammonium Phosphate.
- The Taliban are poisoning innocent Afghans with drugs, destroying their infrastructure,

and recruiting foreigners from places like Chechnya and Arabia to harass and intimidate innocent people.

- Who best represents progress and who represents destruction? Each Afghan needs to make the choice for what future they desire for their offspring.
- Join the Afghan National Army and Police.
- How dare the Taliban call themselves “Islamic Students!” They are merely anarchists.

Is there a structure to these messages? Some standardized logic?

The basic framework of the messages is often manipulated to use the Taliban’s own logic against them: “If the Taliban call themselves warriors, then why do they fight in woman’s clothing. Who has brought this disgrace upon the Afghan people? What warrior would want to die in women’s clothing, and face the afterlife as a coward?”

The RIAB website also has longer programming available for download, like medical broadcasts on malaria prevention, hygiene, vitamins, the dangers of opium, scorpions, constipation, and frost bite. Important stuff, if a bit out of touch with the most pressing concerns of the day. The main programming sent down by the battalion—but no doubt originating much higher up the chain of command—is national news, either as an mp3 or transcribed in Pashto for an Afghan interpreter to read on the air.

How does the Voice of America do?

Captain Gefar prefers the Voice of America to any other news. He spends slow afternoons sitting in the gazebo he built at COP Rankel, drinking chai and listening to adapted *Washington Post* stories on his portable receiver.

You emphasize music--you’ve told me--over accounts of events in Afghanistan, even though “nation-building” is a goal.

It takes more than national news to connect the citizens of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, which is why Safar RIAB, 100 MhZ on your FM dial, plays today’s hits and yesterday’s classics. Music was banned under Taliban rule, so listening to the radio is in a way an act of defiance against the recently departed regime. Much of the music on the RIAB is streamed straight from the station in Lashkar Gah. There’s music from Tajikistan, Turkey, Iran, India, and Pakistan, in Farsi, Uzbek, Urdu, and lots of other languages. There’s also a good deal of what can only be described as Afghan music: newer tracks in Pashto and Dari, cut in Jalalabad or up north.

Tell me about the music.

Some of the music might be a little edgier than the local rural populace is used to, but the Afghan soldiers tune in to blast it from their standard issue battery-powered radios every chance they get. At any of our postage stamp-size patrol bases in Safar, Marines are a captive audience to the sounds of the latest bass-heavy reverb and sample-rich Pashto remixes (what I call Ningarhari *dub*). At night it wafts—muffled—out of the ANA guard post. On short patrol halts, the music is deployed from ANA cargo pockets before the Marines have even had a chance to reach for a sip of water. And last week I saw a new speaker system installed in the open bed of one of the Afghan tactical trucks, to supplement the simple radio on the dashboard. In the evening the soldiers turned the Ford Ranger’s volume all the way up,

and danced a version of the Attan, a traditional national dance frequently played on the RIAB. These soldiers are of different ethnicities, but they're all Afghan when it comes to their music.

That sounds like music to the ears of RIAB implementers. Any dissent?

Captain Gefar, who, as I mentioned, is a loyal Voice of America listener, dislikes the music we play on the RIAB. "The constant 'donga donga donga' is uneducated," he told me once. He prefers news. When he listens to music, it's got to be something patriotic or in some way edifying.

It's interesting that there is so much local control—or at least was when you were there (it may now have changed) over the music list. What was your own prescription if you could have implemented it?

It's not clear that songs about Afghanistan connect the people to Afghanistan. I often think about what I would play, given free rein of the RIAB; a sort of *High Fidelity* top ten list. I'd be looking for Afghan versions of my favorite bands; songwriters who elevate and empower and long, without mawkishness. I imagine something that a Helmandi Radio Raheem would want to carry on his shoulder. Of course to say that I want Afghan versions of certain music is to miss the point that too close a cultural kinship is impossible, to say nothing of undesirable. Which is why we started letting Farhad do the choosing. He was my designated DJ.

Who is Farhad?

Farhad is from Kabul. The big city. He's in his early 20s, fairly devout, kind beyond belief, and totally cool. Afghan cool. I was fortunate enough to have him as my interpreter. He wanted to learn how to be a DJ, so I sent him to a week-long RIAB course at Camp Leatherneck, the main mega-hub for Marines in Helmand Province. He doesn't drink or smoke or curse or disrespect his elders, but he does happen to know how to get people dancing. I had visions of Farhad introducing the local yoots to the future of Afghanistan. Farhad: "Hellooo Safarians, this is DJ Farhad on the ones and twos." Teenage Safarians: "Farhad, we love you, Farhad!" But soon after he finished the DJ course, Farhad went on vacation and never came back. I hope he's all the rage in Kabul now, or finishing school, or both.

Should the Farhads of Afghanistan control the programming?

Control of small market radio station programming must be transitioned to interpreters and Afghan soldiers and, ultimately, to the locals themselves, who understand the nuances of conflict the way only those stuck straddling the fence can understand. There's no intent for our news to be investigative in nature. It's not journalism, which is to say it lacks accountability and subtlety.

This is not your average local radio station. What kinds of statement of objectives did you receive to assist you in implementation?

Our programming is, as a matter of course, overtly—and overly—instructional in nature: "Objective: Exploit improvements in essential infrastructure, local services, and development in order to gain support for the government of Afghanistan. Effect Desired: Locals attribute improvements to their government. Target Audience: Adult Afghan populace."

Did you stick by these objectives?

The objectives are important, but they're also way too earnest, too reverent, too bland and platitudinous. If my hometown radio station interrupted the music to play a cheery featurette about the great things the police were doing, I'd want to find a new radio station.

Ye adou're gone from Safar now. Do you know of changes in the administration of the RIAB?

The Marine Corps infantry battalion that came to replace us decided to control the RIAB a little more formally and systematically. They interpreted information operations as a form of "non-kinetic fire support," and tasked their artillery officers with shaping the flow of information. Just as small caliber mortar rounds can be used at the platoon and company level, but larger mortars and artillery have to be cleared by the battalion staff or higher, the new unit planned to require approval of all RIAB programming at the battalion level. The upside is that the battalion staff will be able to compare methods from the several RIABs under its command, but it also takes some of the creative spontaneity out of the hands of the people who know the area best.

What will happen with more centralized security? Is RIAB going to lose its juice?

The new artillery lieutenant in Safar was dreading the prospect of filtering everything through the battalion's proposed review process. "I'll just send them some short messages for approval, but there are just too many other files I'd have to upload. This is not going to be a fun summer for the locals. No more music and poetry. Just public service messages on loop." The attempt at a local and responsive outlet becomes a media conglomeration with top-down authorization. Will Captain Gefar still be able to hop on the mike and speak to the people?

How did the RIAB play Osama bin Laden's death?

On my last day of work in Safar, after ten months in Helmand, I woke up in a pool of sweat. The sun was already baking our tent. I sat up on my cot. Our artillery officer looked over. "Did you hear about the raid?" he asked. "What raid?" I answered groggily, incredulous that anything had happened in Safar in the hours I'd been sleeping. "They got Osama." The message from battalion was to the point: "Please include this in your messaging." Our civil affairs officer crafted one of his manipulation-of-local-logic specials for the RIAB: The Taliban failed at protecting bin Laden, their guest, as required by the code of *Pashtunwali*. If the Taliban couldn't care for one man, how would they care for you?

A Marine was killed by a suicide bomber on a motorcycle that day. Otherwise, it was business as usual. No one mentioned it at the elders *shura*, and the bazaar was its typical flow of vendors and vendees. No one was dancing in the streets. But a small Marine-run radio station mostly kept the music playing.

Captain Sam Jacobson will be a first year student at Stanford Law School starting in Fall, 2011.
