


**Profiling and Influence Analysis  
How Soap Operas Bring about Change**

  
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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### The popularity of soap operas

This paper examines why soap operas are popular across the world, and how they have been used to bring about change. Serials have been used by rival proprietors in all mass media (newspapers, magazines, comic strips, film, radio and then television) to capture a market. The name 'soap opera' appeared in the 1930s, when domestic serials provided a vehicle for advertising health and beauty products. Early radio soap operas were broadcast in the afternoon and designed to appeal to women, a focus that has continued.

Soap operas' episodicity – regular narrative instalments with a break between episodes – provide a space for talking with others about the content of the serial. This is a key aspect of both people's enjoyment of soaps, and of ensuring that they return to consume the next episode. Soaps focus on talk rather than action, developing relationships between multiple characters over multiple plot lines. The regular follower enjoys engaging with these evolving relationships, and evaluating their own experiences in terms of the serial's social patterns. Many soap operas include elements of fantasy, an 'external unrealism', but the relationships and emotions portrayed need an 'inner realism' to engage the listener.

Many of the soap operas consumed across the globe are imported, from big productions like USA's *Dallas* or Australia's *Neighbours*, to the huge number emanating from Latin America, or shared between Arab countries. The 'open' nature of serials means that they can raise potentially controversial social issues, as contentious characters can be cut if the audience does not react positively towards them. Soaps are relatively cheap, and audiences can be exceptionally loyal, but this can take years to build.

### Afghanistan's soap opera

*New Home New Life* (NHNL), the BBC World Service Trust (BBC WST)'s Afghan soap opera, provides entertainment and education and has brought about considerable behavioural change. NHNL was first broadcast in Dari and Pashtu in 1994 and remains the most popular radio programme in Afghanistan, with more than 14 million people listening at least once a month.

Woven into the story are informational themes such as health, education, and law and order, intended to support development of people disrupted by conflict. Practical advice on mine awareness, managing livestock, nutrition and child development, as well the Taliban's restrictions on women, corruption and participation in elections and *loya jirgas*, have been transmitted in the form of stories. NHNL has been able to address little-discussed topics such as child birth, or challenge controversial practices like using marriage to end a cycle of revenge.

The programme is funded by international donors, including the UK Government, but the BBC retains strict editorial control. Once donors have agreed the serial's themes, storylines are developed from material gathered by an evaluation team which travels all over Afghanistan, collecting people's real-life experiences. Each 15 minute episode has five scenes, and includes characters doing the 'wrong' thing so that the consequences of undesirable actions can be seen. NHNL can respond to unexpected events and support continued development, such as when UNICEF's vaccination campaign was threatened by the expulsion of all foreigners from Afghanistan.

NHNL story collection staff assess whether the stories broadcast on the soap have the impacts desired by the donors, supplemented by independent evaluations. NHNL has changed breastfeeding practices, reduced landmine incidents and increased Afghans' awareness of government responsibilities. Although soap operas are particularly effective where there are limited information sources, which was certainly the case in Afghanistan when NHNL began in 1994, the soap's continued popularity is evidence of its credibility.

### **Soap operas as change agents**

Government agencies have used soap operas elsewhere to bring about change. DFID and FCO have supported other serials in the former Soviet Union and in Africa; in Arab states Ramadan soaps address social issues. DFID suggests that soap opera is probably the most effective means of bringing about social change. As radio is a key information tool in states with poor infrastructure, it should be a central feature of influence campaigns. Focus must start with the intended audience and their viewing habits, particularly entertainment, rather than desired 'messages'. The MoD might also apply the popular characteristics of soap opera to other techniques designed to influence local people.

## HOW SOAP OPERAS BRING ABOUT CHANGE

### A world awash with soap opera

1. Soap operas have a remarkable cross-cultural appeal. In 1995, *Neighbours* was being watched in 25 countries around the world, from Bulgaria to Zambia. An Indian serialisation of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* broadcast in 1987-8 was regularly watched by up to 100 million people; protests erupted when exams were scheduled during its broadcast time, and 3000 sanitation workers went on strike on hearing of the imminent end of the series.<sup>1</sup> In Trinidad, a researcher found that 'for an hour a day, fieldwork proved impossible as no-one would speak with me, and I was reduced to watching people watching a soap opera'.<sup>2</sup> A Turkish soap opera caused controversy in the Arab world, after being dubbed into Arabic by a Syrian company, drawing criticism for its portrayal of non-practicising Muslims kissing and drinking alcohol, and apparently prompting divorce cases.<sup>3</sup> Other work on soap opera in Afghanistan, Egypt and not least the UK testifies to the genre's extraordinary cross-cultural popularity.<sup>4</sup>

2. This paper examines why soap opera is so popular and how it has been used to help to bring about change. It includes an in-depth case study of *New Home, New Life*, the BBC World Service Trust's long-running successful Afghan soap opera. It concludes with suggestions as to how the MoD might make greater use of soap opera's chance-inducing qualities.

## THE POPULARITY OF SOAP OPERA

### The history of soap operas

3. The development of serials begins with their use in print (newspapers and magazines; Dickens' works were initially serialised), through comic strips (such as *Flash Gordon* and *Dick Tracey*), film serials (initially in collaboration with newspaper summaries of plots) and on to radio and then television serials. In each case the drive came from competition between rival proprietors, and an urge to capture a market. And they were, and remain, extremely popular. In 1940 in the USA, 64 soap operas were regularly broadcast on radio, including all ten highest-rated daytime programmes.<sup>5</sup>

4. The name 'soap opera' appeared in the 1930s, when serials addressing household problems were developed to provide a vehicle for advertising health and beauty products. This arrangement continues, to the extent that, at least in the 1990s, Proctor and Gamble owned several serials, and supplied them to foreign television stations at minimal if any cost. In return, the station allowed advertising of Proctor and Gamble products during the commercial breaks. Allen argues that within a few years, 'soap operas proved to be one of the most effective broadcasting advertising vehicles ever devised'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Allen, 1995, p. 14,2-3.

<sup>2</sup> Miller, 1995, p. 216.

<sup>3</sup> BBC Monitoring, 2008a.

<sup>4</sup> Skuse, 1999, 2000a, 2000b; Abu-Lughod, 1995; Geraghty, 1995; Hobson, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> Hagedorn, 1995, p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> Allen, 1995, p. 16,2.

5. The time of broadcast of the early radio soap operas, in the afternoon, was also specifically designed to appeal to women. This focus on a female audience has continued across time and cultures. *The Young and the Restless* has been said to emphasise dialogue rather than visual content, 'because this is compatible with domestic work'.<sup>7</sup> And DFID argues that, 'In many developing countries, reading, listening or watching the national and international news tends to be considered to be a male activity. Engaging with other programming, such as soap operas, may be considered a more 'female' media activity.'<sup>8</sup> While DFID recognize that radio may be monopolized or prioritized for use by men, it remains a key information avenue for women across the world. In Afghanistan,

'Communications infrastructure is extremely basic, though radio ownership levels are at saturation level. Despite this, women and children often find it difficult to access and use radio, because radio listening is socially constructed as an ostensibly male activity... men can monopolise the use of the radio for the serious duty of listening to news. Because little investment is made in female education women are widely perceived to be less capable or interested in economic or political issues. However, where women do have regular access to radio it is commonly described as a window to the outside world or as a lifeline.'<sup>9</sup>

Thus soap operas often provide entertainment, and information, to people (usually women) who are otherwise engaged in domestic tasks which do not require their full mental concentration.

6. In addition to intending to change audiences' soap consumption habits in favour of their sponsors' products, soap operas have also long been deliberately used to bring about wider social change. For example, *The Archers* was introduced in the UK after WWII in order to help farmers increase their productivity. One storyline followed the fortunes of a young pig-keeper, who was trying to make enough profit to marry his fiancé. The wedding plans were on and off, depending on the success of his varying schemes for increased pig production. Listeners were hooked on the romantic developments, but at the same time much of the Britain public became experts in pig rearing.<sup>10</sup>

### How Soap Operas Work

7. Hagedorn argues that 'serials have been introduced into every medium precisely at the point at which they are emerging as a mass medium: because they constitute a remarkably effective tool for establishing and then developing a substantial consuming public for that medium.'<sup>11</sup> They are deliberately designed to attract and retain a loyal audience over a long time period. This research task seeks to understand how they achieve and maintain such audience loyalty.

#### Narrative breaks and social interaction

8. A key characteristic of soap operas and other serials is their episodicity: 'the enforced and regular suspension of both textual display and reading activity'.<sup>12</sup> This distinguishes

<sup>7</sup> Miller, 1995, p. 215.

<sup>8</sup> DFID, 2000, p. 33.

<sup>9</sup> Skuse, 2000a, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Rigby, 1993, p. 6 quoted in Skuse, 1999, p.142.

<sup>11</sup> Hagedorn, 1995, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Allen, 1995, p. 17.

serials from other forms of narratives (books, radio plays, films), both in the regularity of instalments, and in the lack of control that the consumer has over when those instalments take place. Such a regular narrative break of course stimulates interest in viewing subsequent episodes.

9. But these 'delays across the narrative breaks'<sup>13</sup> provide a space and need for interaction with others about the content of the serial. Perhaps more than any other form of television, soap operas encourage viewers to extend the pleasure of watching by talking about what they watch.<sup>14</sup> Silk factory workers in Hangzhou, China, bring each other up to date with episodes of soaps that they had missed because of the revolving shift pattern.<sup>15</sup> In Trinidad, watching soap opera is a social activity, as televisions often attract a neighbour or two, and collective discussion follows the viewing. A researcher was shocked when an important Muslim festival was interrupted by three women announcing the serial's developments to those who had missed the episode by attending the ceremony.<sup>16</sup> In the UK, researchers found that the people relied on others in order to understand the narratives of soap operas.

'Soap opera texts are the products not of individual and isolated readings but of collective construction – collaborative readings, as it were, of small social groups such as families, friends and neighbours, or people sharing an apartment. Most viewers report that they have made it a habit to rely on other people in order to compensate for gaps in their comprehension.'<sup>17</sup>

Finally, a Rwandan radio soap opera that aimed to improve inter-ethnic relations was found to be most effective in doing so when listened to in a social setting: the listeners discussed the programme and later reported more positive inter-ethnic attitudes, not due to a change in their beliefs stemming from the message of the soap opera (though the content of it did matter), but due to a change in their perceptions of socially sanctioned practices, most likely induced through the ensuing social interaction.<sup>18</sup>

10. Consumption of soap operas is thus a communal act, whether they are viewed in groups or 'consumed' by discussion in groups after the episode has been aired. This time for viewers or listeners to talk about the soap opera is both a key facet of peoples' enjoyment of serials, and an aspect of ensuring that they return to view/listen again and again.

### Talk rather than action

11. In any particular episode of a soap opera, not a lot happens. Rather there is an emphasis on the development of the relationships between the characters, and 'on talk rather than action'.<sup>19</sup> This again makes serials consumable by those who cannot focus all their attention on images, as they are occupied with domestic chores. The focus on talk rather than action is linked to the presence of a large community of characters, and associated multiple plot lines.<sup>20</sup> While this makes comprehension of an individual episode difficult for the occasional viewer, the regular follower enjoys engaging with the constantly

<sup>13</sup> Hagedorn, 1995, p. 28.

<sup>14</sup> Allen, 1995, p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Rofel, 1995, p. 301.

<sup>16</sup> Miller, 1995, p. 216.

<sup>17</sup> Seiter et al., 1991, p. 226.

<sup>18</sup> Paluck, in press

<sup>19</sup> Allen, 1995, p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> Allen, 1995, p. 19.

evolving relationships between the characters, such that 'what happens' is only secondary. Such insights into relationships help to explain the attractiveness of soap operas, because they enable people to 'evaluate their own experiences as well as the norms and values they live by in terms of the relationship patterns and social blueprints the show presents.'<sup>21</sup>

### Inner realism and external unrealism

12. The extent to which the events that take place within a soap opera are realistic is of questionable significance. It has been suggested that UK viewers judge British soaps for their realism, while they view (and enjoy) American soap operas as fantasy.<sup>22</sup> Indeed viewers can enjoy and critique the unreality of soaps, as in viewers' amusement at a character's clean hair after three days walking through jungle.<sup>23</sup> But importing the British gritty realism into Kazakhstani serials was not overly successful, as listeners were not interested in being reminded of their own difficult circumstances.<sup>24</sup> Yet a serial must be sufficiently 'genuine' to allow enjoyment, because

'It is pleasurable to be able to deny the textuality and the fictional nature of the film and forget it: it gives the viewers a comfortable and cosy feeling because they can 'let the narrative flow over them' without any effort. The apparent 'transparency' of the narrative produces a feeling of direct involvement, because it ensures that the viewer can act exactly as though the story really happened.'<sup>25</sup>

13. This is possible even if the concrete situations narrated are far removed from the life of the viewers, because they are 'rather regarded as symbolic representations of more general living experiences: rows, intrigues, problems, happiness and misery.'<sup>26</sup> This has been described as an 'inner realism' combined with an 'external unrealism'.<sup>27</sup> The important point therefore seems to be that the relationships between characters must be believable, and reflect viewers' experiences, even if the situations in which the characters act are far removed from reality. It has been suggested that the 'open' nature of serials, which hold no expectation of closure or a happy ending, contributes to the enjoyment of soap operas.<sup>28</sup> There is however little other evidence for the importance of the endless nature of serials, particularly in relation to their role as change agents.

### The local versus the global

14. Many of the soap operas consumed across the globe are imported. This does not only include the US big budget productions such as *Dallas* (consumed in, among other places, the Netherlands, Israel and Japan)<sup>29</sup>, or Australia's *Neighbours*, but also the massive number of productions emanating from Latin America. In the mid-1990s Mexico's *Televisa* exported to 59 countries and Brazil's *TV-Globo* to more than 100.<sup>30</sup>

15. The popularity of foreign soap operas around the world suggests there is a value in importing serials, rather than producing local versions. Indeed it has been argued that *The Young and the Restless* is successful in Trinidad in part precisely because it is not

<sup>21</sup> Seiter *et al.*, 1991, p. 236; see also Ang, 1985, p. 20.

<sup>22</sup> Hobson, 1991, p. 157.

<sup>23</sup> Seiter *et al.*, 1991, p. 236.

<sup>24</sup> Mandel, 1998.

<sup>25</sup> Ang, 1985, p.40.

<sup>26</sup> Ang, 1985, pp. 44-45.

<sup>27</sup> Ang, 1985, p. 47.

<sup>28</sup> Ang, 1985, p. 75.

<sup>29</sup> Ang, 1985; Katz, 1993.

<sup>30</sup> Allen, 1995.

Trinidadian. Trinidadians describe their country in a word as 'bacchanal', implying confusion and scandal but also suggesting the revelation of truth through scandal. Soap operas are also bacchanal, and hence widely enjoyed. But because Trinidadian television is constrained to produce serious programmes, it is only through an imported soap opera that a bacchanal series may be enjoyed.<sup>31</sup>

16. Other work, however, has found that home-grown serials are particularly engaging. *Yearnings* was a month-long, daily three hour serial aired in China in 1991, eighteen months after the Tiananmen Square demonstrations. The scriptwriters adapted the genre to Chinese tastes by developing 'archetypal characters: the virtuous, filial woman who would appeal to Chinese men, the effeminate intellectual, the female shrew, etc.' By beginning the series in 1969, at the height of the Cultural Revolution, with the dispersal of an intellectual family, the soap opera enabled viewers who had suffered during this period to connect with the narrative tradition of 'speaking bitterness.' This narrative style was initially a political tool (the public accusations against landlords) but after the Cultural Revolution it took a social form in intellectuals' outpourings of bitterness about the sufferings they had endured. Thus one way in which the soap opera 'seduced' its viewers was by using a familiar, and culturally specific, narrative form.<sup>32</sup>

17. Despite the cross-cultural popularity of the soap opera genre, there is no guarantee that the same serial is popular in all countries. They are received differently in different cultural contexts. The Australian soap opera, *Neighbours*, had its positive reception in the UK but a relatively negative reception in the US and France, suggesting that the cultural and televisual norms of importing countries determine the success or otherwise of an imported soap.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, it is claimed that the focus on 'traditional' white families in British soaps means that it is difficult to incorporate issues around homosexuality into the model, and impossible to accommodate debates around race.<sup>34</sup>

#### Sandbox for controversy

18. Allen argues that because there is no final moment of ideological or moral closure, the open serial is probably

'a poor vehicle for the inculcation of particular values, but it does mean that open serial writers and producers can raise any number of potentially controversial and contentious social issues without having to make any ideological commitment to them... This is not to say that open serials are not ideological constructs, but it is ultimately not in their interest (or that of their producers or sponsors) to be seen to take sides on any particular issue or to appear to be overtly didactic' (1995, p.21).

19. However the soap opera does provide a venue for the introduction of controversial topics, as contentious characters may be cut if the audience does not react positively towards them. Indeed it has been suggested that such plot lines are used to retain audience loyalty.<sup>35</sup> *The Riordans*, an Irish soap which ran from 1965 to 1978, addressed a range of controversial social issues, including the living conditions of farmworkers, sexuality and the use of contraceptives, alcohol and tranquiliser addiction, and the role of the church in Irish society. It was its open serial form that enabled it to do this on

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<sup>31</sup> Miller, 1995, p. 223.

<sup>32</sup> Rofel, 1995, pp. 303-4

<sup>33</sup> Crofts, 1995, pp.118-9.

<sup>34</sup> Geraghty, 1995, p. 74.

<sup>35</sup> Hagedorn, 1995.



government-controlled television, in a society where even in 1986 the majority opposed divorce, and which was under scrutiny of the Catholic Church. *The Riordans* could raise these issues without taking a stand or offering solutions.<sup>36</sup>

## CASE STUDY: AFGHANISTAN'S SOAP OPERA

### Edutainment in a Conflict Zone

20. *New Home New Life* (NHNL), the BBC World Service Trust (BBC WST)'s Afghan soap opera, is one of the most successful examples of a serial that provides both entertainment and education, and has brought about considerable behavioural change. This case study is based on a review of BBC, government and academic literature (including an anthropology PhD thesis on NHNL<sup>37</sup>) as well as interviews with NHNL's BBC WST production team, FCO representatives responsible for part funding the soap, and DIS's Head of Media Analysis.

21. *New Home New Life* has been broadcast in Dari and in Pashtu since its inception in 1994 and remains the most popular radio programme in Afghanistan, with more than 14 million people listening at least once a month.<sup>38</sup> From its inception it has been written, produced and acted by a large team of Afghans, initially in Pakistan but since 2002 in Kabul. The radio programme is supplemented by a radio series for children, a *New Home, New Life* cartoon, and educational programmes covering rural and urban concerns, health issues and political progress.<sup>39</sup>

22. The soap opera began with the return of refugees to three fictional villages in Afghanistan, and followed their attempts to rebuild their lives after years in exile. It is designed to realistically reflect society in Afghanistan, and uses a large character set with several family groups carrying the bulk of the storylines, including a troublesome local landlord, well-educated returnee refugees and a widow and her sons. Although NHNL's role and context have changed significantly in the last 15 years, it retains its ability to captivate and influence its audience.

23. In the absence of state educational facilities, it delivered impartial social development messages without being overly didactic.<sup>40</sup> Woven into the story are informational themes such as health, education and law and order, intended to support development of people disrupted by conflict.<sup>41</sup> Practical advice on; mine awareness, managing livestock, nutrition and child development, the Taleban's restrictions on women, corruption and participation in elections and *loya jirgas*, has been transmitted in the form of stories, developed from material gathered by an evaluation team which travels all over Afghanistan, collecting people's real-life experiences to feed into the soap opera.<sup>42</sup>

24. NHNL has been able to address controversial or relatively little discussed topics. One story followed the pregnancy of a women diagnosed with HIV, who was so worried about the baby being infected that she attempted an abortion against doctors' advice, by

<sup>36</sup> Hagedorn, 1995, p.22.

<sup>37</sup> Skuse, 1999.

<sup>38</sup> Saville and Volf, 2008.

<sup>39</sup> BBC, 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Skuse, 1999, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> Clark, undated, p. 1.

<sup>42</sup> Clark, undated, p. 2 and interview with BBC WS.

taking herbal medicine, and nearly died. In a country where pregnancy is rarely mentioned in public, the soap opera succeeded in raising issues around mothers' health and childbirth.<sup>43</sup>

25. The programme also addressed the Afghan tradition of using marriage to end a cycle of revenge. In 1996, when Shir Mohammed's father was killed he accepted a young woman, Sabira, from the killer's family as his bride, instead of taking revenge by killing the man. A decade later, Sabira still suffers hostility from her in-laws who associate her with the murder. This storyline was so powerful that it prompted response from Mullah Omar, then ruling Afghanistan as leader of the Taleban, who denounced the practice as un-Islamic.<sup>44</sup>

26. Other members of the Taleban are known to have listened to the programme; in 2001 the Education Minister compared George Bush to NHNL's arrogant landowner, Jabar Khan. Several, however, thought it should be banned, in part because of the voice it gave to women. Later Afghan government figures are also known to listen in; one kept a British diplomat waiting for 15 minutes while he heard the end of an episode.

27. Ethnographic research in the late 1990s in Afghanistan found that men, women and children often gathered over a meal to listen to the BBC World Service. The choice of programme and length of time spent listening to the radio was well considered due to the high cost of batteries. Radio ownership was high, at 83% for male respondents to the research, not least because the lack of other information sources meant people felt that, 'We have to listen to radio to find out about our country'. Men focussed on the news, with women and children becoming more interested when the soap opera started, but men were also clearly interested, particularly in cliff-hanger or comedy moments.<sup>45</sup>

28. BBC WST staff reported that the period 1999-2001 was challenging, as the Taleban became resentful towards the West, and were considering banning the soap. Following the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamyan in 2001, and the ensuing international outcry, BBC correspondents were expelled from Afghanistan but the NHNL story collectors for the most part retained their permits. For a few months in 2001 they avoided entering Afghanistan, and collected stories only from the refugee camps, which staff found very frustrating as material from Afghanistan itself was 'much richer'.

29. After 2001, the BBC considered taking NHNL off air as perhaps no longer relevant, but it was recognised that people needed information about the rapid changes in the region, particularly when the borders with Pakistan and Iran were closed. Staff reported that the storylines were not so much concerned with the bombing and invasion, more with the massive number of frightened people who were moving around and out of the country. Storylines encouraged people to consider whether they really had to leave, and if they did, to plan ahead, so as to avoid ending up in a minefield, or the whole family being without water. Although the team were unable to capture nationwide results, anecdotal evidence suggested that these were successful episodes.

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<sup>43</sup> Clark, undated, p.2.

<sup>44</sup> Clarke, undated, p.2.

<sup>45</sup> Skuse, 1999, pp. 119, 115, 109.

## Creating New Home, New Life

### Funding

30. The programme is funded by international donors, who provide input to the themes of the programme, although the BBC retains strict editorial control. Donors have included United Nations agencies (UNESCO, UNICEF, UNOCHA, UNHACR, UNMACA, UNFPA), NGOs (Agha Khan Foundation, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation), the European Commission and the UK Government (DFID, FCO and the MoD).<sup>46</sup>

31. HM Government has contributed to the funding of NHNL as part of the Afghan Education Programme, funded through the Global Conflict Prevention Pool (GCPP) a joint MoD, DFID and FCO budget administered by the FCO. In FY07/08 the GCPP contribution to NHNL amounted to £300,000; reportedly a similar figure had been spent on the programme in previous years. In 2008, in the same year that the GCPP became the Stabilisation Aid Fund, now run by the Embassy in Kabul, the figure decreased to £150,000, but FCO representatives hoped this figure would increase. The Afghanistan Drugs Inter-Departmental Unit (ADIDU) also contributed £200,000 to NHNL specifically to support counter-narcotics themes in the programme. The UK Government contribution amounted to 25% of the total costs of the BBC WST's Afghan Education Projects, of which NHNL is a core part.<sup>47</sup>

### Theme development

32. Crafting episodes of NHNL takes approximately three months: one for research, one for storyline development and recording, and one month lead time before the programme is broadcast. The first step is to agree, with the donors, the themes that the forthcoming episodes will cover. All donors, including FCO and DFID staff, are invited to regular consultative meetings to contribute to the programme's themes. FCO staff reported that UK Government influence over the themes included in NHNL is largely informal. Representatives have attended consultative meetings, but the FCO head of press and public affairs also speaks with the BBC World Service Trust on an *ad hoc* basis, and provides assistance with funding applications. He felt that the BBC was well aware of the interests of the UK Government with respect to the programme, and that overall NHNL is a 'very effective tool for getting out broadly positive independent messages'.<sup>48</sup>

33. BBC WST staff reported in 2008 that the only issue they were struggling with was that of poppy cultivation. They agreed to cover the issue only because it was a big issue on the ground, not because it was pushed by the British Government. However, they are careful to ensure that they do not broadcast 'in a vacuum'. In this case, they felt that their efforts were not supported by activities on the ground, in part because the UK, US and Afghan Governments were all following different counter-narcotic policies. Attempts by listeners to diversify their crops have been constrained by a lack of local support and the limited reach of the state in places like Helmand province, where opium production is considerable.<sup>49</sup>

34. Although donors can suggest themes, and provide expert advice on particular issues, the BBC retains editorial control and the donors do not get involved in the storyline

<sup>46</sup> Clerk, undated, p.1, 3.

<sup>47</sup> Stabilisation Aid Fund, 2008, p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with FCO representatives.

<sup>49</sup> Skuse, Frost Yocum & Gillespie, 2008, pp. 11-12.

development. The BBC's editorial independence is essential for maintaining its reputation with its audience, as they recognise that listeners would lose faith if it took a stance on the conflict.

### Story research

35. The NHNL team has found that 'on the ground support for the stories is essential', with the result that almost all storylines are based on real experiences of Afghan people. These are gathered by story collection or 'needs assessment'<sup>50</sup> teams who travel throughout Afghanistan, speaking with male and female listeners.

36. The themes agreed with the donors are broken into topics. Focus groups of listeners are formed, with members selected regardless of whether they have any experience of these topics. Efforts are made to ensure inclusive consultation, so both Pushtuns and non-Pushtuns are consulted, and if the topic concerns poppies, for example, it is felt important to collate stories from poppy farmers and their families. If a subject requires additional work to elaborate the stories collected, the NHNL researchers might walk around the area to identify signs that confirm or disprove the story, or carry out 'spot checks' to see a reported 'fantastic stable' or check whether soap is indeed in a toilet as reported (indicating a change in hygiene practices). They also carry out key person interviews, for example with a doctor, for greater information. The reports from this research are shared with donors for their technical input.

37. BBC staff gave an example of coming across an engineer in a valley who had set up a dynamo to produce electricity. A researcher was sent to collect full details, including which dynamo was used, what it was used for, and where the engineer obtained the cable. Following broadcast of an episode in which a NHNL character set a dynamo in the same way, NHNL researchers discovered dynamos appearing in other valleys and in other provinces.

### Storyline writing and recording

38. A strict formula is followed in developing each 15 minute episode, of five scenes, each changing location, character set and length. There are no long monologues and each scene contains at least two characters, with plot development occurring in every scene. Dari and Pashtu dialogues are developed in parallel, to ensure linguistic idioms are authentic, so that listeners to one version do not feel that they are listening to a translation of the other.<sup>51</sup> Sound effects help to create a believable sense of place, as well as aiding character identification, with the gurgle of a bubble pipe or the dragging of shovels indicating the presence of particular characters.<sup>52</sup>

39. Scripts include characters doing the 'wrong' thing, so that the consequences of undesirable actions are seen. As a script writer explained, 'It's like having a book from which they can practice a real way of life'. Stories were also included that would be appreciated by the Taleban, such as stopping play of football at prayer time.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Stabilisation Aid Fund, 2008.

<sup>51</sup> Skuse, 1999, pp. 128, 129, 131.

<sup>52</sup> Skuse, 1999, p. 175; Skuse, Frost Yocum & Gillespie, 2008, p. 8.

<sup>53</sup> Skuse, 1999, pp. 144, 240, 154.

40. NHNL was initially produced and recorded at Radio Pakistan, then broadcast from London and rebroadcast from Peshawar and Quetta in Pakistan.<sup>54</sup> Six episodes are broadcast each week, three episodes in Dari and three in Pashto, but repeated broadcasts mean that it goes out 24 times per week, in the prime-time slots before and after national and international news.<sup>55</sup>

41. The month-long lead time allows for delays in delivery to the transmission site, but 'the wonderful elasticity of soap' also means that storylines can be changed at short notice if significant events occur in Afghanistan. So, for example, if the scriptwriters learn of a vaccination campaign due to start in two weeks time, episodes can be re-written to ensure that the Afghan population is well informed. This occurred when shortly before bombing began on 7 October 2001 the Taliban expelled all foreigners from the country and closed down communication channels. UNICEF had invested \$1 million in a polio vaccination campaign, but had no way of communicating that it would still go ahead. NHNL already had a planned storyline about the vaccination campaign, which was retained. In addition, an interview with a senior UNICEF representative was broadcast next to the soap. A message was recorded that despite the difficult situation, people were still encouraged to use health clinics if they saw one, because their children would not survive anyway if they had polio. This message had the additional effect of making people recognise that the vaccination campaign going ahead indicated that Kabul would not be completely destroyed.

### Evaluation

42. NHNL story collection staff also have a role in assessing whether the stories broadcast on the soap have the impacts desired by the donors.<sup>56</sup> For example, in trying to end the practice of putting burning charcoal onto the stomach of a pregnant woman in order to change the sex of the child, NHNL might include this practice in one of its storylines, along with the consequences. The story would include another family in which a member prevented the practice. Following broadcast, the researchers would return to the area from which the story was gathered and assess whether the level of information about the hazards of the practice had altered. If not, the topic would be repeated with different characters.

43. This approach succeeded in changing breastfeeding practices. Initially it was a challenge to convince women to give the first milk (colostrum) to newborn children. Women thought it was dirty because it had blood in it, while doctors said it contained vital nutrients. NHNL addressed this topic in 1994-6 and saw improvements in breastfeeding practices. Where the colostrum was still not consumed, the excuse had changed to it being 'hard to digest'. BBC staff interviewed in 2008 said that they would not expect listeners now to talk of 'impurities'.

44. NHNL has also influenced the way that Afghans view conflicts. In 1995, when the Afghan actor Ismail Aram emigrated to Australia, NHNL had to kill off his character, Uncle Khair Mohammed, in a conflict over poppy growing, which he had been trying to prevent. In a sign of the popularity and influence of the soap opera, the BBC mail bag received multiple letters of condolence and mourning ceremonies were held for Nek Mohammed. At

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<sup>54</sup> Skuse, 1999, p. 15.

<sup>55</sup> Skuse, 1999, p. 16; Saville & Volf, 2008

<sup>56</sup> Skuse, Frost Yocum & Gillespie, 2008.

a *jirga* set up to resolve a local dispute in Shinwar, an old man asked, 'How many Uncle Khair Mohammeds have to be killed before this conflict will be resolved?' The soap character, seen locally as a good man, had become part of their conception of normal life.<sup>57</sup>

45. In addition to the BBC's own research and anecdotal evidence, other organisations have evaluated the impact of NHNL. UNOCHA commissioned research which showed that there was a rapid decline in landmine incidents directly after an NHNL episode started with a storyline about a boy whose lower leg was blown off by unexploded ordinance while he was ploughing the family fields. The decline in injuries could not be attributed to anything but the influence of NHNL; indeed mainstream mine awareness training programmes were having an adverse effect in that they produced a shift from lower limb to upper limb injuries. An evaluation by DFID found that the same storyline had encouraged many young disabled listeners.<sup>58</sup> More recently, a survey conducted in 2007 found that Afghans who had recently listened to *New Home New Life* were more likely than non-listeners to vote; to be able to name the levels of government responsible for problems such as no water supply; and to agree that poppy cultivation is detrimental to Afghanistan's reputation.<sup>59</sup>

46. BBC WST staff suggested that their programmes are particularly effective where there are limited information sources. This was certainly the case when NHNL began in 1994, when decades of conflict had left an educational void. Its success illustrates that where physical aid delivery may be difficult or dangerous, mass media can reach large audiences with a relevant message in a highly cost-effective way.<sup>60</sup>

47. But in 2008, Afghanistan had a 'very vibrant mediascape' with 11 TV stations in Kabul alone, 50 FM radio stations and hundreds of publications. The increasing access to television and other radio channels means that reliance on NHNL for education and entertainment has reduced.<sup>61</sup> However, a significant proportion of the rural population still only receive BBC WS, and it is still the most-listened to broadcaster in Afghanistan.<sup>62</sup> Even in places where entertainment sources have multiplied, NHNL retains its following due to the programme's credibility.

## CONCLUSION: SOAP OPERAS AS CHANGE AGENTS

### Evidence of change

48. *New Home New Life* is but one, albeit very significant, example of the use that DFID and other agencies have made of soap opera as a tool for conveying narratives intended to bring about change. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, UK development money funded the creation of television soap operas to develop awareness and acceptance of

<sup>57</sup> Clark, undated, p. 1

<sup>58</sup> UNOCHA research described by BBC WST staff in interview; DFID, 2000, p.32. The success of this storyline had a significant impact on one of the soap's staff, himself an Afghan refugee. In 1994 while working on NHNL in Pakistan he had been applying for asylum. He received an 'unreadable' A4 letter, which he deciphered to discover that its author had also stepped on a landmine, and was lying injured considering suicide when he heard the NHNL character step on a mine. The listener said, 'I'm going to see what he does; when he dies, I'm next.' The letter continued, 'Now he's a tailor and I'm a bicycle repair man'. Recognising the significant impact of NHNL on its target audience, the now producer said, 'That changed me - I saw a purpose'. He stopped applying for asylum, returned to Kabul with NHNL in 2002 and continues to work for the BBC World Service Trust in London.

<sup>59</sup> Stabilisation Aid Fund, 2008, p. 2; Saville & Volf, 2008, p. 10.

<sup>60</sup> Skuse, 1999, pp.14-15.

<sup>61</sup> DFID, 2007a, p. 31.

<sup>62</sup> Stabilisation Aid Fund, 2008, p. 10.

reforms in line with the drive towards market capitalism. For example, the FCO contributed £1 million to Kazakhstan to develop a soap opera based around a kiosk, to help make concepts like 'privatisation' familiar to the post-socialist audience.<sup>63</sup> Other examples of the use of soap opera include a local NGO's programme, *Los Nuevos Vecinos* (Our New Neighbours), following the earthquake that hit the Colombian town of Armenia in January 1999. The serial's five writers lived in the camps or temporary housing set up following the earthquake.<sup>64</sup>

49. In Liberia, Common Ground Productions produces a radio soap opera, on the problems and dilemmas faced by a Liberian refugee family. In South Africa, a radio soap opera, *Soul City*, is but one aspect of an 'edutainment' campaign of the same name, promoting messages regarding equality of rights on the issue of land tenure. An evaluation of the campaign indicated that awareness of issues such as government subsidies and redistribution schemes rose by 20-30% for people exposed to *Soul City* media.<sup>65</sup>

50. In Arab states, broadcasters commission special programmes during Ramadan, the Muslim month-long fast, capitalising on the fact that families come together at dusk to break the fast together. Soap operas are one popular form of Ramadan broadcasting. For example in Lebanon during 2008, after breaking the fast, families watched Egyptian and Syrian soap operas together providing light relief from the political uncertainty facing the country. Elsewhere broadcasters have used the attraction of soap operas to carry messages to their audiences. A Syrian soap opera, *Arabs in London*, warned of the problems facing Arabs living in the West, including cultural conflict, loss of identity, marital relations and terrorism, in a bid to dispel a belief among many Arab youth that the West is an ideal place to live. Similarly, UAE state-run and Lebanese private channels have shown programmes that tackle Islamic extremism by attempting to dispel the distorted image given to Islam, depicting terrorism as a global threat that threatens Muslims as well as non-Muslims.<sup>66</sup>

51. DFID remains interested in soap opera as a way of engaging with audiences across cultures. A recently approved DFID project will use a Kenyan TV soap opera as a vehicle for secondary school students in the UK 'to engage with international development and poverty reduction.'<sup>67</sup>

52. Although the BBC World Service Trust does not release its *New Home, New Life* story-collecting research data to the MoD, it is clear from the evaluation results described that the soap opera is both very popular in Afghanistan, and has been able to bring about changes in people's behaviour. Elsewhere, an evaluation of an entertainment-education radio soap opera introduced in seven areas of Tanzania in 1993, compared how listeners responded to an alternative programme in an eighth area. In 1995-1997 the soap opera broadcast nationwide. Using data from annual surveys of 2,750 households, and a sample of new family planning adopters in 79 health clinics, the authors concluded that 'the soap opera had strong behavioural effects on family planning adoption; it increased listeners' self-efficacy regarding family planning adoption and influenced listeners to talk with their spouses and peers about contraception.'<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Mandel, 1998, 2002; Gillespie, 1996, p.27.

<sup>64</sup> DFID, 2000, p.44.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45, 47.

<sup>66</sup> BBC Monitoring 2008b, 2008c, 2006.

<sup>67</sup> DFID, 2007b.

<sup>68</sup> Rogers et al., 1999, p.193.

53. DFID states that 'creative approaches' such as soap operas can be useful in 'supporting peace-building and provision of humanitarian information', because

- 'Fictional media such as soap opera, drama and mini-dramas can provide combatants and civilians with a safe neutral 'space' through which conflict, human rights, mediation and sensitive humanitarian information can be discussed free from local reference points and therefore recrimination.
- Such media are usually free from references to specific political, ethnic or religious groups and affiliations and concentrate mainly on key social issues.
- Fictional generalisations enable the maximum number of listeners or viewers to meaningfully engage because there are no specific political, ethnic or religious references to cause offence and the generalisation is broad enough to seem culturally familiar.
- Creative broadcasting is more enjoyable for listeners and captures a high audience if well produced.<sup>69</sup>

54. Overall, DFID seems convinced of the value of this medium as a narrative for effecting change, stating that, 'a soap opera is probably the most effective means of bringing about social change, particularly if it is backed up with targeted publications and interpersonal communications (from health workers, for instance).'<sup>70</sup> This is a considerable endorsement.

#### The way forward for MoD

55. This paper has shown the significant role that entertainment programming can have on people's attitudes and behaviour. Such an impact implies that cross-Government information strategists would do well to focus on influencing creative broadcasting along with news broadcasts. Rather than beginning with the message to be conveyed, communications strategies might begin by thinking about the audience that the UK Government seeks to influence, and examining their media consumption patterns. Women and men, for example, have quite different listening habits, and attempts to influence segments of the population require targeting types of media, not only targeted messages.

56. Media monitoring frequently focuses on news bulletins, rather than entertainment, commercials or other kinds of broadcasting. Yet, this paper has indicated that while the elite might be watching the news, their wives are likely to be watching soap operas. To understand the information sources of local people in an operational theatre, it is necessary to monitor a range of the communications items that they consume.

57. Soap operas are (relatively) cheap, which partly explains why young television companies buy them from other countries. In Russia, for example, a newly independent production company with a limited budget chose to buy foreign programmes attractive to the Russian audience, rather than create its own soaps.<sup>71</sup> Yet they are only cheap in the long-term if they build up a following. And although soap opera audiences can be exceptionally loyal, such loyalty and an adequately sized audience can take years to build.<sup>72</sup> This might mean that they are inappropriate as a tool for UK Armed Forces to use

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<sup>69</sup> DFID, 2000, p. 27.

<sup>70</sup> DFID, 2000, p. 56.

<sup>71</sup> Baldwin, 1995, p. 293.

<sup>72</sup> Allen, 1995, p. 15.



to bring about change in theatre, as they involve a prohibitively long-term investment. It may be possible, however, for the MoD to influence existing serials. The MoD currently has limited overt role in influencing the themes of *New Home, New Life* in Afghanistan, but the cross-Government strategy for the country is represented through FCO's administration of funding for the programme. There may be scope for greater coordination with FCO in this area, although interviewees felt that, in theatre, MoD, FCO and DFID representatives were sufficiently well coordinated.

58. Finally, the factors that make soap operas successful may be applied to other techniques designed to influence local people. Thus, using a narrative format in which there are opportunities for social discussion has also been found to be effective in the design of theatre as a means of social influence.<sup>73</sup> Theatre can also succeed in providing a safe arena for the discussion of controversial issues<sup>74</sup>, as can other radio broadcasting which allows viewers to phone in, such as the Canadian-run Radio Rana in Afghanistan.<sup>75</sup> The importance of inner realism alongside externalism unrealism is in line with psychological research on the importance of contextual relevance for the attractiveness of ideas and messages.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, a combination of academic insights from psychology, anthropology and communications, with practical lessons such as those highlighted in this report, might enable an investigation of the role and appeal of narratives that could inform military influence activity and wider Government strategic communications.

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<sup>73</sup> Tomlinson (2009), in another output of the PIA study, discusses the use of theatre for effecting change

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> As described in a presentation given by [REDACTED] at the Information Operations / Influence Activity Symposium, Defence Academy, Shrivenham, March 2008.

<sup>76</sup> This is more fully discussed in Sheehy-Skeffington (2009), in another output of the PIA study

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