Afghan Media in 2010

Priority District Report

Sorubi (Paktika)

October 13, 2010

This publication was produced for review by the United States Agency for International Development by Altai Consulting. The authors view expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States Government.

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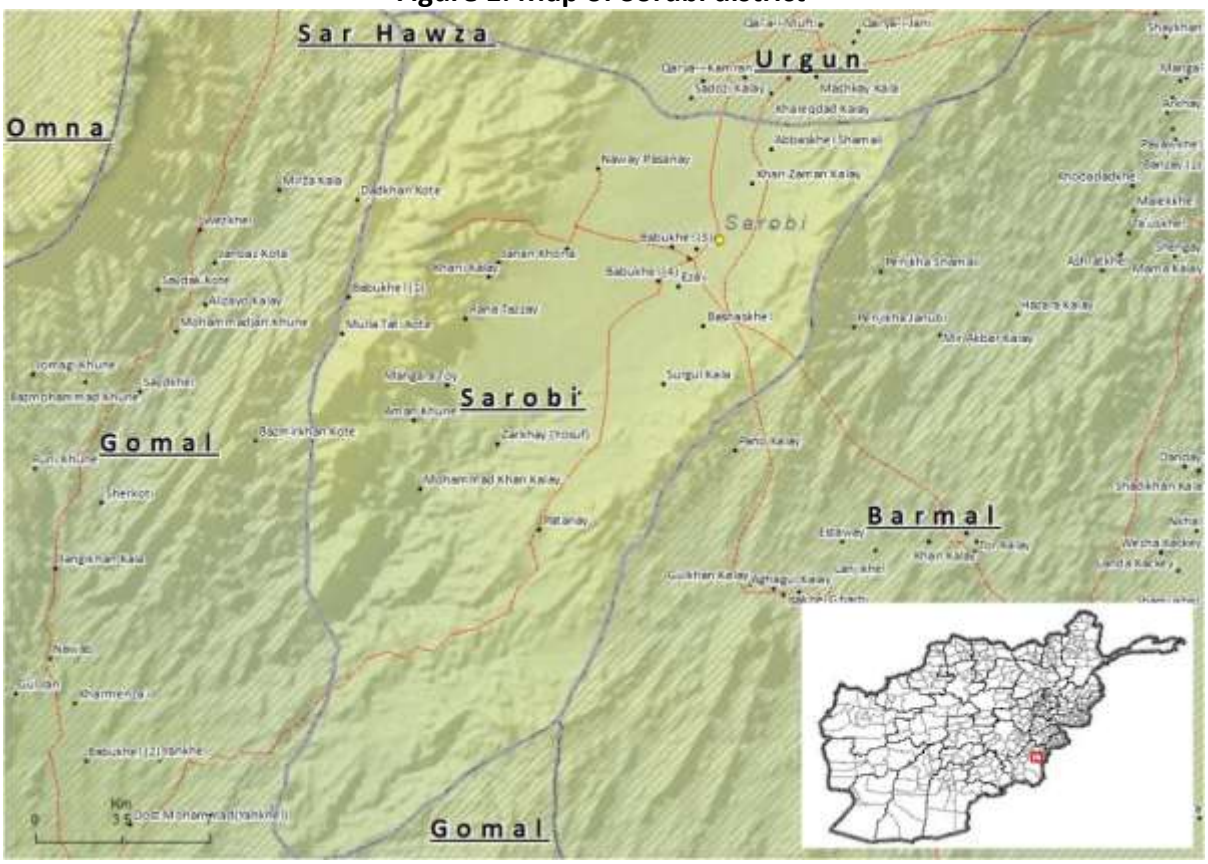
1 Introduction

1.1 District profile

Sorubi district is located in the north of Paktika province, close to the Pakistani border, and covers an area of 381km². It borders Sar Hawza district to the northwest, Urgun to the north, Barmal to the east, and Gomal to the south and west. The district lies at the end of the Urgun River valley and is surrounded by mountains, but benefits from a large and well-irrigated river plain in the center of the district.

Figure 1: Map of Sorubi district



The district population is estimated at 48,000, spread over 30 villages, and is majority Pashtun from the Suleman Khail tribe of the Ghilzai confederation. Pashto is the primary language. Literacy is well below the national average. Short-range migratory Kuchi make up a substantial part of the population in the winter.

The Urgun River starts in Sorubi and irrigates a substantial proportion of the flat land. The economy is largely agricultural, driven in part by distribution of pine nuts (although the district is not as forested as Urgun to the north) and by cultivation of wheat and barley on both irrigated and rain-fed land.

Sorubi is an isolated district with poor road infrastructure, although the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) is addressing this through the construction of a road from the provincial center, through Urgun and Sorubi, to Pakistan, which will help with the integration of the district.

Security is an issue. Urgun and its surrounding areas are regarded as an active Taliban recruitment zone, influenced and radicalized by the Pakistani tribal areas nearby. The Haqqani and Hekmatyar networks are thought to be active in the district.

1.2 Methodology

The fieldwork was conducted in April 2010 and covered the following areas: Sorubi center, Suran Khail (urban area, south of the bazaar), Tawos Khail (urban, 150m north of the bazaar), Zala Lanji Khail (peri-urban, 1km east of the bazaar), Nawi Lanji Khail (rural, 1.5km southeast of the bazaar), and Shoshnarkali (rural, 1.5km northeast of the bazaar).

Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with 11 community leaders, including one doctor, one border commander, four *maliks* (village chiefs), three district employers, the head of the Department of Vaccinations, and the head of the Department of Agriculture.

No major security issue was reported during the fieldwork, although 15 people who were asked to take part in the survey declined, for security or privacy reasons.

2 Media landscape

The media landscape in Sorubi is very poor. No terrestrial TV channel is available and the population has not addressed such isolation through satellite TV, as in the similarly isolated neighboring Urgun district, where only one terrestrial channel is received yet TV usage via satellite is relatively high. Furthermore, three of the four provincial radio stations available are military, and the government radio stations have poor quality reception or are exclusively in AM.

An estimated 70% of the district's population can afford to buy a TV set, yet only 400-600 households have a satellite dish, thus there are few TV viewers in the district. Additional constraints come from the limited electricity supply. In the past year, approximately 60-70% of households have started making up for this through the use of solar panels, most of which have been set up by the National Solidarity Program (NSP) or through private funding (the cost of one solar panel is roughly $200-800).

Radio penetration is high but listenership is significantly constrained, owing to the limited number of stations received.

There are no video shops, no public spaces with TV or video, no Public Call Offices (PCOs), and no computer shops. Two or three shops sell computer services (there is no internet access), largely to satisfy demand for clips, ringtones, etc. (mainly among young people). Mobile phone use began in Sorubi approximately three years ago, and only Roshan and MTN provide a service. Interestingly, KIIs with community leaders highlighted an overall pessimism with respect to media development in the district, with no major change having taken place in recent years.

2.1 Media outlets

Sorubi district has no access to terrestrial TV channels. It has access to 12 radio channels, none of which are local, and no newspapers and magazines are distributed in the district.

2.1.1 Television

TV channels in Sorubi can be viewed only through satellite. There are eight national TV channels available on satellite. There are no cable networks.

2.1.2 Radio

Besides the shortwave radio stations that are available throughout Afghanistan, there are eight radio stations available in the district.

Name	Scope	Ownership	Frequency	Antenna location	Broadcast radius
Paktin Ghag	Provincial	Military	1386 AM	Shikin FOB (Barmal district)	60km
Urgun Ghag	Provincial	Military	90 FM	Urgun FOB	-
Pashtoon Ghag	Provincial	Private	89.4 FM	Sharan	100km
Patman	Provincial	Military	92.5 FM	Sharan	10-15km
Deewa	Regional	Public (US)	100.5 FM	Khost	-
Mashaal	Regional	Public (US)	100.5 FM	Khost	-
Nangarhar RTA	Regional	Government	105.2 AM	Jalalabad	150km
Khost RTA	Regional	Government	89.5 FM 1458 AM	Khost PRT	150-300km

Paktin Ghag

Paktin Ghag is a military station established in 2005. Its antenna is located on the PRT Forward Operating Base (FOB) in Shikin, Barmal district, approximately 60km from the center, on Paktika's border with Pakistan. While widely recognized as a foreign military radio station, it is the most popular station in Sorubi district. It broadcasts 7am-10pm every day. Programming encompasses music (mostly Afghan), news, and religion. Interactive programming also plays a significant role on this station. Examples of popular programs are *Sandareez* ("Music Request") (Thursdays at 8pm), *Dilikunu Echparawuna* ("Answering Letters") (Wednesdays at 9pm), and *Ghami Echparawuna* (another music call-in show).

Urgun Ghag

Urgun Ghag ("Voice of Urgun") is a military radio station established in 2008 with an antenna located on the PRT FOB in Urgun district (28km from Sorubi). It employs five people. The quality of its reception is poor, so it is hardly ever listened to and was rarely mentioned by the surveyed population.

Pashtoon Ghag

Pashtoon Ghag is a private outlet that started in 2008 and is run by Mr. Mohammad Nabi Hamdard. Its 40m antenna is located in Sharan (in the center of Paktika). Its 300kW transmitter allows for a 100km broadcast radius. The radio station broadcasts 13 hours a day (5-12am and 4-10pm). Content is largely musical, cultural, and satirical. There are specific programs on rule of law and elections, agriculture, and children. Additionally, on a daily basis around lunchtime, the radio broadcasts *Khowala* ("Food"), an interactive program during which people are invited to share their opinions on a range of topics. The outlet employs 21 people, including the manager, 5 presenters, and 2 technicians.

Patman

Patman is a military radio station established in 2007 (92.5 FM). It broadcasts through a 30m antenna located in Sharan (Paktika) and a transmitter with a broadcast radius of 10-15km.

Mashaal/Deewa

Mashaal and Deewa are two stations established in 2009, respectively, by Radio Free Europe (RFE) and Voice of America (VOA), targeting the cross-border Pashto listenership. They broadcast from Khost (100.5 FM and 621 AM), Kunar, and Gardez.

Nangarhar RTA

Nangarhar Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA) is the state-run radio station broadcasting from Jalalabad. In Sorubi, it is received only on AM. The radio station broadcasts 24 hours a day. See the Jalalabad report for details.

Khost RTA

The state-run station Khost RTA was established in 1982 and is received with a weak signal in Sorubi district. The radio has two transmitters, an FM of 1kW and an AM of 0.5 kW, with a broadcast radius of 150-300km (it is received mostly on AM in Sorubi district). Currently, this outlet is based in the US military compound in Khost and is managed by Mr. Ghafur Mahidi. Programming is 100% Pashto, runs 18 hours a day (starting at 5am), and includes music (50 hours a week) and locally produced content (45 hours a week).

2.1.3 Newspapers

There are no local newspapers in Sorubi, nor is there any distribution of newspapers in the district. Newspapers and magazines are available only when people travel outside the district and buy the publications themselves.

Malalai

This is a monthly magazine owned by Ms. Jamila Mujahed. It is printed in 5,000 copies and sold at a unit price of $0.50. Financial constraints mean the outlet struggles to print regularly.

Sada-e-Azadi

This is a military biweekly free newspaper printed in 423,000 copies. Content is in English, Dari, and Pashto. For further information, please see the final report.

2.2 New media

2.2.1 Mobile media

A couple of shops provide computer services. DVDs range from music videos to films of Taliban fighting. Male youth exchange and share ringtones and songs on a daily basis using Bluetooth technology. New songs or movies (mostly Indian) are available weekly and reach Sorubi from Kabul, Pakistan, and other districts of Paktika. Transfers are done by copying from CDs or flash discs to mobile phones. The price of such services ranges from $0.40 to copy one song to $0.60 to copy a movie (which can take as long as 2.5 hours).

2.2.2 Internet

There is no public internet access in the district. A very small number of interviewees claimed they had internet at home.

2.3 Media and information actors

2.3.1 Government

The Paktika state-run RTA TV and radio stations are no longer active. The local population in Sorubi has access to Kabul RTA (through satellite) and two state-run radio stations, Nangarhar RTA and, to some extent, Khost RTA. There are no representatives of the Ministry of Information and Culture (MoIC) or Bakhtar News Agency (BNA). There is one small public library, close to the district office.

2.3.2 Outlet managers and journalists

No journalists are working in Sorubi district. Furthermore, given the lack of local media outlets, news about the district generally comes from locals and is broadcast only if they call journalists working for provincial radio stations (such as Paktin Ghag). News coverage of Sorubi district is therefore rather limited, delayed, and irregular (every two or three days).

Despite the limited availability of private radio stations in Sorubi, independence of media outlets is not considered an issue: "*People do not think about these things,*" declared one of the community leaders interviewed.

Censorship on TV does not represent a significant issue, given the limited number of TV viewers in the district. Generally speaking, however, programming that offends Afghan culture (including inappropriate dressing for women, promotion of gender equality, and representation of young shaved males) is perceived badly.

2.3.3 Other content providers

No external content provider was reported.

2.3.4 Media NGOs

There are seemingly no local media non-governmental organizations (NGO) or any other organizations providing assistance.

2.3.5 Traditional information sources

Opinion leaders in Sorubi district include 30 *mullahs* and over 30 *maliks*, some of whom also take part in the district *shura* (council). Given the lack of local media in Sorubi district, traditional sources of information play a significant role in sharing news or information on local events. The mosque is one setting for information exchange, for example after evening prayers on Fridays. On religious issues, traditional sources compete with broadcast media: "*People prefer the radio to traditional sources of information because if people say things on the radio then they cannot be wrong.*"

2.3.6 Insurgents

No insurgent radio station was reported in the district.

Insurgents communicate with the population through *shabnama* ("night letters"), which are put on the walls of mosques or houses every couple of months, with general warnings not

to cooperate with international organizations or the government. Eight of the eleven community leaders interviewed reported having received or seen *shabnama*, militant CDs/DVDs, or insurgent-related videos on cell phones. Face-to-face communication also takes place.

Videos of insurgents (coalition soldiers, rocket firing, etc.) are shared through mobile phones (an estimated 10-15% of the total number of videos shared, according to the interviewees). These videos are generally not over 30 minutes long. Approximately seven or eight new videos are shared every week (the exact origin is unknown).

2.3.7 Military

The local population in Sorubi district has access to three provincial military radio stations, Urgun Ghag, Paktin Ghag, and Patman.

Paktika is reportedly one of a set of provinces (including Khost, Logar, Paktia, Ghazni, and Wardak) where the US military has set up a total of 28 small radio stations, or radios-in-a-box (RIABs). These are not registered with the government, are located in the PRT or FOB or in district offices, operate with 250-300W transmitters, and usually employ three persons. The contents are localized and decentralized.

The Afghan military interacts with the local population of Sorubi on a weekly basis through loudspeakers and mosque gatherings. Less regularly (every one or two months), the foreign military calls for public meetings at the mosque. Military communication generally consists of warnings not to allow insurgents into the villages. Suggestions from the population are welcomed vis-à-vis specific issues.

2.3.8 Others

No other interest group related to media was reported.

3 Audience

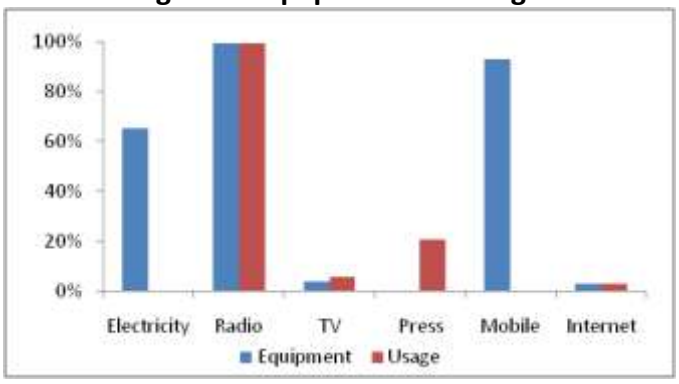
The following description of Sorubi's audience is based on 100 interviews.

3.1 Equipment and usage

3.1.1 Household equipment and media usage

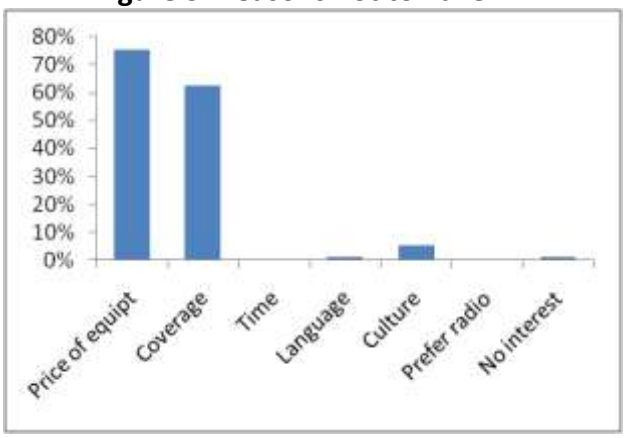
As in other districts covered by the study, Sorubi has high equipment rates in relation to radios (99%) and mobile phones (93%). The same cannot be said for the TV equipment rate, which is extremely low: out of 100 respondents, only 4 declared possessing a TV set and 6 said they watched TV (the following audience analysis will therefore not include TV).

Figure 2: Equipment and usage



A closer look at the reasons given for not having a TV set shows that, along with price (75%), the major issue is absence of coverage. Sorubi is isolated and Paktika's provincial center, Sharan, is lagging behind many other provincial capitals. Moreover, mountainous, neighboring Pakistani districts prevent terrestrial broadcasting from abroad. Buying a TV set (around $140) is useless without a satellite antenna (around $120), and the package is too expensive for many.

Figure 3: Reasons not to have TV



The 21% printed press readership observed is surprisingly high in the absence of a distribution network, but may be related to the comparatively high literacy rate in the sample.

3.1.2 Sources of information

Given the lack of terrestrial TV and the consequent low TV equipment and usage rates, radio is the dominant media on almost all topics, with over 90% of interviewees quoting it as their main source of information, except on religion.

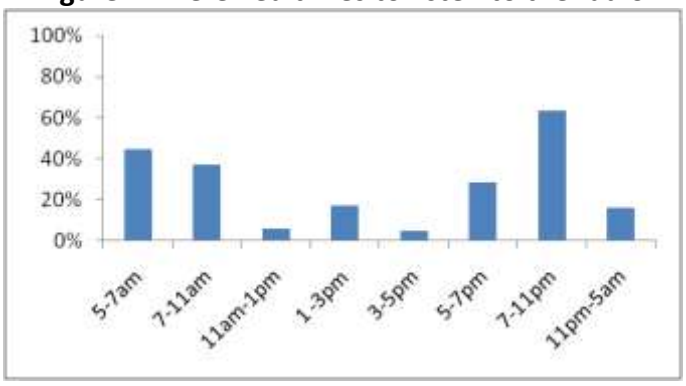
Table 1: What is the most used source of information?

	***Mullah*, mosque**	**Newspapers**	**Radio**	**TV**	***Shura***	***Khan*, *malik*, commander**	**Other**	**#**
Politics	2%	0%	95%	1%	0%	0%	1%	84
Religion	54%	0%	41%	4%	0%	0%	1%	85
Local news	0%	0%	96%	0%	0%	0%	4%	77
National news	0%	0%	94%	1%	0%	0%	4%	71
International news	5%	0%	92%	3%	0%	0%	0%	74
Development projects	0%	0%	96%	4%	0%	0%	0%	68
Movies and songs	0%	0%	91%	7%	0%	0%	1%	70

3.1.3 Usage patterns

Around 40% of the audience listens to the radio between 5am and 11am (morning peak). The evening peak starts at 5pm to reach 64% listenership at 7-11pm.

Figure 4: Preferred times to listen to the radio



The sample of TV users (six) is too small for a meaningful analysis.

3.2 Preferences

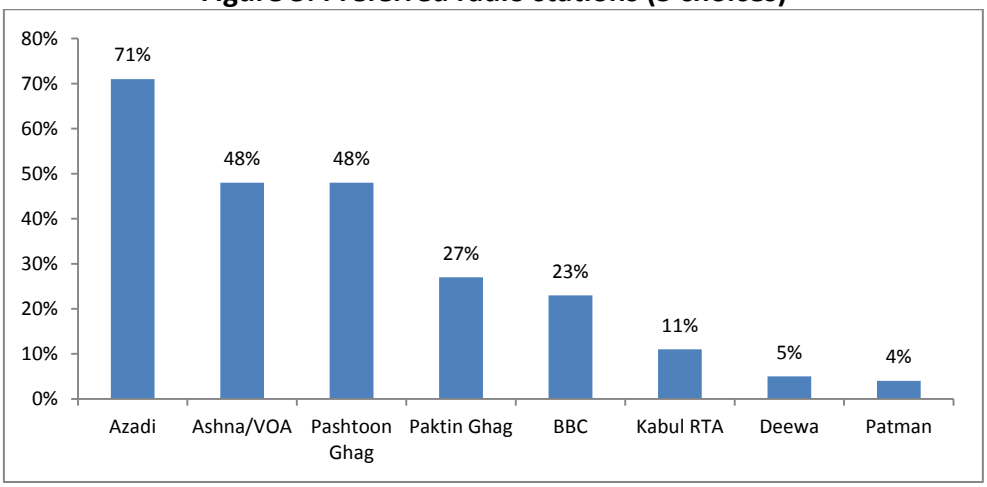
3.2.1 Outlets

Radio

With no local radio station in the district, Sorubi's audience is left to choose between provincial and national/international stations. The usual three champions come in the order seen across the rural districts included in this study (Azadi, Ashna/Voice of America (VOA), and the BBC). The private station Pashtoon Ghag is more popular than in neighboring Urgun.

The military station, Paktin Ghag, has a high level of popularity (comparable with Urgun Ghag in neighboring Urgun district), which was explained in qualitative interviews as being a result of its coverage of local issues/events and its interactive programs.

Figure 5: Preferred radio stations (3 choices)



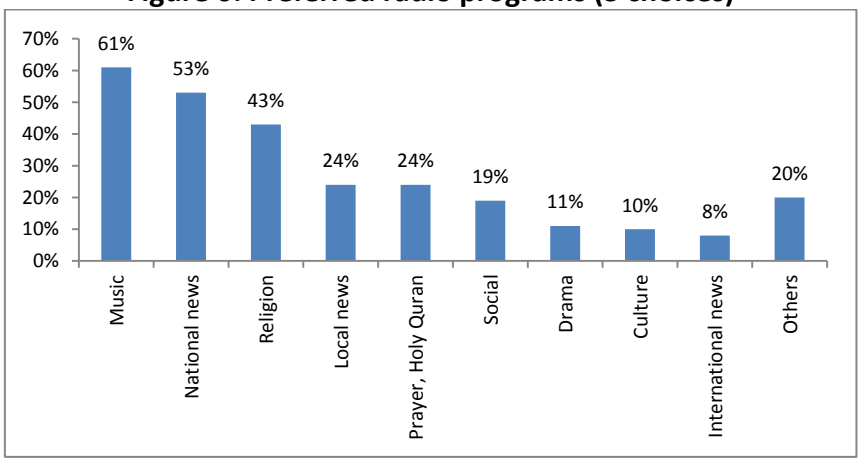
Printed press

The favorite newspapers and magazines are Saba, Malalai, Sada-e-Azadi, and Sol.

3.2.2 Programs

Sorubi's preferences, in relation to radio programs, lean towards music rather than national news and religion.

Figure 6: Preferred radio programs (3 choices)



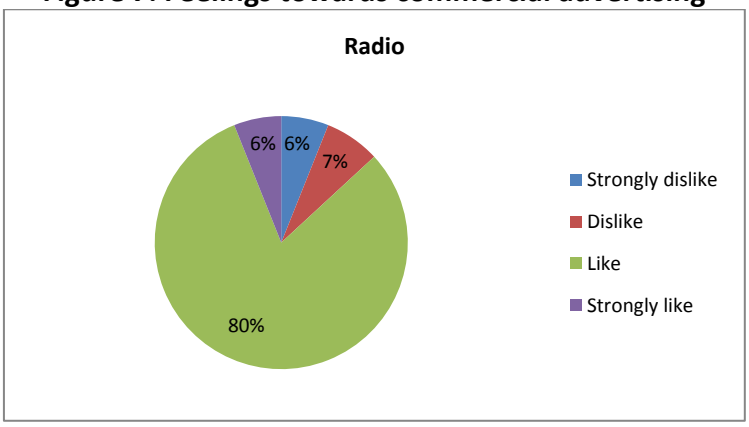
Qualitative interviews showed that popular programs include news from the BBC (7-8am and 7-8pm). Music is widely appreciated on Paktin Ghag (9am-12pm every day) and VOA call-in shows are especially popular.

There seems to be a general desire for more local news and more religious, cultural, and educational programs, possibly through government-controlled media outlets as opposed to private outlets: "*If private people make money out of it, it won't be true.*"

3.2.3 Advertising

Most respondents (86%) like advertising on the radio. A similar number (87%) find advertising useful or even very useful. A total of 29% would like to hear more commercials on the radio, whereas 70% consider that there are enough.

Figure 7: Feelings towards commercial advertising



Sorubi's respondents remembered more commercials than those in other locations. The most prominent are the usual (mobile operators 32%, banks 27%, consumer goods 17%), but private education (11%) commercials were also noticed.

3.2.4 Personalities

Tabasum, a Khost journalist working for Paktin Ghag radio, is popular among interviewees. His clear voice and accent attracts many to his morning religious programs (7am-7.30am) and also to his Thursday evening interactive program.

3.3 Participation

3.3.1 Comprehension

Radio listeners have no major problems understanding radio programs and messages (92%). Among those who declared having difficulties, national news and political debates are the most challenging programs.

According to the qualitative data, the Pashto accent on Paktin Ghag radio is similar to that of Sorubi's population. Accents on the BBC and VOA are slightly different and represent a potential barrier to comprehension. However, the types of programs usually listened to (music and news) mean that this issue is reduced significantly. TV programs and movies (e.g. Indian) are generally appreciated even if they are not completely understood.

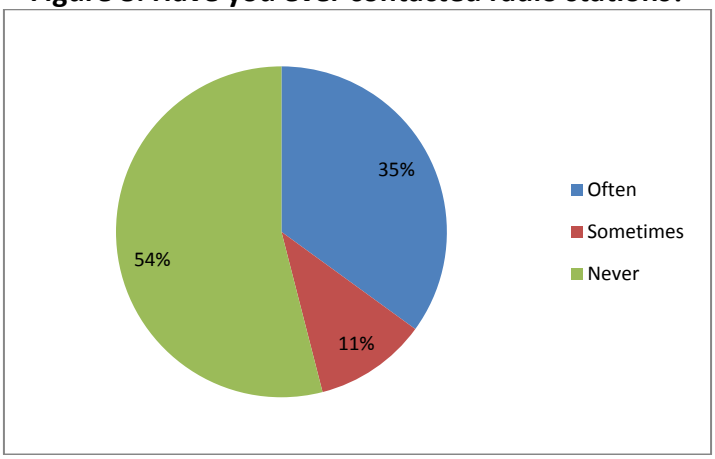
Four out of five printed press readers reported no comprehension difficulties.

3.3.2 Participation

Sorubi's respondents, along with Khost respondents, are the most active of all locations in terms of contact with the media. This may be explained by the young age of the sample, as well as high education levels.

Contacts are made mainly to request songs (80%) or to ask questions (20%). Similar to other locations, the most popular local stations attract the most interactions. In Sorubi, over two-thirds of interactions are directed towards the private station Pashtoon Ghag, and a minority towards the military station Paktin Ghag (12%).

Figure 8: Have you ever contacted radio stations?

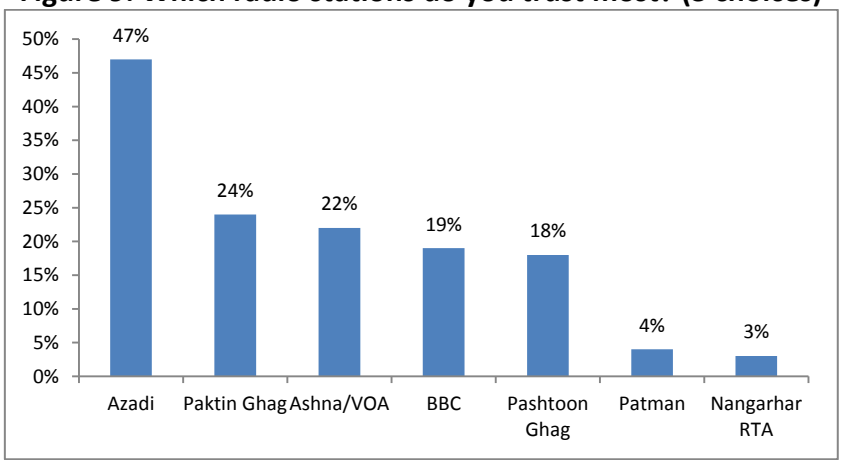


The qualitative interviews showed that some of Paktin Ghag's interactive programs are popular (approximately 25-30 people call every day, including some Sorubi expatriates living in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and dedicating songs to their families back home).

3.3.3 Trust

Although the most preferred radio stations are among the most trusted, radio listeners in Sorubi tend to trust local/provincial channels less than they do national/international ones (with Azadi far ahead of all others).

Figure 9: Which radio stations do you trust most? (3 choices)



Paktin Ghag is trusted for religious topics, local news, and music: "*People trust information from Paktin Ghag because it broadcasts real and true things,*" said one community leader. Insurgent information is widely trusted in the sense that it expresses serious warnings and threats directed at the inhabitants. "*Things that are written in letters or said face to face will happen in the future.*"

3.3.4 Perceptions of local media

There are no local media in Sorubi, therefore perceived "local" media are actually provincial.

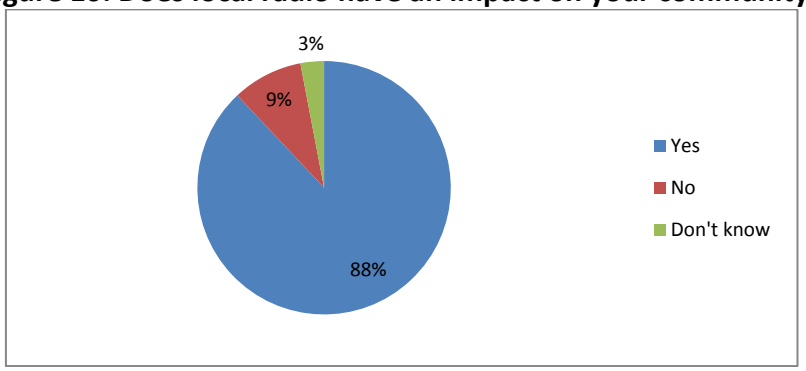
According to the respondents, local radio stations benefit the community and help the public have access to more local news (92% respondents agreed with this).

Independence of the media is not considered an issue in Sorubi: Paktin Ghag is a military radio station but is not perceived negatively, as "*people do not think about these [media independence] things.*"

3.3.5 Circulation and impact

With 88% of the sample believing in the power of radio to change the lives of the local community, Sorubi is above the average in the districts covered by the study. This may be because they feel that radio brings new ideas, which are discussed among them.

Figure 10: Does local radio have an impact on your community?



According to qualitative interviews, approximately 15% of the district's population shares videos through mobile phones, which is consistent with the number of young individuals who own mobiles with video applications.

3.3.6 Development project communication and educational campaigns

Interviewees recalled vaccination campaigns broadcasted on Ashna and Paktin Ghag.

Other campaigns cited by respondents included, for example, the district governor's campaign against more than two people riding on a motorbike at the same time. This announcement was broadcast two or three times a day on Paktin Ghag (after the news bulletin) and once or twice a month through loudspeakers. These announcements were quite effective, as the community members were afraid of being punished (going to jail and being forced to stop using motorbikes for a certain period of time).

3.3.7 Insurgents

Only 12% of respondents reported insurgent presence. Only a small part of the sample (9%) was exposed to insurgent communications.

As in other districts, *shabnama* are the insurgents' main form of communication (36%). All respondents perceived the quality of information that insurgents provide to be poor or very poor.

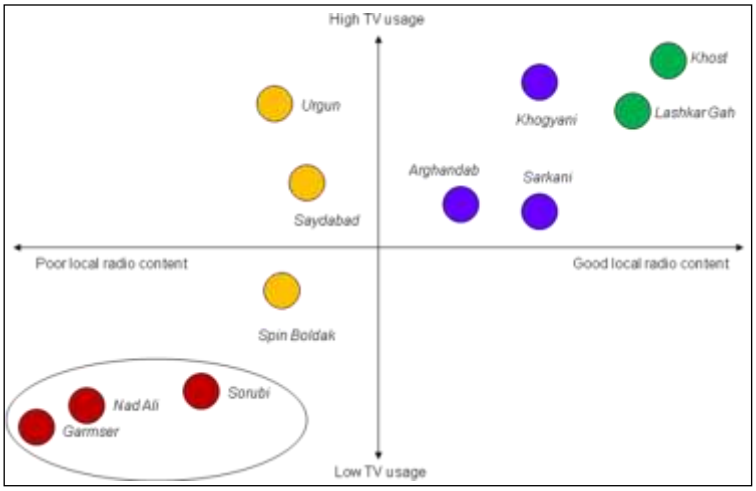
4 Conclusions and areas of opportunity

Within the scope of this study, Sorubi district is one of the most isolated. Sorubi has absolutely no access to terrestrial TV channels (like Saydabad in Wardak province and Garmser in Helmand). Unlike neighboring Urgun (also in Paktika province), where terrestrial coverage is very limited but not completely lacking, inhabitants do not make up for such absence with satellite antennas, apparently for cost reasons.

A few radio stations are received in the district and there is access to four provincial radio stations; however, local content is poor, since there is no local radio station broadcasting from the district. Furthermore, signal quality can be problematic, particularly for Patman, which only 13% of respondents can access without problems for. Further differences are experienced within Paktika province in terms of coverage and quality of reception of radio signals: Sorubi has good reception of Nangarhar RTA and only very limited reception of Khost RTA (the reverse is the case in Urgun district).

Figure 11, which classifies the districts analyzed into four groups on the basis of TV usage and quality of local radio content, illustrates Sorubi's positioning in relation to the others.

Figure 11: Contextualizing the priority districts analyzed



In such a context, the most urgent need relative to TV viewership is installing antennas to enable broadcast of (at least) the state-run national channel RTA and, if possible, private channels whose programming is adapted to the Pashto-speaking, slightly conservative audience (Ariana, Lemar, and Shamshad, for instance). In Sorubi, limited coverage as well as equipment prices constrain TV penetration. A complementary indirect action, as in most rural areas, is to improve access to electricity.

As far as radio is concerned, it is possible to draw lessons from the military station's relative success in terms of both popularity and trustworthiness, to be applied to other, less successful military outlets where relevant. Supporting the creation of a proper network of PRT radio stations, which would facilitate sharing of successful content, is a recurrent recommendation across this study.

Internet and the printed press are issues for the future but, given comparatively high literacy rates and youth interest in new media, promoting access to these in the provincial center Sharan should be contemplated.