



Afghan Media in 2010

Priority District Report Garmser (Helmand)

October 13, 2010

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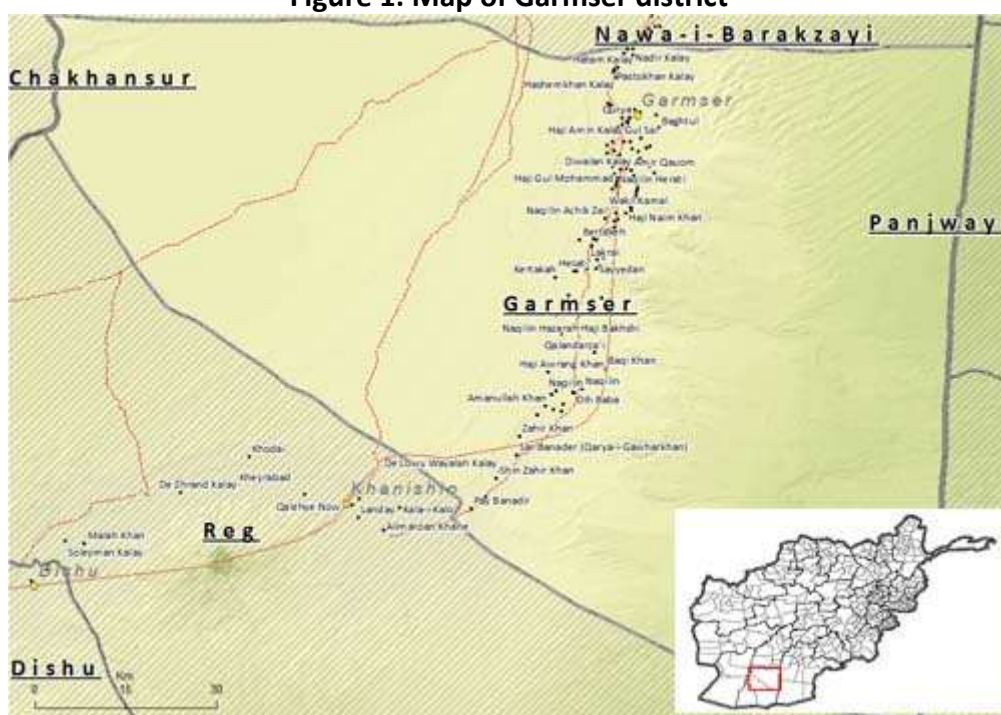
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1 Introduction

1.1 District profile

Garmser district is in the center of Helmand province and covers an area of 10,454km². It borders Nawa district to the north, Reg to the south, Panjway to the northeast (Kandahar province), Registan to the southeast (Kandahar province), and Chakhansur (Nimroz province) to the west. The district is flat and lies along the Helmand River on the road south of Lashkar Gah.

Figure 1: Map of Garmser district



The district population is estimated at 82,400 and is predominantly Pashtun. The presence of major Afghan Pashtun tribes, alongside Hazara, Uzbek, and Tajik minorities, comes from the redistribution of land that took place in the 1970s, which produced a flow of internally displaced people from other provinces into the district.

Garmser is important in the counterinsurgency effort because of its status as a major agricultural center, sustaining a predominantly rural population. The population's main source of income is agriculture, underpinned by a vast and complex irrigation structure that enables large-scale cultivation. Cereal and vegetable crops are planted, including wheat, corn, beans, and ladyfinger. Poppies are also cultivated in large quantities (15% of cultivated land) along with horticultural crops (3-5%). To bolster legitimate agriculture, various agricultural programs have distributed enhanced wheat seed over the past five years.

Garmser's infrastructure is badly damaged as a result of recent conflict. Critical infrastructure (such as the district hospital and some schools) has been rehabilitated, but irrigation canals and other community infrastructure remain in a bad condition.

Approximately 5.5% of the population is literate. The interviewer, a middle school teacher in Lashkar Gah city (originally from Garmser), reported the presence of one boys' primary school (13 teachers for 500-600 pupils) and one boys' high school (7 teachers for 200 pupils) in the entire district. This contrasts with official Education Management Information System (EMIS) figures, which claim about 21 primary and secondary schools and 4 high schools in the district. In Garmser, the National Solidarity Program (NSP) is implemented through Building Resources Across Communities (BRAC, formerly the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee).

Security is a major issue in Garmser. Since the US military began clearance operations in 2008, the cleared area in the north of the district, known as the Snake's Head, has fared well and has a thriving bazaar and a functioning community council. However, the middle and south of the district remain highly volatile, with insurgents still firmly in control. Most community leaders said security in the area was poor.

1.2 Methodology

The fieldwork covered the following areas of the district: the bazaar (urban), Shamalan (urban, 2km northwest of the bazaar), Dewala (peri-urban, 4km south), Kharko (peri-urban, 4km southwest), and Jegarom (rural, 7km southwest).

Key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted with the following 11 community leaders: the manager of the district governor's office (Kharko); *qawmemeshers* (village elders) in Kharko (two) and Dewala; a *malik* (chief of village) and *shura* (council) member in Darweishan; *shura* members in Darweishan and Dewala; *maliks* in Kharko, Shamalan, and Dewala; and a teacher (bazaar).

There were no interviews of journalists or outlet managers: the interviewer did not approach the only local radio station and its two staff members (including one foreign manager and a translator/journalist) owing to lack of permission from the military. No contact details were sought for the outlet manager.

Since there is no mobile phone network coverage, only field interviews took place. Therefore, the analysis that follows is based on 25 interviews only. Findings from 435 phone interviews of 61 unique media users across Helmand province are included in the audience section.

Informal networks of the interviewer facilitated the fieldwork considerably. Most of those initially asked to take part in the study said no or asked for money.

2 Media landscape

Garmser is one of the most isolated and stagnant of all the districts investigated. It has the poorest radio coverage: some inhabitants have set up additional antennas in order to receive a few provincial radio channels broadcasting from Lashkar Gah, but most of the local population receives only two channels through shortwave (apart from the recently established local military radio station).

There is extremely limited electricity in the district, and only a small number of households own generators. Mobile phone network coverage is very poor. Reception quality improves slightly closer to Nawa district (north of Garmser), but communication often takes place through *thuraya* (satellite phones), which are generally owned by wealthy people or those running businesses. They are also available in a number of Public Call Offices (PCOs) at the bazaar, although the number of PCOs has decreased significantly in recent years. AWCC started to work in the district recently (May 2010), but coverage is limited and functions only in the daytime.

The district has no official video shop, but four shops are said to sell CDs (secretly) and radios and tape recorders (officially). Five ice cream shops occasionally show CDs on TV sets. Some satellite dishes can be seen: some belong to government authorities, a few to hotels in the bazaar, and others to private households.

There is an access point for the Government Communication Network (GCN) for government representatives and the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT).

2.1 Media outlets

Garmser district has no access to terrestrial TV (there are no local TV channels). It has poor access to seven radio stations, one of which is local (although respondents referred to only six, see below). No newspapers and magazines are distributed in the district.

2.1.1 Television

Besides satellite TV channels, which a very limited number of households watch, no terrestrial TV channels and no cable networks are available in the district.

2.1.2 Radio

Besides the shortwave radio stations that are available throughout Afghanistan, there are six radio stations accessible in the district (plus one not referred to be interviewees), but only if additional aerial antennas are set up to support reception.

Name	Scope	Ownership	Frequency	Antenna location	Broadcast radius
Radio Garmser	Local	Military	-	Hazarajaft (Garmser)	-
Sabawoon	Provincial	Private	88 FM	Lashkar Gah	35km
Samoon	Provincial	Private	88.6 FM	Lashkar Gah	25km
Bost	Provincial	Private	89.8 FM	Lashkar Gah	70km
Helmand RTA	Provincial	Government	95.5 FM	Lashkar Gah	45km
Arman FM	National	Private	98.1 FM	Lashkar Gah	-

Radio Garmser

Radio Garmser, located in the PRT compound, is a military radio station launched in 2009. Broadcasting hours run from 8am-12pm (when it has the largest listenership) and from 1pm-10pm. Despite being a military radio station, it is not widely associated with foreign influence, as programming is mainly Afghan music and occasionally local news (depending on the day). Once or twice a week, after 8pm, the district governor or another official gives a speech. Occasionally, the chief of police or a district official makes an announcement, such as on the importance of keeping an appropriate distance from military cars. The radio station does not broadcast commercial advertising.

Sabawoon

Sabawoon is a private radio station established in 2004 and owned by Mr. Mirwais Pason. It uses a 42m antenna with a 600W transmitter and has a 35km broadcast radius. Sabawoon broadcasts Salam Watandar for three hours every day¹. Please see the Lashkar Gah report for further information on this radio station.

Samoon

This radio station started operations in 2006. It has a 25m antenna and 150W transmitter with a 25km broadcast radius. Programming runs for 13 hours a day, mainly in Pashto (60%) (the rest in Dari). Please see the Lashkar Gah report for further information.

Bost

Bost was established in 2008. Its 42m antenna is located in the center of Lashkar Gah city and its 600W transmitter has a broadcasting radius of 70km. Owner Mr. Abdul Salam Zahid reported that the radio station covers 90% of Helmand province. Please see the Lashkar Gah report for further information.

Helmand RTA

The state-run Helmand RTA (Radio Television Afghanistan) was established in 1991. It uses a 45m antenna with a 1kW transmitter and has a 45-50km broadcast radius. The station broadcasts eight hours a day. Please see the Lashkar Gah report for further information.

¹ A few respondents talked about Salam Watandar as an outlet independent from Sabawoon.

Muska

Muska is located in Lashkar Gah and reportedly has a 120km broadcast radius. It should also be received in Garmser, although it was not mentioned in either qualitative or quantitative research. Please see the Lashkar Gah report for further information.

Other radio stations

Apart from stations available on shortwave throughout Afghanistan (e.g. the BBC, Azadi, and Ashna/Voice of America (VOA)), the only national radio station received in Garmser is Arman FM. Households receive the signal transmitted from Lashkar Gah through additional antennas set up on the roofs of houses.

2.1.3 Newspapers

There are no local newspapers and no distribution of printed press takes place. It seems that no press material is brought to the district from other areas.

2.2 New media

2.2.1 Mobile media

Although there is very limited network coverage, mobile phones are reportedly used to send clips using Bluetooth technology.

2.2.2 Internet

Only the government office, the PRT, the Islamic Bank, and the International Relief and Development (IRD) office have internet access, through satellite.

2.3 Media and information actors

2.3.1 Government

There are no representatives of the Ministry of Culture and Information (MoIC) or Bakhtar News Agency (BNA) in Garmser. There is no public library.

2.3.2 Outlet managers and journalists

One journalist, working for Radio Garmser, is based in the district. He also works as a translator for the radio station. He is not originally from the district and never leaves the center, for security reasons. The interviewer visited the PRT compound but did not have permission to approach the journalist.

The dearth of local journalists means a certain amount of delay in broadcasting news. Local news is generally first heard at the bazaar or from community leaders, and eventually on the radio. Our interviewer reported that *“when something happens we don’t know on time.”*

Radio Garmser is known widely to be supported by the PRT, yet, as mentioned above, its extensive music programming means that local people do not criticize it in any great measure. The one journalist is said to liaise regularly with the district office to collect

information. Although pressure from the government does not seem to be an issue, insurgent pressure evidently exists, as the journalist cannot leave the district for security reasons. When asked whether there are specific topics the media cannot talk about, most community leaders mentioned security.

2.3.3 Other content providers

There are no major content providers in the district.

2.3.4 Media NGOs

There are no media non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the district.

2.3.5 Traditional information sources

Traditional sources of information include *mullahs*, who are generally the primary information source on religion in the district, *shuras*, informing on government development and international aid, and word of mouth in the bazaar and the mosque. People generally use these types of information source more than official media, except for national and international news. In the latter case, the BBC is the most popular and trusted station. As Radio Garmser is predominantly music programming, it cannot compete with traditional sources of information.

2.3.6 Insurgents

Insurgents communicate with the population through *shabnama* (“night letters”) (generally once or twice a month) and, according to community leaders, most commonly through face-to-face confrontation – warnings and threats rather than information sharing. Confrontations usually take place in the evening, when insurgents knock on doors of private houses or go to the mosques after evening prayers.

Wealthy people tend to be more exposed to blackmail by insurgents. *“When they know that a person is rich, they ask him to buy a car ... during the poppy season they know who owns more land and easily ask for money”* (interviewer in Garmser).

2.3.7 Military

The military, both national and foreign, occasionally gather *qawmemeshers* and *shuras* to discuss and follow up on security in the district, for instance after a shooting at a checkpoint. Additionally, when distribution of aid is planned (such as of seed, fertilizer, or equipment), the military tends to inform the *shura* beforehand.

Checkpoints in every village represent a source of information for the district. Information is reportedly sent to the chief of police who in turn briefs the district office on any relevant fact/event.

3 Audience

The following is a description of the audience in Garmser district, based on 25 close-ended interviews and 11 open-ended KIIs. Given the very small number of interviews, since no interview could be conducted by phone, the following data should be considered with caution.

Findings from data collection through 435 phone interviews with 61 unique media users in Helmand province are also reported in this section.

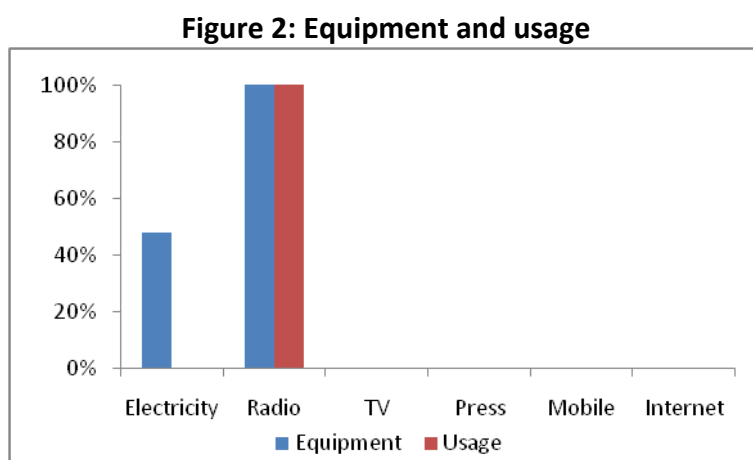
3.1 Equipment and usage

3.1.1 Household equipment

Households interviewed in Garmser are all equipped with radio sets, but no TV equipment was reported. Access to electricity is very limited: although 48% of households declared having some access to electricity, very few own or access a generator, and no household has solar panels. Most use batteries for lighting purposes.

No household reported owning a mobile phone, although a few have *thuraya*.

No internet access was reported.



Interviewees said they did have the financial capacity to purchase TV sets – it is not economic factors alone that keep TVs out of the home, although lack of grid electricity makes watching TV doubly expensive. The main reasons given for not using TV were cultural and religious: 92% of interviewees felt that use of TV was unsuitable for the local culture – and possibly even dangerous. Around 52% of interviewees said they were not interested. This reflects the high degree of conservatism in the district.

However, it seems that Garmser may now be in the same situation as many other places in Afghanistan were a few years ago, which now have relatively high usage of TV. Other visited districts that are considered quite conservative and that have a comparable level of threat are Khogyani (Nangarhar), Arghandab (Kandahar), Sarkani (Kunar), and Urgun (Paktia) – each now has at least some reported usage of TV.

Potential reasons for this could be: that Garmser has other very local specificities, yet to be identified; that penetration of TV in the district is simply slower than in other places but that eventually the cultural objection will lift; or that our sample did not accurately represent the situation in the district.

3.1.2 Sources of information and media usage

On nearly all topics tested (local, national and international news, health, politics, and religion), interviewees declared that they preferred radio as a source of information. The only topic with a standout preference for a traditional source of information was religion (100% consult the *mullah* at the local mosque). Responses were similar for the most trusted sources of information: radio is the most trusted for all topics except religion and health, on which matters 56% interviewees declared they would trust an expert most.

For legal issues (e.g. land disputes or complaints about lack of water), people prefer to contact the insurgents as opposed to the media, although they generally do not approach them directly. The most common procedure for contacting the insurgents involves going to the mosque (not a central one) or a *qawmemesher* (not the *shura*) to discuss the issue, and then eventually the insurgents will be informed as well. The value added is that the insurgents solve the problem immediately through orders and threats.

People tend to prioritize traditional sources of information over media when it comes to corruption issues too, then sharing this information with the *shura* or the district governor.

Since radio is the only medium available in the district, and a set is found in each household, Garmser interviewees are overwhelmingly radio users. None declared watching TV or reading newspapers to any extent.

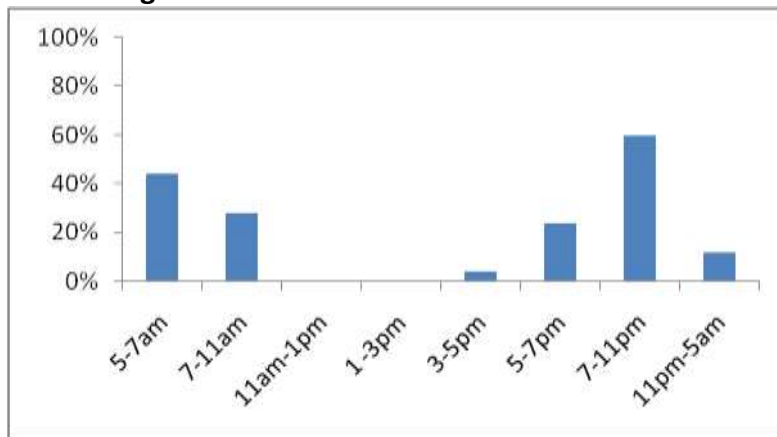
Physical media include night letters from insurgents, government leaflets (e.g. encouraging participation in elections, vaccination of children), CDs (secretly sold by shops), and personal contact with people from other areas (especially Lashkar Gah city).

3.1.3 Usage patterns

Media consumption patterns in Garmser are typical of those observed in rural Afghanistan in 2005: the radio is the primary medium and people listen to it regularly and with attention.

A total of 84% of interviewees declared listening to the radio every day, and the other 16% several times a week. People listen to the radio mostly in the morning (5-11am) and in the evening (5-11pm), with peaks in the early morning (5-7am) and evening (7-11pm). These are typically meal times, when the whole family is at the house. As such, radio is thus listened to with the family and at home. A small number of respondents said they also used the radio in their shops and at work.

Figure 3: Preferred times to listen to radio



3.2 Preferences

3.2.1 Outlets

Unlike other districts in the study, national radio stations are preferred: the BBC is far ahead, mentioned by 96% of interviewees. Community leaders said that the station had a positive impact on the district’s community life.

Arman FM comes next, with 52% of interviewees, followed by Azadi (44%). The first local radio station is Sabawoon (36%), followed by Samoon (24%), and Helmand RTA (20%), all broadcast from Lashkar Gah. Radio Garmser, the local (military) radio station, was not mentioned among the preferred stations.

Figure 4: Preferred radio stations (3 choices)

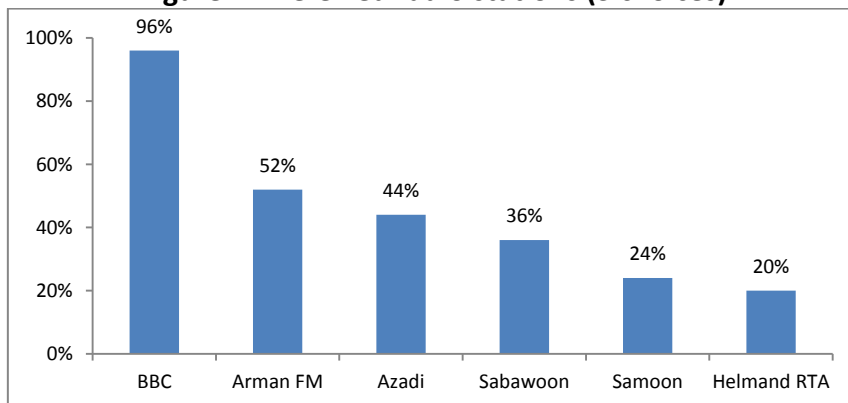
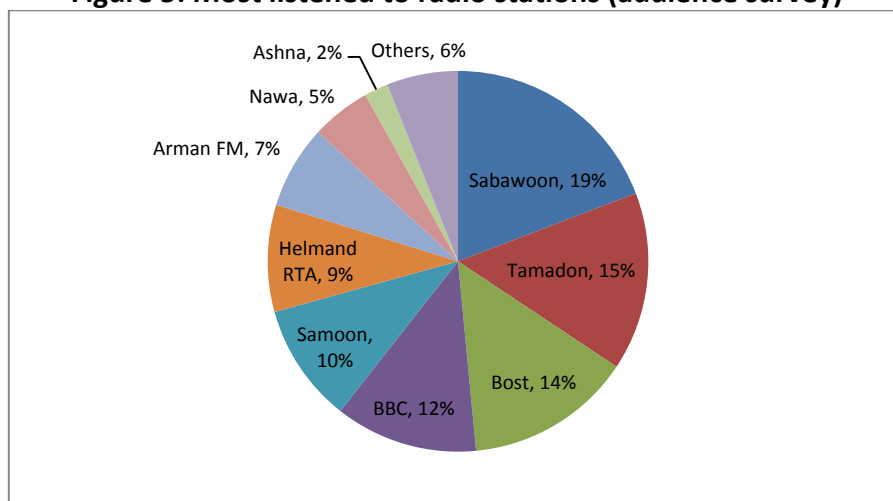


Figure 5 shows the audience share for radio stations in Helmand province (not specifically for Garmser district). Sabawoon has the largest audience share (19%), followed by Tamadon (15%), Bost (14%), and the BBC (12%).

Figure 5: Most listened to radio stations (audience survey)

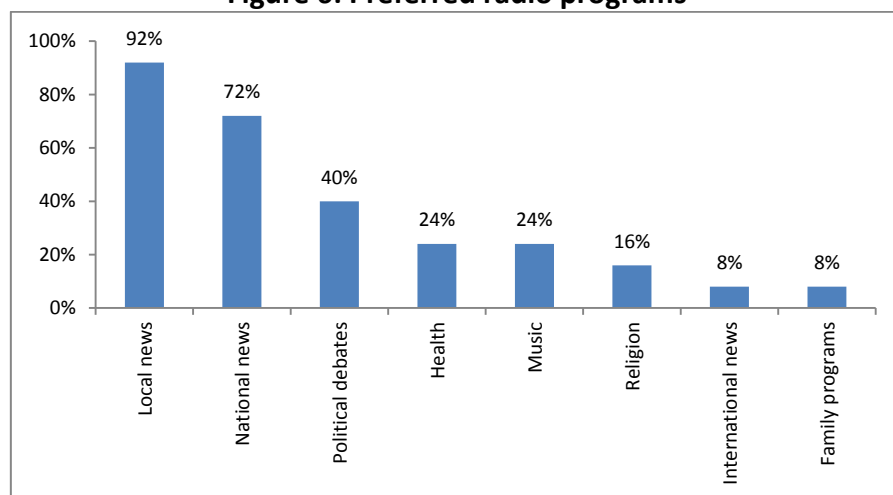


3.2.2 Programs

Garmser interviewees listen to news on the radio: 92% mentioned local news and 72% national news. Political debates rank surprisingly high compared with other districts in the study (40%, compared with 18% in Khost and Saydabad).

Not listed in the categories, but often mentioned among the most popular programs, was *Nawi Kor Nawi Zhound* (“New Home, New Life”), a radio drama produced and broadcast by the BBC for many years. This, again, is close to what was observed in rural Afghanistan in 2005, when this program was among the most popular across the country.

Figure 6: Preferred radio programs



Around 24% of interviewees listed music among their preferred programs. At the same time, it was among the least preferred for 52% of interviewees. This is consistent with the area’s conservatism, sensitive to any cultural representation that is not close to the local culture. Foreign music is often criticized, although Indian songs are popular among the younger generation.

There was widespread agreement on the need to reduce the amount of musical programming on Radio Garmser (the only local station, controlled by the military) and to include programming on topics such as religion (lectures on and explanations of the Quran),

culture (suggested questions included, “What kind of food do Hazara people living in Bamyān have? What kind of hats do they wear?”), education, and health. On the BBC, people would like more programs like “New Home, New Life” and fewer political debates.

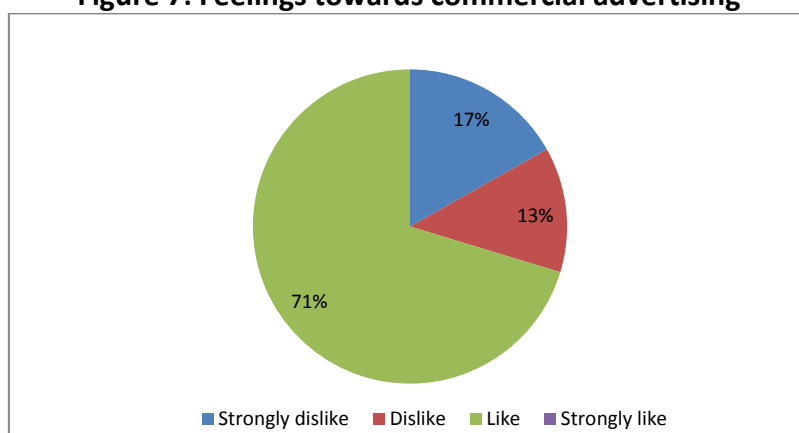
3.2.3 Advertising

Respondents were not very clear on the difference between commercial advertising and educational campaigns. They recalled campaigns on the following issues the most clearly: polio vaccination (UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF)); country and district-level *shura* elections (government); countering poppy cultivation (Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Counter Narcotics); and agricultural initiatives, such as the distribution of one tractor for every 50 hectares of land or improved seed distribution (IRD). These are not broadcast on the radio but are communicated either by members of the *shura* or at the mosque.

When specifically asked about commercial advertising, respondents recalled the following brands: Azizi Bank, Roshan, and AWCC (the last two are mobile phone operators), all supposedly on the BBC – which is dubious, since the BBC does not usually broadcast commercial adverts. There are no commercial adverts on Radio Garmser.

Interviewees like commercial advertising for the most part, and find it moderately useful. It is thought to impact literate people’s most. However, key informants doubted that adverts advocating an end to poppy cultivation had produced any effect, regardless of literacy level.

Figure 7: Feelings towards commercial advertising



3.2.4 Personalities

Interviewees mentioned no major popular personalities. The Radio Garmser journalist is known more as a translator than for the content he produces or his opinions. However, the clarity of his voice is appreciated.

3.3 Perceptions and impact

3.3.1 Comprehension

Radio Garmser does not generate comprehension problems in the district, nor does the BBC’s Pashto programming or Azadi radio. A total of 28% of interviewees reported some problems of understanding, mostly in relation to political debates, international news, and cultural programs. The major issue seems to be with difficult terminology and concepts –

this can be explained by the fact that the preferred station is the BBC, known sometimes to broadcast relatively complex topics using specialized language.

Radio Garmser and the BBC (“New Home, New Life”) were said to be the most easily comprehended (but this answer seemed driven more by their popularity).

3.3.2 Participation

There is no interactive programming on Radio Garmser, and seemingly no real way to contact the station. In relation to preferred stations, there seems to be no participation at all by the public. This is the only district visited for this study where this was the case.

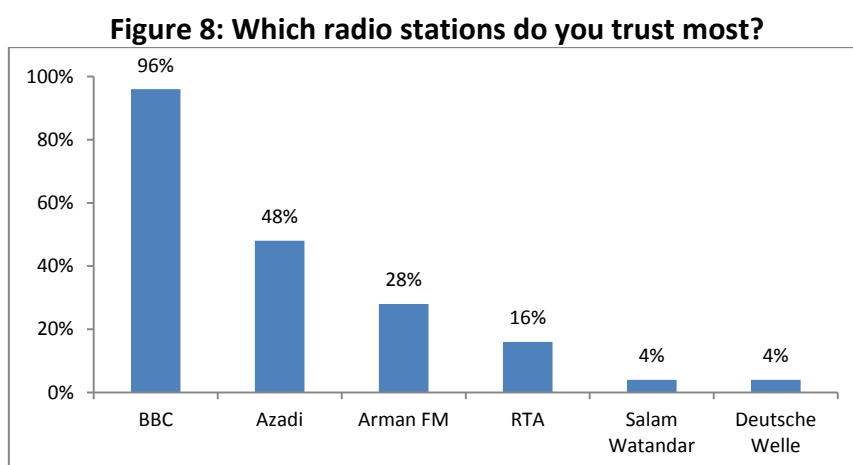
3.3.3 Trust

The station most trusted by Garmser interviewees is the BBC, by far: all users declared that they trusted it. Other trusted stations are Azadi, Arman FM, and RTA.

In Figure 8, Salam Watandar stands alone as a station, although it is a program broadcast by Sabawoon (albeit produced independently). This is because a small number of respondents in the audience survey identified it as a standalone station. Although the number of these respondents was limited, this implies that findings on trust in Sabawoon might be rounded up slightly so as to include these perceptions of Salam Watandar.

Radio Garmser was not mentioned among the most trusted stations: interviewees explained that speeches by district officials broadcast on the military radio station are generally not trusted. Deutsche Welle is mentioned on the list, as it is received through an AM signal.

Insurgents do not produce information, only threats and warnings.

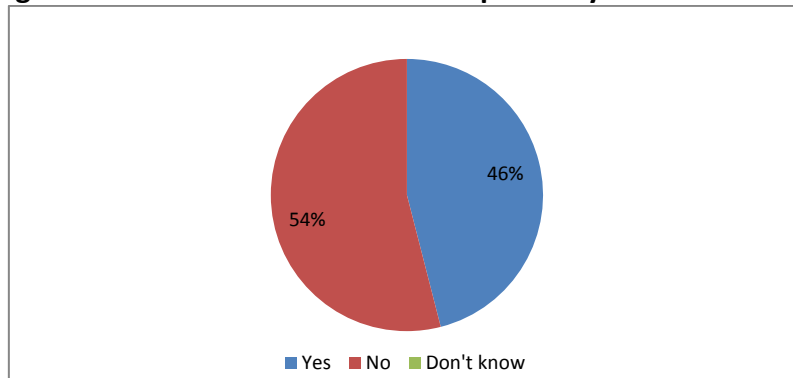


3.3.4 Perceptions of the local media

Feelings in Garmser district vis-à-vis the media are mixed. Although respondents recognized the potential the media offers with respect to entertaining youth (through music) and promoting learning on issues such as health, education, culture, and religion (for example, there is a large appreciation of its awareness-raising power in the BBC’s “New Home, New Life”), there seemed to be some criticism with regard to the lack of diversification in radio programming (“*far too much music on Garmser Radio*”).

The BBC is considered independent, in that it is said to report truthfully and in an unbiased way. Radio Garmser, the only real local medium, is widely recognized as being under the control of the military. Despite this, and although it is not among respondents’ preferred stations, listeners rated Radio Garmser as being of “good quality.” Nevertheless, the majority said that the station does not have a significant impact on the community. It is useful merely for public announcements.

Figure 9: Does local radio have an impact on your community?



3.3.5 Circulation and impact

As radio plays a central role in information transmission, and as it is the only window on the rest of the world for most people, information heard on the radio is often discussed among friends and family. Many of these discussions are focused on security.

The BBC drama “New Home, New Life” is said to be the program with the largest impact on the population in Garmser. Families often refer to and internalize messages learned from the drama, such as on washing hands after going to the toilet or using mosquito nets on windows.

Figure 10: Do you discuss what you hear on the radio?

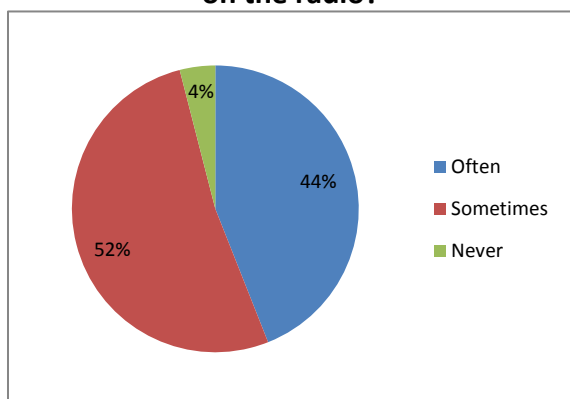
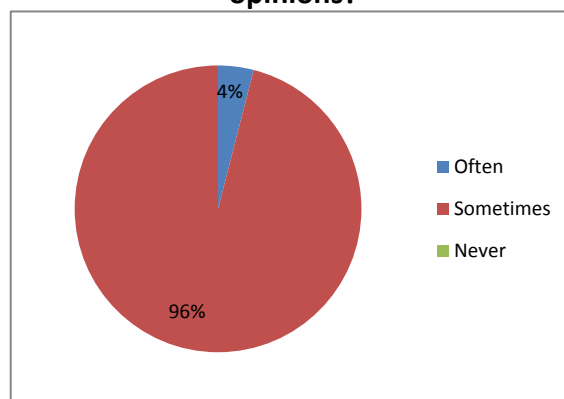


Figure 11: Can radio make you change your opinions?



Exchanging videos through mobile phones is not common in Garmser, for security reasons. *“If they have mobiles, they don’t want to show that they do.”*

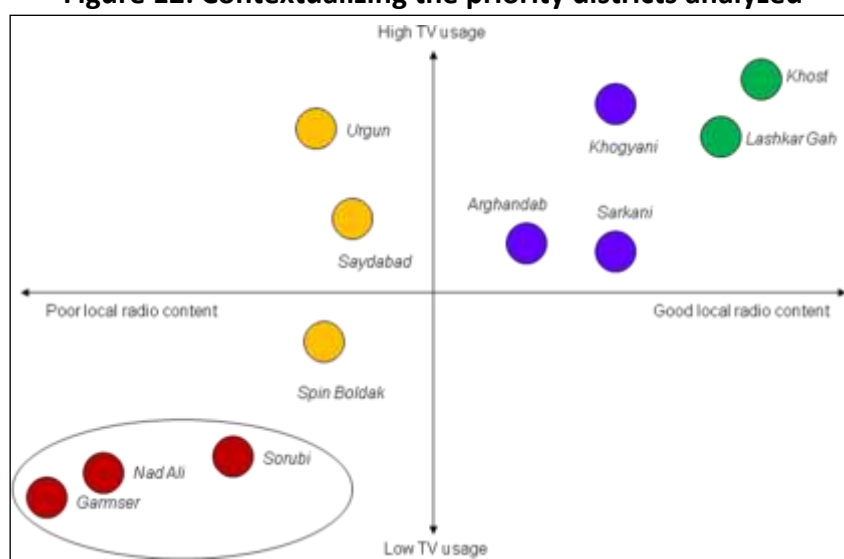
4 Conclusions and areas of opportunity

Garmser is an extremely isolated district, with very little access to the media and very unsophisticated media usage. There is a complete absence of terrestrial TV coverage, and also very limited radio reception. In and near the bazaar, it is possible to hear Radio Garmser very clearly, but no repeaters are present, hence the broadcast range of the only local radio station is limited. The BBC and Azadi are the only two national radio stations that can be heard clearly all around the district, through shortwave. Provincial radio stations can be received only through additional antennas placed on rooftops.

The radio is therefore, unsurprisingly, a widely trusted medium. However, weak and limited infrastructure, alongside poor programming offered by the local military station (criticized for its extensive music programming and repetitive speeches) and generally limited or delayed news coverage, represent key constraints to listenership and to the popularity of the local station.

Figure 12, which classifies the districts analyzed for this study into four groups on the basis of TV usage and quality of local radio content, illustrates Garmser's positioning in relation to other districts.

Figure 12: Contextualizing the priority districts analyzed



Setting up repeaters and additional antennas would be a quick intervention to increase both the coverage and the quality of existing radio stations. Amir Agha, a hill located 7km southwest of the bazaar, would be a good spot for establishing additional antennas that would allow for further reach.

A number of interventions could increase buy-in for the local radio station. Radio Garmser could significantly reduce music programming and diversify its content. Given the importance of agriculture for the local population, agriculture programming (e.g. information on crop diseases, the price of staples at the market) could be a valuable addition. If it cannot be created locally, content could easily be bought from external sources. Indeed, military radio stations could work as a network to share content, to provide unpopular radio stations with access to programming that is more in demand.

Content diversification should also mean increasing local news, which is currently covered to a limited extent and furthermore is delayed. Security is a constraint in this respect (since journalists are unable to travel around the district freely), but one solution could be to encourage the local population to feed the news in directly (e.g. for listeners to call the local radio station to provide information about the district). Increasing interactive programming on local radio could help the local population become familiar with the option of calling in. Mobile phone coverage is still very poor, of course, but this could be addressed by installing Base Transceiver Station (BTS) on the Forward Operating Base (FOB), for instance.

There is no TV usage in Garmser, as this is significantly constrained by limited electricity and cultural barriers. Key interventions would relate to supporting electricity coverage, as well as ensuring culturally sensitive programming on TV channels.