

## **Afghanistan: April '07**

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Helmand radio project gets under way.

Three months of hard work brought rich dividends in April, when IWPR began innovative radio programming in Helmand province.

It would be difficult to describe how primitive radio is in Helmand, a southern province beset with a growing insurgency, a thriving opium poppy industry, and severe economic hardship.

Journalists are under-trained and under-equipped, often lacking even the simplest tools of the trade. News reporting is often, at best, "protocol journalism" – an announcer reads a script in a studio, often doing little more than echoing the official line.

IWPR brought professional equipment and first-rate journalism training to Helmand, enabling radio journalists to do things they had previously been unable to contemplate, such as live call-in shows, and panel discussions on sensitive, controversial subjects, as well as professional radio spots.

Trainee journalists in Helmand now have professional digital recorders, allowing for studio-quality sound that can be easily edited. Studio mikes, mixers, cables, etc. give radio stations the possibility to produce live call-in shows.

The head of Helmand Radio and Television, Abdul Malek Mushfeq, originally put a damper on the idea of a live show, because, as he put it, "we cannot filter out impolite questions". All call-in programmes at state radio were taped and edited. For other radio stations, call-in shows were limited largely to song requests.

So it was a big surprise when me, radio trainer Josh Phillips and the Helmand Radio team arrived at the studio to be told that the show would be live, and starting in 20 minutes.

The topic was security: government officials and a retired army officer were to answer questions from the public.

The guests had already arrived, equipment had to be set up, and questions discussed.

But the results were much more than we had hoped for: several hundred callers responded. In a one-hour programme, only 30 or so could be accommodated, but the experience proved that there was real hunger for this type of programming in Helmand. People desperately want to be heard, and want a chance to ask difficult questions of those in power.

Many of the callers asked about corruption, and challenged studio guests to explain why the police were not being held accountable for their transgressions.

In Helmand, as in many parts of Afghanistan, police corruption is endemic. Drug use, violence, bribery - all are characteristics associated with the very people who are supposed to protect and defend the local population.

The second programme was, if anything, even more successful. Naweed Nazari, a young journalist in Lashkar Gah, assembled a panel to discuss the concerns of young people.

Guests included a female member of the provincial council, a member of the teachers' union, and a member of the National Unity Party, all young people themselves.

Their conclusion: the government is not doing enough to help the province's youth. Young people in Helmand face numerous difficulties, among the most serious of which are high illiteracy rates, drug addiction, and unemployment.

From the experience, IWPR and its trainees, along with the radio listeners, gained valuable insight into the concerns of ordinary Helmandis, and a deeper understanding of the problems in the province.

**Location:** [Afghanistan](#)

**Topic:** [Youth](#)

**Focus:** [Afghanistan](#)

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