

# Countering Extremism through the Airwaves: The Role of FM Radio in Peacebuilding in Pakistan's Conflict Zones

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## Abstract

The tribal areas of Pakistan have historically been plagued by conflict, extremism, and limited access to information and communication. Militants have historically used illegal FM radio stations to spread propaganda and extort funding, highlighting the need for legitimate radio stations to counter these efforts. The tribal belt faces numerous challenges, including a lack of infrastructure, as well as issues related to agriculture, education, health, and shelter. Establishing new FM radio stations in these areas presents a unique opportunity to promote intercultural dialogue, challenge violent ideologies, and foster alternative narratives that promote peace. Approximately 70 percent of the population in tribal districts relies on radio as their primary source of news and entertainment. The new radio stations communicate state narratives, educate locals on the legal system and their rights as citizens, and address various social issues. This study aims to investigate the role of radio stations in Peacebuilding and Countering Extremism in the affected Areas of Pakistan. The Scholar used qualitative methods to gather in-depth insights from stakeholders and measure the impact of FM radio stations. The data were collected through in-depth interviews with station managers (n=15), program producers, and radio presenters regarding the aims and objectives of the radio stations, as well as details of the programs broadcast during daily transmissions. The participants were selected by using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Thematic Analysis was used to analyse the data, i.e., interviews. The data is examined through the lens of the Agenda-Setting Theory. It is concluded that there are variously designed radio programs focusing on health, education, women's empowerment, agriculture, and development. There are also special programs focusing on social cohesion, Peacebuilding, and Countering Extremism in the affected Areas of Pakistan.

**Keywords:** *Radio, Conflict, Peace, Pakistan, Propaganda, Tribal Areas*

## **Introduction:**

Pakistan faced an increase in instability, insecurity, violence, and conflict due to its key position as a “frontline state” in the so-called war on terror after 9/11. Approximately 10,000 terrorist attacks were reported in Pakistan from 2002 to 2015 (Mahasin, 2017). During this period, more than 70,000 people were killed and over 30,000 were injured. More than half of these attacks (5,500) occurred in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. While this situation has affected the entire Country, the majority of the events took place in Baluchistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, including the newly merged tribal districts (NMDs) (Shah et al., 2020).

These regions share a long border with Afghanistan. The tribal districts also face many challenges, including a lack of infrastructure, agriculture, education, healthcare, and development (Ullah et al., 2020). Due to the potential of radio, militants used illegal FM radio stations to spread propaganda and extract funding in the tribal areas and also in the settled areas (like Swat).

About 70 percent of the population in tribal districts depended on radio as their primary source of news and entertainment radio (Baber & Ullah, 2020). The establishment of new FM radio stations in these areas presents an opportunity to promote intercultural dialogue, challenge violent ideologies, and foster alternative narratives that promote peace. It also focuses on communicating state narratives, educating locals on the legal system and their rights as citizens, and addressing various social issues (Abou Zahab et al., 2013).

After 2002, PEMRA, the FM radio station saw rapid growth. PEMRA issued licenses to different FM radio stations in the country (Ullah & Khan, 2017). Currently, more than 265 FM radio stations are working in Pakistan. These radio stations include commercial and non-commercial radio stations (Campus Radio).

Radio is still considered a powerful and effective communication and information tool, especially in underdeveloped communities. It can help create peace, counter conflict, violence, and extremism, and support education and women's rights. This research study aims to determine the impact of FM radio stations in war/conflict-affected areas (tribal areas) of Pakistan, particularly in countering extremist propaganda and promoting peace (Baber & Ullah, 2020). FM radio plays an important role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding processes, especially in areas with low literacy levels and limited means of communication. Radio is used for sharing information,

promoting intercultural dialogue, and enhancing social cohesion (Khan, 2007). Different radio programs can influence the public and change their perceptions and attitudes toward development and peace. FM radio has successfully challenged violent ideologies and promoted alternative narratives that encourage reconciliation and peace in conflict-affected areas.

### **Problem Statement:**

The tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan have long been affected by conflict, limited access to information, and ideological extremism. Extremist groups have exploited communication gaps, using illegal FM radio stations to spread propaganda and recruit followers. In contrast, legitimate FM radio stations have the potential to offer alternative narratives, promote intercultural dialogue, and contribute to socio-economic development. This research study aims to investigate the impact of FM radio stations in tribal areas of Pakistan in shaping perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors toward peace and development while also assessing their effectiveness in countering extremist propaganda.

### **Significance of the Study**

This research is significant as it addresses a critical gap in understanding the impact of FM radio in conflict-prone regions. By highlighting the potential of FM radio to promote peace, counter-extremism, and foster development, the study aims to inform strategic interventions by governmental and non-governmental actors in communication and peacebuilding efforts.

### **Research Question:**

RQ1. To what extent do peace-oriented FM radio messages disrupt extremist propaganda, and how do they affect audiences' knowledge of their legal rights and civic duties?

RQ2. How do the themes, formats, and presentation styles of FM radio programs influence listeners' perceptions of peace and inter-communal harmony in the tribal districts?

### **Objectives of the Study:**

- To examine how FM radio programming promotes peacebuilding and social cohesion in conflict-affected tribal areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
- To assess the effectiveness of FM radio broadcasts in countering extremist narratives and increasing public awareness of legal rights and civic responsibilities.

## **Literature Review:**

Radio has historically played a crucial role in conflict resolution and peacebuilding worldwide. Radio's capability to reach remote and marginalized communities, its potential to share news and correct information, and its capacity to involve local communities in dialogue make it a potent tool for fostering peace and development (Khattak, 2011).

Radio programming under the Countering Violent Extremism policy framework can enhance peace, civic engagement, and positive foreign views, but has a mixed impact on opposition to violence and Islamic law (Aldrich, 2012). It helps construct peacebuilding narratives by airing diverse perspectives and contesting extremist narratives. (dos Santos, 2023). Peace and tolerance radio programming, under the CVE policy, positively impacts civic engagement and views of foreign nations but has mixed results on opposition to violence in the name of Islam (Aldrich, 2012).

The study evaluates KBC radio's role in peacebuilding among Marsabit communities, highlighting low coverage of conflict reporting. Extending coverage may enhance peace efforts and content relevance.(Lechet, 2011). Like Culture de la Paix in Central Africa, radios promote peace through dialogue and connecting communities. Indigenous language broadcasts, such as in Sango, facilitate inter-group communication, aiding in the peacebuilding efforts(dos Santos, 2023).

Radio is a powerful medium for sharing information regarding health and education with different populations. Radio broadcasting aimed to promote peace and mutual understanding among European nations from 1921 to 1939. It contributed to self-regulation until geopolitical changes made it unfeasible post-1933 (Potter, 2023).

Early radio broadcasts in New Zealand focused on educational content, particularly targeting women for health and scientific motherhood education. Community radio has been identified as a cost-effective tool for promoting rapid change and delivering vital developmental information, especially in remote regions where access to education is limited (Ullah & Baber, 2018). Radio programs have been effective in addressing sensitive topics like sexualities and gender relations among young people, contributing to their health promotion and awareness. In regions like Sub-Saharan Africa, radio programs have been instrumental in spreading awareness about HIV/AIDS, influencing behavioral changes through targeted content and strategic air times. Overall, radio's

ability to reach wide audiences and deliver tailored educational content makes it a valuable tool for promoting health and education globally (Macindoe, 2021).

In 1947, Radio Pakistan was the only electronic medium for news and information in the country. Over the years, it has been neglected due to government policies focusing on propagating their agendas instead of disseminating education and highlighting social, cultural, and political issues for the masses (Zahid et al., 2021). Concrete and stunning efforts are still required to maximize yield and benefit from the radio medium in Pakistan (Chaudhary et al., 2020). Community radio is identified in this work as vital to sharing information on health and SDG education, especially in less developed communities where oral customs and Indigenous languages are still distinct signatures (Ajisafe, 2021).

According to the Saleem et al. (2019), radio is the biggest source of information in rural areas but still more work is needed to be done. Through Radio Pakistan, it is now easier for women to get an education without making opponents to their parents and strict family heads.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

This study used the agenda-setting theory, as a theoretical framework, developed by Walter Lippmann in the 1920s (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The theory highlighted that the media determine what people think about different events and issues. Media sets agendas regarding different events happening around us. It creates images in people's minds; they react not to actual events but to the images in their minds (Lau et al., 2020).

FM Radio is a cheaper medium of information in underdeveloped areas of the world. In Pakistan, especially Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (including Tribal districts), No other reliable sources of information are available for people (Ullah, 2018). A traditional agenda-setting methodology was used to understand the local radio station's capability to inform and educate the audience about the issue. Different radio stations are working in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, each with an agenda. Currently, those stations broadcast different programs whose main objective is to create awareness about Health, Education, women's empowerment, development and also broadcast for social cohesion, Peacebuilding and Countering Extremism in the affected Areas of Pakistan.

### **Timeline:**

The data was collected in spring 2024 (January to February 2024).

**Methodology:**

The researcher used a qualitative research design in this study, specifically, the thematic analysis, this study explores the Perception of station managers, producers, and presenters regarding the role of FM Radio in Peacebuilding in war and conflict-affected Areas of Pakistan. Qualitative research allows scholars to do detailed and wider research and to have a better understanding of the problem under investigation (Braun & Clarke, 2014).

**Sampling:**

The purposive sampling techniques were used to recruit respondents as developed by Privitera (2013). The purpose of the study was explained to the eligible respondents, and their consent was taken. The data collected for this study consisted of semi-structured interviews with (n=15) including station managers, program producers, and presenters of radio stations with over 5 years of experience in radio broadcasting. who currently work on any FM radio stations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The data was collected in spring 2024 (January to February 2024). The interviews were conducted in person in the local language (Pashto) and later translated into English. The names were anonymized, and Participants 1 And 2 were given identification codes.

**Analysis of the Data:**

All the interviews were analyzed using the thematic analysis method. It is a deductive method that involves identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns or themes in qualitative data (Braun et al., 2014). The analysis is primarily conducted at the semantic level, where themes are identified based on the explicit meaning of the data, which is driven by the researcher's theoretical and analytic interests. Braun and Clarke (2006) explain that the analytic process involves a progression from description to interpretation.

**Finding:**

During the analysis of the data, it was concluded that more than 50 radio stations working in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; there are some big FM radio Networks, which have more than 5 Channel, Like Pakhtunkhwa radio stations, Suno FM, Abaseen Radio network, Dilbar Radio, Radio Pakistan, Etc. Besides the Commercial FM Radio stations, there are some community radio stations, Campus Radio stations in different Universities, Commercial FM radio, broadcasting, News, information, and entertainment, while the campus Radio stations mostly focus on

Education-based broadcasting. The Radio Stations broadcast different programs on the following major themes,

**Education:**

The lack of education is one of the reasons for the involvement of people in violence, conflict, and terrorist activities. Education can help develop interfaith harmony, religious tolerance, and employment opportunities in the region. Participant 5 has a master's degree in Journalism and added

*" Education is the key to development and peace. Without access to quality education, youth in conflict-affected areas are more vulnerable to engaging in violence and conflict activities."*

The lack of basic infrastructure and educational opportunities in conflict-affected regions is a key factor in the lack of educational institutions, schools, and colleges in the Northwest of Pakistan. Participant 6 further added that

*"The cycle of underdevelopment caused by the absence of basic infrastructure and educational opportunities hampers the potential for peace and prosperity. Peace is not just connected to education but is essential for education, life, prosperity, interfaith harmony, religious tolerance, and employment."*

Education is key for development in the world. During the analysis of the data, the majority of the respondents agreed that they have specially designed radio programs for education. Each station has different formats, but the content of the programs is the same. Participant 09, who has 15 years of experience in community radio as a producer, stated.

*"We have different radio programs focused on education. We invite various lecturers, teachers, professors, and staff members from the education department to discuss various education-related issues".*

There are formal and informal education systems in Pakistan. Some respondents believe that radio is a powerful tool for both formal and informal education.

### **Women's Rights and Empowerment:**

Women make up half of the population, but the literacy rate and job opportunities for women are quite low. Radio stations broadcast specially designed programs focusing on women's education, rights, and empowerment. They engage female program producers and presenters to create programs on women's issues. They also invite female professors, lecturers, and school teachers to discuss education, particularly women's education. Additionally, female journalists are invited to speak about women's rights and the challenges faced by women in war-affected areas like KP. Government officials and representatives from NGOs are also invited to talk about the importance of women and their role in development. Female doctors are also invited to discuss women's health-related issues.

### **Youth Development:**

According to the UN Population Report 2024, Pakistan has the fifth largest young population in the world. Around 63 percent of the Country's population consists of youth aged between 15 and 33 years old, Pakistan's population is projected to grow rapidly from 247.5 million in 2023 to 511 million by 2100, with a large youth population (around 140 million under 25) (report, 2025). The majority of Pakistani youth are active users of social media. As of January 2023, there were 71.70 million social media users in Pakistan, which accounts for 30.1 percent of the total population of 238.1 million. Of these social media users, 73 percent are male, and 27 percent are female. Youth also promote peace by sharing beautiful images of the mountains, life, culture, and stories of the people who love peace and development.

*"Youth hold the power of social media to project a positive image of their village, area, customs, and culture, changing prevailing negativity and paving the way for peace, development, and prosperity."*

### **News and current affairs:**

Media organizations such as newspapers, television, radio, and websites must gather accurate information and present it to the public to counter misinformation and prevent potential conflicts. Journalists must use their platforms responsibly and avoid biased reporting that may fuel conflicts. Their focus should be on promoting development, understanding, and showcasing the positive aspects of different communities and regions. Through their work, journalists can help bridge gaps, change perceptions, and promote peace among diverse groups of people.

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Most radio stations broadcast news bulletins in national and local languages (Urdu and Pashto), including national and local news that interests the audience. For example, FM 101 provides hourly updates, while other radio stations offer news updates at different times.

*In Pakistan, FM radio stations function as community radio stations, and their transmission is limited to specific communities with a common language and culture. These radio stations are located in Waziristan, Orakzai, Kohat, and other areas. They provide important news and information to their audience, covering topics such as politics, education, health, new developments, and sports.*

Participant 14, shared his opinion and stated

*"Besides the news bulletin, we have special programs about different occasions such as August 14, March 23, World Radio Day, and Eid."*

The role of the media in shaping public opinion is significant, and they have a crucial responsibility to report the truth fairly and unbiasedly while ensuring that diverse voices are heard. Participant 8 further shared that broadcasters strive to share news and information about events, festivals, agriculture, and other activities with people in a more positive way to change their preconceived thoughts and perceptions.

### **Peace and Development:**

The Kyber Pakhtunkhwa region, including Newly Merged Districts (NMDs), has been impacted by panic broadcasting by Taliban militants using illegal FM radio stations to spread propaganda. This has been a historical issue in the tribal areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan, which have grappled with conflict, extremism, and limited access to information and communication. The media plays a crucial role in promoting and developing these areas. Establishing new FM radio stations presents a unique opportunity to encourage intercultural dialogue, challenge violent ideologies, and promote alternative narratives for peace. These radio stations would focus on conveying state narratives, educating locals about the legal system and their rights as citizens, and addressing various social issues. Participant 3 has expressed an opinion on this matter.

*"The radio is a powerful tool for information and communication and now is the time to use this tool for positive change and to support peace in our area. We broadcast different programs that directly or indirectly support peace and development. These include peace festival shows, Eid shows, inviting different tribal elders to resolve local conflicts, and inviting religious leaders to speak about peace. We have invited various guests, including government officials, tribal elders, and religious leaders, to discuss various local disputes in the area. They address the main issues and gain a deep understanding of the problems.*

### **Entertainment:**

Entertainment is one of the major components of FM broadcasting in Pakistan. The majority of the radio stations broadcast songs, drama, live transmission, poetry and sports news. The most common format of the entertainment program, as the RJ (Presenter) delegated, has one to two hours; he/She announcement the topic of the discussion then plays different songs, and also receives a call from the audience about the topic and songs on demand. Same of the Presenter is well-known for the presentation style,

Participant 3, presenting a radio program from the last 9 years, added

*Daily, I receive 35 to 40 calls on my radio show. Each day, there is a different topic of discussion, and I try to talk about social issues and find solutions for them. We learned from the audience's feedback that they had valuable comments and suggestions.*

Approximately 70% of the population in tribal districts is dependent on radio as their primary source of news and entertainment. The FM radio station is fulfilling the need for entertainment. The respondent 2 further added,

*We received calls from audiences of different age groups; we also received calls from females; they demanded different songs, so we searched the songs and played them to the audience; there were some old songs and some new songs.*

Radio broadcasts, news, and programs related to sports include news about local sports events as well as national and international sports events. Cricket is the most important event for the audience in the area.

### **Conclusion and Discussion:**

This study was designed to understand the impact of FM radio stations in peacebuilding and countering extremism in the conflict-affected regions of Pakistan, specifically Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (including merged districts). The study focused on all radio stations operating in the affected area. Data was collected from (n=15) respondents, including station managers, program producers, and presenters of radio stations with over 5 years of experience in radio broadcasting. The interview data was analyzed using thematic analysis to understand the themes of the broadcasting. The study concluded that radio broadcasting significantly contributes to education, women's empowerment, youth engagement, and the creation of peace narratives. It is also a powerful medium in tribal areas which helps to raise social cohesion and strengthens community resilience against extremist ideologies (Khan, 2017; Ullah, 2018)

The study concluded that education helps to develop interfaith unity, religious tolerance, and job opportunities in the region. Without access to quality education, young people in conflict-affected areas are more likely to become involved in violence and conflict. Radio supports formal and informal education by inviting different people, including academics, community leaders, and individuals from diverse backgrounds, to discuss and exchange ideas. This aligns with previous studies (Ajisafe, 2021; Potter, 2023; Ullah et al., 2020) that identify radio as an effective tool for educational outreach in less developed areas. The Radio programs have contributed to building awareness about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and community-driven initiatives (Potter, 2023). It further added that FM radio can reach remote populations in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and serves as an important medium for educational information (formal and informal) sharing, especially in areas with low literacy rates (Baber & Ullah, 2020). This study corroborates that targeted educational programming can positively influence listeners' attitudes toward education, literacy, and community development.

FM Radio stations also broadcast programs addressing women's issues, health, and rights and promoting women's empowerment. The inclusion of female voices in program production and

discussions provided a safe space for addressing women's challenges in conservative and conflict-prone settings. (Heywood, 2022); Macindoe (2021) Stated that radio programs hosted by female presenters always play a significant role in awareness and behavior change. Additionally Ch et al. (2024) Support the study and emphasize the vital role of radio in advancing women's education in rural Pakistan. The study confirms that interactive programs addressing women's rights and empowerment and narratives from female leaders significantly contribute to breaking gender stereotypes and promoting gender equity.

Pakistan has the fifth largest young population in the world (Sahr Suleman, 2025). The study concluded that FM radio stations also focus on youth issues, and radio programs contribute to peacebuilding. Radio initiatives actively engaged young audiences by encouraging positive narratives, fostering discussions about cultural heritage, and promoting constructive use of social media. dos Santos (2023) Highlighted that media initiatives encouraging intercultural dialogue are instrumental in fostering youth engagement and promoting peace narratives. This study resonates with that perspective, advocating for strategic radio programming to empower youth as peacebuilders within their conflict-affected communities.

The study confirms the centrality of FM radio in promoting peace narratives and facilitating conflict resolution. In the tribal belt (a broader area including Afghanistan), local tribal and religious leaders are highly respected and have the authority to determine the direction of their societies. Their guidance and support play an important role in promoting peace and development in the region. Elders and religious leaders continue to focus on peace and advocate for the community's cleanliness, development, and education. Shafiei and Overton (2024) Agreed with this study and added the role of community radio in promoting intergroup understanding and peace in conflict-affected societies. The lack of information and knowledge is one of the causes of conflict, and sharing basic information about an issue can help solve many problems. The role of social media as a source of news and information cannot be relied upon.

This study concluded that legal FM radio stations have demonstrated significant potential in promoting peace and countering extremism in Pakistan's conflict-affected regions. Through different educational programs, women empowerment initiatives, youth engagement, and promotion of peace narratives, radio serves as an important communication channel for creating

social cohesion and resilience in the community. The study advocates for continued investment in community-based media initiatives and encourages policymakers to leverage radio's influence for sustainable peacebuilding efforts. It's further proposed that NGOs and policy stakeholders integrate radio-based programming in future peacebuilding efforts. This study also contributes to the broader understanding of media's impact on conflict transformation. It underscores the need for targeted, inclusive, and participatory media strategies aligning with local needs and global peacebuilding frameworks.

### **Theoretical contributions:**

The agenda-setting theory, by Walter Lippmann suggests that the media determine what people think about different events and issues. Media sets agendas regarding different events happening around us. (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Each media organization (Radio station) has its own agenda for broadcasting. This study concluded that the radio station used the agenda-setting methodology to inform and educate the audience about issues and also create awareness about health, education, women's empowerment, and development and also broadcast for social cohesion, peacebuilding, and countering extremism in the affected areas of the world.

### **Limitations Future Research:**

The researcher in this study used purposive and snowball sampling techniques to select participants. However, it's important to note that the findings of this study are limited in their applicability to a wider population due to the specific selection of participants. Additionally, the study utilized in-depth interviews, and it should be noted that the researcher acted as an interpreter of the data provided. While the researcher accurately presented the words of the participants, the meaning behind those words may not always be fully understood.

This research study looked at the perception of the radio station manager and producer in Kyber Pakhtunkhwa. Future research should expand the study to other areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan. To do so, future research should collect data about violent events from media owners and audiences.

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