

FIRST PERSON

# Mongolian Rural Radio Gains Momentum

by Luke Distelhorst

It was 8 a.m.; there was no power, a hollow roof full of ash and dead pigeons, three crooked poles of different gauges and a cheap Chinese satellite dish that came with the wrong pieces.

At Gobi Wave radio station in Ömnögovi province in southern Mongolia, our options were limited. After all, it is the least densely populated region in Asia.

We had driven 12 hours over demanding dirt tracks to reach Dalanzadgad, the capital of Ömnögovi, only to find our ability to install the new equipment hindered by a uselessly broken power plant.

Radio broadcasting in Mongolia started in 1934, but it took 72 years before the growing number of rural radio stations in the country banded together. In April of this year, representatives from 12 rural radio stations met in Ulaanbaatar with help from The Asia Foundation to improve radio in the Mongolian countryside.

## Objective voice

The result of the two-day meeting was the creation of the Oron Nutgiin Radiogin Kholboo rural community radio association. The Asia Foundation stated that, "Through the ONRK, these stations will produce a diverse schedule of programs that explore local environmental, social and political issues, and seek solutions to them. ... The ONRK will support the development of radio as a free and objective voice."

D. Naranchimeg (Naraa), director of Gobi Wave radio (103.6 MHz), attended the meetings as a supporter of cooperation among rural radio stations, stating, "For herders, radio is the link to the world."

Rural families across Mongolia have extremely limited access to print media, and less prosperous families cannot afford televisions and satellite dishes.

Although it was established in the late 1990s, Gobi Wave did not actually start broadcasting until a grant in 2001 from the Soros Foundation allowed the group to buy equipment and to pay out salaries.

"In the beginning it was hard. We had so little funding we played almost 90 percent music and only 10 percent news," Naraa said.

## Crumbling building

Still, the Gobi Wave facilities are in need of repair.

When I noticed the antenna poles were missing from the site, I worried aloud, as we had no other way to mount the new dual dipole antennas on the roof of Gobi Wave's crumbling brick building.

Charlie Mayer, a senior producer with the National Public Radio program "All Things Considered," answered that the pipes had been taken to the only place with power — the power plant — so they could be welded.

Working in Mongolia on a Luce Scholars fellowship, Mayer has been



From left: Charlie Mayer, Simon Mayer, Enkhbat of Gobi Wave and Tamir of VOA

focusing on rural radio in Mongolia, saying, "They make a huge difference in these small communities. They broadcast real news about the people in the community and have no biases ... this is the real reason I came to Mongolia."

Dalanzadgad does have other sources of news; however, they are either owned by or affiliated with political parties. The employees at Gobi Wave feel it is their duty to produce unbiased and objective news.

Tserendulam, a Gobi Wave journalist and mother of three, lives to do her job.

"Of course I could work for a big company and make more money, but then I wouldn't be helping the community," she said. "With this work, I know I'm helping others as well."

"How much do you make?" I asked. "In a month? 70,000 tögrög," or about \$60. "My husband doesn't work either," she said.

## Giving advice

Bill Siemering, one of the founders of NPR and president of Developing Radio Partners, has made 10 trips to Mongolia to work with rural radio stations. In June, he traveled to radio stations in northern Mongolia to lend advice about the growing importance of local, independent news sources.

"What other social investment can have such a broad reach or affect more lives than an effective local radio station?" Siemering said.

Throughout the day during the installation of the new equipment, the citizens of Dalanzadgad constantly called in to the radio station, asking why the station was off the air.

By 3 p.m., the pipes had returned from the power plant, welded and bolted

together in true, jury-rigged Mongolian style. With the tin roof torn open to accommodate the antenna pole and mounting brackets, a process that destroyed a shoddy Chinese hammer, the team was able to install the antenna and still not be late for a meeting with B. Badraa, deputy governor of Dalanzadgad.

Badraa was excited to hear that with the donation of a satellite dish by the U.S. embassy, Gobi Wave could now broadcast Voice of America programming.

For the first time, Gobi Wave now offers international English-language news, programming and music to Ömnögovi and four adjacent aimags.

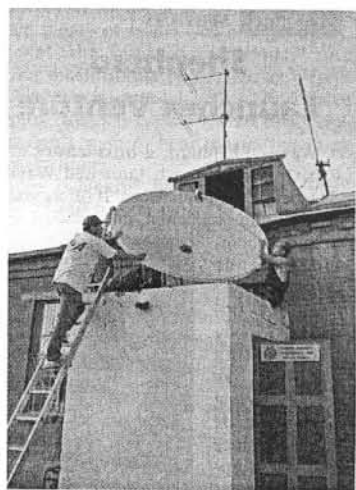
At 10 p.m. the local government turned on a generator to power the whole town, sucking up 1 million Mongolian tögrög, or approximately \$860, worth of diesel per hour.

Now it was time to test the new antenna, Mackie Onyx 1620 mixer and 300-watt Broadcast Warehouse transmitter, all donated by The Asia Foundation. Gobi Wave went back on the air.

But finding AsiaSat 2, the satellite that carries VOA, proved a problem. Tamir, the VOA representative in Mongolia, drove to the local cable station and woke the lone attendant to fine-tune and spin the dish until 2 a.m. By this point everyone had been working for close to 18 hours.

## VOA programming

The next morning, as the staff of Gobi Wave received training on the new mixer and Sony MZ-B100 MiniDisk player, VOA programming aired with the help of a generator. While the citizens of Dalanzadgad still did not have power, the surrounding countryside got its first taste of, VOA News in "Special English."



Tamir and Simon Mayer



Gobi Wave Founder and Director D. Naranchimeg is interviewed by a local TV station.

But Gobi Wave is only one station. Across Mongolia rural community radio stations are gaining a reputation for being independent sources of community, national and international news.

Many of these stations are under heavy financial restraints. Five of the 12 stations in the ONRK operate on an annual budget of less than \$3,000 per year.

With recent donations from The Asia Foundation and the U.S. embassy in Mongolia, Gobi Wave has reliable, modern technology. Ivanhoe Mines Ltd., a Canadian company investing in the Oyu Tolgoi project in Ömnögovi, recently signed a \$4,000 underwriting contract with Gobi Wave, almost doubling its annual budget and making Ivanhoe the first private-sector underwriter of radio in Mongolia.

As we followed sandy ruts through a live ammunition range on the way out of Dalanzadgad, we cranked up DJ Walt "Baby" Love, courtesy of VOA and Gobi Wave.

Ahead lay 370 miles of dirt, dust and sand leading back to Ulaanbaatar. Behind us, however, was one step forward in the development, education and evolution of rural communities in Mongolia.

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