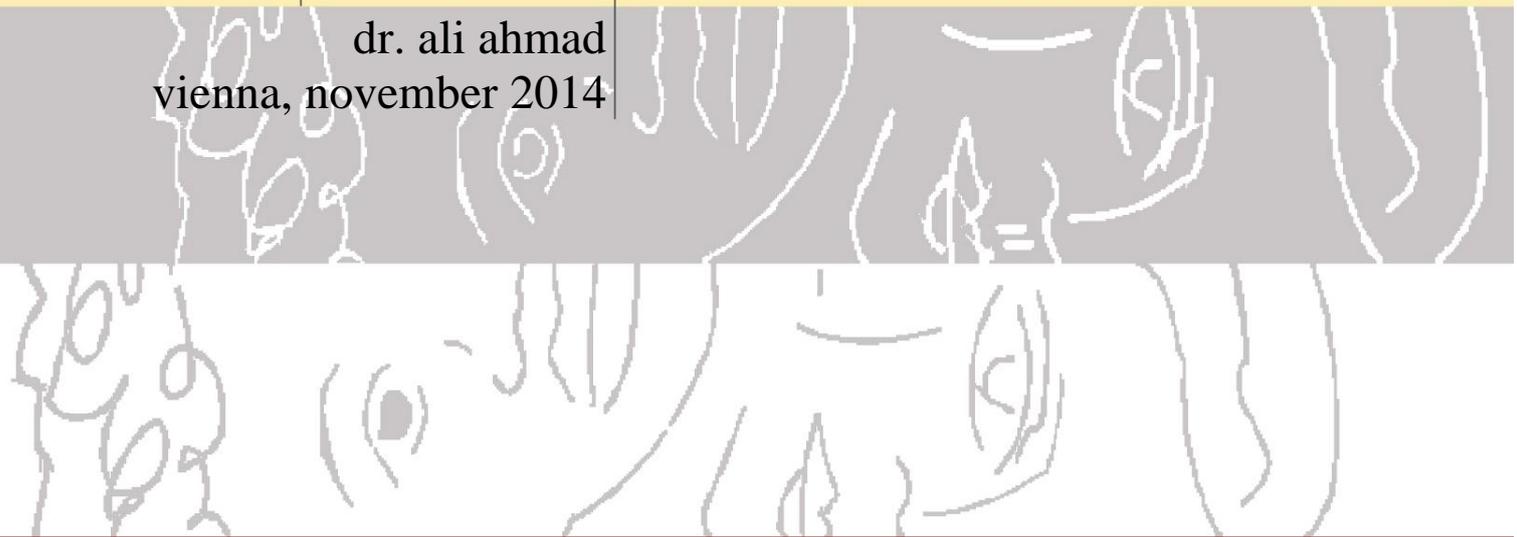


**innovativer
pool**

status report from 2002-2014

dr. ali ahmad
vienna, november 2014



Afghanistan: Evolution of the Media Status Report from 2002-2014

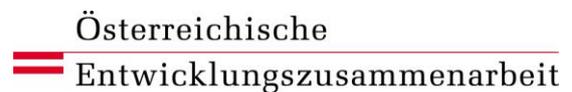
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I. Introduction

The last decade has been witness to much drama and action with the ‘clash of civilizations’ that academic scholars had been warning the world against, suddenly becoming too real too soon. Post 9/11 western discourse has been dominated the need to assert a strong stand against international terrorism and in particular, terrorism as seen to be rooted in Christianity’s nemesis, Islam. This discourse has been backed by strong on-ground action with the consent of the United Nations General Assembly backing the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan. Many lives were lost and ten years after, the country still tethers on the edge of instability. In a picture that still remains blurry and out of focus, there is one beacon of change that is tangible – a vibrant and flourishing media landscape.

The coming-of-age of the media space in Afghanistan in the post Taliban era can be counted as a major success story for the Afghan government as well as the international community. Media is one sector that can effect social change despite a fragile political environment. As such, U.S. government agencies, international aid organizations as well as regional political actors have thus far invested hundreds of millions of dollars to institutionalize a free, independent and pluralistic media sector in the war-torn country. As a result of all these efforts, the media sector in Afghanistan has developed fairly well and the country is now ranked 128 amongst 179 countries in the World Press Freedom Index 2014.¹ Interestingly, media in Afghanistan is more independent even compared to its regional peers such as Pakistan, Iran and other Central Asian states.

Afghanistan’s Constitution guarantees the freedom of speech and its press law promotes and supports the right of freedom of thought and expression with free, independent and pluralistic media. As per Article 34 of the constitution, “the freedom of expression is inviolable”. As a result of this constitutional guarantee, today Afghan people have access to a huge diversity of facts and opinions on account of a flourishing media landscape encompassing radio, television, as well as print media. The Afghan media landscape now encompasses 65 televisions, 174 radio stations² and over 800 publications³. Radio and television networks now

¹ <http://rsf.org/index2014/en-index2014.php>

² As of September 2014, sourced from the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MCIT) 2014: <http://mcit.gov.af/en/page/4876/6005>

³ As of September 2010 as quoted in Altai consulting 2010, and BBC Media Action 2012.

cover 89% of the residential areas and this is expected to increase to 95% by the end of 2014⁴. This vibrancy is in sharp contrast to the status quo under the Taliban regime – only one radio station, ‘Radio Shari’at’, and not a single television channel.

While the flourishing landscape generates interaction and interaction goes a long way in seeding tolerance, media seems to be the new battleground between religious and secular elements within Afghanistan. Increasingly content and coverage has been inviting sharp criticism as being “western”, “biased” and even “vulgar”. Religious and secular elements disagree on what should be publicly broadcast and some have couched it in terms of ‘Islamic’ and ‘un-Islamic’ programming. What exacerbates these differences is the lack of a clear definition of what constitutes ‘Islamic programming’ leaving each group to proclaim itself as the sole guardian of culture and decency in a deeply religious society.

These debates are supplemented with other real challenges that the industry faces - program quality, financial viability, security of media practitioners, professionalism etc., even as reach and impact are severely hampered by Afghanistan’s as yet dismal literacy level. A low literacy rate (currently only 31% of the population is literate) not only hinders the active consumption of print media, but since print media is the cheapest source of information, it also weakens the reach of social and political news at the base of the pyramid.

Despite these evident challenges, media will continue to play a critical role in repairing the country’s social fabric and addressing threat perceptions, internally as well as externally. Media is the next battleground and for a population that is starved of information and alternative points of view, even the debate on what constitutes “Islamic media” should be seen as a step forward since it signals open discussion. Eventually, the role of the media is to inform the masses and enable them to make connections. To that extent, continued support from the international community and strengthened legal, moral and financial frameworks will go a long way in cementing democracy in Afghanistan.

II. Study design and purpose

The numbers tell us that Afghanistan’s media has evolved; however it is not clear how relevant this development has been in terms of reach, quality and impact. To any onlooker,

⁴ MCIT 2014

the state of the media in Afghanistan today is unparalleled with any other phase in the country's history. But this may not be enough. At this point, in fact it is all the more pertinent to ask whether this growth can be sustained and the vitality of the space maintained post the withdrawal of U.S.-led NATO troops by end 2014.

It is worth pointing out that many international organizations including NATO⁵ and USAID, either directly or indirectly, fund many media currently operational in the country and as such the industry may not be in a position to even cover basic operating costs once this aid/funding is withdrawn. On the domestic front, the Afghan government is still struggling to build basic governance structures and institutions and is in no position to attend to the needs of this sector on an immediate basis. In these troubled times, one of the major concerns for the Afghans, particularly for civil society, is the future of a peace deal with the Taliban in the context of freedom of speech. In fact some religious fundamentalists have gone to the extent of proclaiming that free media is more dangerous than suicide bombers because suicide bombers kill people but media makes people go astray by shaking people's faith. Their reference is to popular music and entertainment shows, seen as a harbinger of westernization and thus, a threat to traditional values.

Outline of this study

This study examines the development of the media in Afghanistan during the period of 2002-2014; post the ouster of the Taliban by U.S. coalition forces. It also critically evaluates the sustainability of free and independent media given the fragile nature of the country's democratic institutions following the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan. It will further examine the freedom of speech and how media can strengthen democratic values and re-shape public interests. This study will also look into the relevance of new media including social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. in the Afghan context. We will finally conclude with some recommendations and way forward.

Central research questions

1. What are the impacts – direct and indirect - of the withdrawal of NATO troops from Afghanistan on local media post-2014?
2. What can the international community do after 2014 so as to ensure that the media scene in Afghanistan continues to remain diverse and vibrant?

⁵ NATO forces supported development of the media through the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRT).

3. How should media maintain the balance between traditional Afghan and western culture to prevent simmering conflictual tendencies between the two?

Methodological approach and sources

The methodology applied in this study employs mainly the qualitative analysis approach, in particular content analysis of public policy papers and documents, supplemented with interviews conducted in person as well as electronically. All information and data was tested and validated by field research and the researcher's own personal memoirs.

A- *Semi-structured interviews* with journalists, experts, academia and analysts.

B- *Print media* including local language sources. This categorization includes textbooks, policy papers by various research organizations, government publications, academic journals, news articles, popular magazines, and press releases by key international as well as local organizations.

C- *Broadcast media* have profound impact on the behavior and attitudes of people due to their strategic importance. With this in mind, a number of news programs and debates were reviewed for content.

D- *Online Sources and platforms* were used both as a source of information (by screening various websites, televisions, radios, social media) and as well as a means of conducting interviews and collating data.

E- *Personal experience:* I combine and relate the information gleaned from the aforementioned sources with my own experience in the field. As a field journalist from 2004-2012, I was covering the 'war on terror' and the fragile peace initiatives by the Afghan government and its international backers for various international media outlets and think tanks operating in Afghanistan. In particular, my work for the International Crisis Group (ICG) and McClatchy Newspaper Company⁶ enabled me to directly witness the development of the media sector in Afghanistan in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Taliban and the years after.

⁶ McClatchy Newspapers Company is the third largest newspaper chain in the United States:
www.mcclatchydc.com

III. Background and historical perspective

Early years

It all began in 1873 during the regime of King Amir Sher Ali Khan. The reformist King established communication, department of post office and printing houses for the first time⁷ and the first Afghan newspaper ‘Shams al-Nahar’ was published⁸, twice a month. In its initial years, it was all of two pages; which was later increased to 16 pages⁹. Abdul Qadir Peshawari, the political and military advisor as well as secretary to the King, was the brainchild behind the paper. However these baby steps were reversed during the reign of his successor, King Abdul Rahman Khan and the period from 1880 to 1901 is associated with the strangulation of the press¹⁰. Modern journalism finally took off in Afghanistan in 1906 with ‘Siraj-ul Akhbar’ (Lamp of the News), first published during the reign of King Habibullah Khan from 1901 to 1919¹¹. Initially, ‘Siraj-ul Akhbar’ was published only once and then stopped before being resumed in 1911. The bi-weekly lithographed¹² paper was the main publication of the state. The chief editor of the newspaper, Abdul Rauf Kandahari, was also a royal teacher. In its second phase, the publication was renamed to ‘Siraj-ul Akbar Afghania’ following active campaigning by Muhmud Tarzi, earning him the epithet, ‘the father of new journalism in Afghanistan’. Tarzi was an ardent advocate of modern education and campaigned actively for educational reform as well as secondary education for girls and boys. He championed the cause of the compatibility of Islam and science. The fortnightly journal focused on nationalism and modernity¹³, the country’s culture and history and the liberation of Islamic countries from European colonial powers. It encouraged readers to be self-critical and question their own understanding of the world. It was the only publication in Afghanistan that reported on World War I.¹⁴

‘Siraj-ul Akhbar’ served as a vehicle to mainstream many social and political themes in Afghan society including the debate on independence of Afghanistan from British-run India,¹⁵ Reflecting nationalistic core principles with Pan-Islamism among Afghans. Tarzi’s articles

⁷ Tanwir 2013, 40

⁸ Kazim 2009 and Tanwir 2013

⁹ Tanwir 2013

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Stewart 2014, 22

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Kazim 2009 and Tanwir 2013

¹⁵ Famous Afghan writers like Abdul Hadi Daudi, Abdul Rahman Ludin, and Abdul Ghani Mustaghni were the other main columnists for this paper.

focused on four pillars – homeland, nation, state, and religion. His messaging through analogy was that homeland was the container, nation the content, the state brings order and religion is the glue that keeps everything together.¹⁶ He critiqued the friendship with the British Empire and his articles, which campaigned for independence from British influence, provoked the British to pressurize the Afghan King to ban the paper after eight years of active publication.

In its third avatar, ‘Siraj-ul Akhbar’ was reinstated in 1919 during King Amanullah’s rule (1919-1929). His is a regime associated with a strong move towards modernity. ‘Siraj-ul Akhbar’ played a very important role in reviving national unity, driving a societal shift towards modernity and instigating a mass demand for independence from the British Empire. As such, the paper was a powerful instrument in uniting Afghans against the British colonial rule. In addition to ‘Siraj-ul Akhbar’, this regime was also marked by the publication of Afghanistan’s first women’s magazine, started under the direct supervision of the Queen.¹⁷

The start of radio broadcasting in 1925 marked the onset of a new era of mass media in Afghanistan. While the first radio transmitters had been installed as early as 1920, officially radio programming started only in 1925 with the installation of 200 watt Russian transmitters in Kabul Palace, the royal residence. Due to the national uprising against King Amanullah in 1929, these transmitters were destroyed but were reinstalled by King Mohammad Nadir Shah in 1931. The radio transmitters were upgraded in 1940 and were known as ‘Radio Afghanistan’ from 1960 onwards, a channel that emerged to be the voice of the government.¹⁸ The advent of the Radio marked a turning point in how the government communicated its orders and decrees with the general public.

The constitution of 1964 and the press law of 1965 guaranteed the freedom of press although operational restrictions were placed. While media was editorially independent from government influence, topics such as Islam, national interest, constitutional monarchy, and public order were decreed to be a priority.

1963-1973 was declared as the decade of democracy for various reasons; one of them being

¹⁶ BBC Media Action 2012 and Tanwir 2013

¹⁷ Some other main parallel newspapers and magazines were as: a. Siraj-ul Atfal (Lamp of Children), the first children magazine which was a sister paper to Siraj-ul Akhbar. It covered some sensitive issues such as women’s education and their role in the Afghan society with religious reasoning; b) Aman-e Afghan (Afghan protection), c) Pashtun Ghag (Pashtun’s voice), d) Anis (companion), e) Urdo (army), f) Etehad (unity) and g) Badr.

¹⁸ BBC Media Action 2012, 6

the freedom of the press.¹⁹ The King appointed Mohammad Yusuf as Prime Minister who was the first high level official to be chosen with no blood-ties to the royal family. He was granted special authority to form his own government. No one from the royal family was allowed to interfere and as a result of this new political age, the media too was freed of political mandates. However, this relative freedom of the media diminished in 1973 when King Zahir Shah was overthrown by his cousin in a bloodless coup²⁰, following which 19 newspapers were shut down due to his restrictive views on media. Following the end of the ‘decade of democracy’, severe restrictions were placed on media during the term of the first President of Afghanistan, Mohammad Daud (1973-1978), the decade-long occupation of Afghanistan by the Russians, the civil war and the reign of the Taliban, right up to 2001.

From this historical account, it is clear that media in Afghanistan have encountered many challenges during the course of history and witnessed the rise and fall of different regimes. It served variously a King, a Prime Minister, a prince, before passing under the control of the Taliban in the 1990s.

The media under the Taliban – then and now

The Taliban Foreign Minister Mawlawi Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil had a television set in the basement of his office at the Foreign Ministry in late 1990s to watch Al Jazeera News but the access accorded to his countrymen was different. Taliban had suspended all TVs and cinematography shows but conversely enhanced radio programs and other state print media²¹. There was only one functioning radio station under the Taliban regime, *Radio Voice of Shari’at*²². The head of the channel, Mohammad Ishaq Nizami believed that it was the Taliban’s religious duty to tell people what was right or wrong for them;

*Afghan people have to be told that we are good for them, that is our job and that is what we will continue to do*²³.

The Voice of Shari’at programs lectured the population about the Taliban’s news, religious preaching, and the regime’s military victories over its opponents.²⁴ The Taliban placed media

¹⁹ Saikal 2012, BBC Media Action 2012, 13 and Tanwir 2013

²⁰ Saikal 2012

²¹ ICG 2008

²² Farivar 1999, ICG 2008, Himelfarb 2010 and BBC Media Action 2012

²³ ICG 2008

²⁴ Farivar 1999

under stringent control by passing strict laws and banning televisions²⁵, cinematography, and music; all of which were considered to be un-Islamic in the 90% of the territory controlled by the Taliban. The Minister of Information and Culture, Amir Khan Mutaqi and later Qudratullah Jamal exercised minimum authority over media law but Mullah Omar's spokesman and the provincial head of information and culture in Kandahar were more powerful than the ministers in Kabul. Kabul may have been home to the Taliban's ministers but Southern Kandahar where their one-eyed leader, Mullah Omar, lived²⁶, remained the *de facto* capital. Anyone caught with a television set anywhere in the Taliban-controlled territory, was beaten and jailed, and the television set smashed. In terms of content regulation, the Taliban prohibited photography of living creatures and banned entertainment programs.

While it was a blanket ban on television, print media too was monitored quite strictly and the only publication that saw the light of day was a Pashto and Dari language monthly called 'Khilafat Meyashtani' (Caliphate Monthly) in Kandahar published by the Taliban (the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan) under its central publishing unit in Kandahar²⁷. The areas controlled by the Taliban's opponents were only marginally better off with a TV broadcasting channel in the Northeast of the country which telecast news and movies for a few thousands viewers²⁸.

Today Taliban use both traditional and modern media to reach out to a broader audience. They have changed their tactics and seek to leverage the media; a sharp contrast to their pre-2001 approach. They run a website (<http://shahamat.info/>) on which video footage/messages are posted regularly. The bulk of the content on the website is in Pashto language²⁹ with translations available in four other languages –Dari - Farsi, Arabic, English and Urdu. The movement has two spokespersons³⁰ for eastern and southern Afghanistan respectively³¹, who are accessible via phone, email, twitter and Facebook. They are regular featured on national as well as international media. Zabihullah Mujahid, the group's spokesman for Eastern Afghanistan said via email that the Taliban would support the media if they were really free and independent and not influenced by the "invading" troops. He said that the media had to operate in favor of national and Islamic interests and lead the Afghan society towards peace,

²⁵ ICG 2008, Fraenkel, Schoemaker and Himelfarb 2010, and BBC Media Action 2012

²⁶ ICG 2008

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Farivar 1999

²⁹ The vast majority of Taliban are Pashtuns. (Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan.)

³⁰ Zabihullah Mujahid, one of the spokesmen of Taliban for Eastern Afghanistan answered to questions for this study.

³¹ BBC Media Action 2012

prosperity, dignity and development.

Given low literacy levels in rural areas, the Taliban also use traditional ways to reach their audience. These include night letters that may contain threats and intimidation - usually handwritten or printed and pre-recorded DVDs³² with military operations footage, among others. Another useful approach adopted by the Taliban is poetry and word of mouth which has proved to be more effective than modern media because in rural areas of Afghanistan. Using both traditional and modern media, the Taliban seek to justify their Jihad (holy war) and pronounce that they are fighting for freedom of Afghanistan³³ whilst simultaneously seeking to undermine the legitimacy of the national government.

The dawn of a new century

Following the U.S. - led invasion of the country after the 9/11 attacks, the west has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into Afghanistan's media as part of their efforts to win the 'hearts and minds' of Afghan public. This led to a massive explosion in the number of TV stations, FM channels, print media publications and news agencies in a landscape that had thus far been barren. Since 2001, the development of this space has not only been marked by an exponential increase in the number of outlets and means of expression, but also by plurality of viewpoints and diversity of discussion. As of 2014, the Afghan media landscape consists of 65 television channels of which 32 operate from Kabul and 33 from the provinces, and 174 radio stations of which 47 are based in the capital and the remaining in the provinces³⁴. In the case of print media, the total number of publications now exceeds 800³⁵. The Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MCIT) that is mandated with the task of licensing frequencies, reports that in addition to existing channels, 21 new television stations and 27 new radio channels are in the pipeline, pending final approval for their licenses. However, it goes on to note that no additional licenses can be issued going forward due to lack of spectrum availability³⁶. As of now, televisions and radios cover 89% residential areas and this is expected to increase to 95% by end 2014³⁷.

³² ICG 2008, 12

³³ Ibid

³⁴ Ministry of telecommunication and Information Technology, last update October 2014:
<http://mcit.gov.af/en/page/4876/6005>

³⁵ Last available data is for 2010 for print media thus this number is as of September 2010 as reported by Altai consulting 2010 and BBC Media Action 2012

³⁶ MCIT 2014

³⁷ Ibid

The spread and use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) across the country is also worth highlighting. Over twenty million Afghans, or two-thirds of the total population, use mobile phones³⁸, enabled by the setting up of over 3900 communication towers in the country³⁹. Competition in the sector is also thriving as the sector is dominated not by one but by five major operators⁴⁰. This is in sharp contrast to the pre-2001 era when there were only 15000 functioning telephone lines in the country⁴¹.

In terms of IT connectivity, 51 Internet Service Providers (ISPs) have been issued licenses to provide internet services⁴² and as a result, two million Afghans, or roughly 8% of the total population⁴³, have access to the internet. On the flipside though, internet usage is limited to urban areas. While data connections on mobile phones are either not available or not affordable, young educated Afghans frequent Internet cafes to meet their information and connectivity needs. In terms of overall numbers however, penetration remains low on account of the dismal literacy rate.

IV. Media landscape in Afghanistan – now

The Afghan constitution guarantees freedom of expression. Article 34 of the constitution decrees “freedom of expression is inviolable. Every Afghan has the right to express thoughts through speech, writing, illustrations as well as other means in accordance with provisions of Afghan Constitution.” It adds, “every Afghan shall have the right, *according to provisions of law*, to print and publish on subjects without prior submission to state authorities”.⁴⁴ The Afghan press law was approved by the parliament in 2009⁴⁵ and promotes and supports the right of freedom of thought and speech with free, independent and pluralistic media. The Afghan media law, however, prohibits the following from being printed, broadcast or published:

³⁸ MCIT 2014

³⁹ Cary 2012

⁴⁰ These five mobile phone companies are: 1) The Afghan Wireless Communication Company (AWCC); 2) Roshan; 3) MTN (an international company operating in Africa and the Middle East); Etisalat (its headquarter is in UAE); and 5) Afghan Telecom (State-run). The first two companies were licensed in 2002, followed by MTN and Etisalat in 2006.

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² MCIT 2014

⁴³ As per Tolo TV, 2014, some television commercials have been advertising that with internet access on mobile phones, including 3G connections, the number of users will likely increase to 10 million i.e. one-third of the total population.

⁴⁴ Afghanistan Constitution

⁴⁵ Human Rights Watch 2012

- Anti-Islamic work,
- That which may be offensive to the other religions,
- That which may cause damage to personality and credibility,
- That which promotes religions other than Islam,
- Pictures of victims of violence which damage social dignity,
- Military secrets whose disclosure endangers national security and interests
- And finally, anything that negatively impacts psychological security and moral well-being.⁴⁶

While the letter of the law is quite clear on its directives, the nascent media landscape in Afghanistan is characterized by contradictions and paradoxes. The Afghan media landscape now encompasses 65 televisions, 174 radio stations⁴⁷ and over 800 publications⁴⁸. While it is worth noting that this represents a sharp break from the status-quo under the Taliban regime – with only one radio station, and not even a single television channel, it is important to recognize that media itself can be a source of instability and sectarian divisiveness in a country struggling with ethnic tensions, power imbalances and social and cultural ambiguity towards what is still seen as a “foreign invasion” by many.

In this section, we attempt to profile the main players and comment on the main trends and patterns of ownership in broadcast media (includes mainstream commercial, government controlled and ethnic and religious channels), as well as print media.

Broadcast media

Both television and radio are strategically more important to the polity of Afghanistan over other type of media. The radio penetration rate as of September 2010 was 68%, with 77% of radio audiences being located in rural and 23% in urban areas.⁴⁹ Radios reach listeners from all ages, men as well as women and all ethnicities. However, this medium seems to be losing out to television, especially in urban areas and among younger demographics. A survey on media preferences listed lack of time and preference in favor of television, as the main reasons why users did not listen to radio⁵⁰. Voice of America, funded by U.S. government and

⁴⁶ Altai Consulting 2010

⁴⁷ As of September 2014, sourced from the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MCIT) 2014: <http://mcit.gov.af/en/page/4876/6005>

⁴⁸ As of September 2010 as quoted in Altai consulting 2010, and BBC Media Action 2012.

⁴⁹ Fraenkel, Schoemaker and Himelfarb 2010

⁵⁰ Altai Consulting 2010, 51

shares the same frequency as Azadi⁵¹ (freedom – the Afghan version of Radio Free Europe), noted that “people have started to borrow money to buy fuel to run generators to be able to watch television”.⁵²

In urban areas, television is the primary source of information, with the penetration rate at 48% (as of September 2010). However, the growth of this medium is curtailed by prohibitive pricing including the price of television sets and cost of fuel for generators.

A. Mainstream commercial media

The development of mainstream commercial media has seen a dramatic upswing in the course of the previous decade. The sector is highly concentrated with a few major players accounting for nearly 80% of the audience share, nationally.

Key players and characteristics:

- **Tolo TV** that broadcasts in Dari language is the most popular station with 45% audience share. Its sister station, Lemar broadcasts in Pashto and has a 6% market share. A 24-hour news channel, Tolo news, was started in 2010. All of these are privately owned and operated by Moby Group that first entered the space in 2002 with the launch of its flagship media offering, Arman FM, a music and news radio station. Arman FM was launched with financial aid from the US. This channel attracts 8% audience, across the nation. The group owns Arakozia as well which targets the Pashtuns in the south.
- **Ariana**, launched in 2005, this television station broadcasts in Pashto, Dari, Uzbeki and English languages. It has an audience share of 19%.
- **Shamshad TV**, launched in 2006, caters specifically to the Pashtun community in the south and eastern Afghanistan as well as the frontier provinces that border Pakistan.
- **Yak TV (1 TV)** started operations in 2010. This television supports the presence of international agencies in Afghanistan leading analysts to characterize it as “pro-west without pushing the west in Afghanistan”.⁵³
- **The Killid Group**, that controls a network of radio channels as well as print magazines, is part of the Development and Humanitarian Services for Afghanistan (DHSA) and has a 5% audience share. This ground emerged in 2003.

⁵¹ Azadi (Freedom) shares the same frequency with Voice of America (VoA). Each airs from 7am-7pm and 7pm-7am respectively.

⁵² Altai Consulting 2010, 51

⁵³ BBC Media Action 2012

B. Government controlled media

RTA (Radio Television Afghanistan) - RTA is the main government-owned broadcaster, which runs a network of radios and TV stations throughout the country. This network includes two medium wave AM stations and nine FM regional stations. The public broadcaster is uniquely positioned in terms of its coverage as it can reach rural areas, which remain uncovered by any commercial TV stations. RTA has the potential to play a major role in national integrative processes such as elections, peace forums, etc. So far, it has received investment around \$100 million for the development of its studios and transmission infrastructure.⁵⁴ There have been various attempts to transform RTA into a Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) under the aegis of the international community, but the government of Afghanistan has thus far resisted giving up control of the state broadcaster.

C. Ethnic, political and religious media

This category refers to media owned or controlled by ethnic, religious and political leaders who seek to promote their own agenda via mass media including television channels. This phenomenon is collectively also referred to as ‘warlord TV’,⁵⁵ an appellation that captures the threat these channels represent in that they could aggravate simmering ethnic and sectarian tensions in the country. Some analysts have concluded that some of these channels are funded and/or influenced by Afghanistan’s regional adversaries, Iran and Pakistan⁵⁶.

- **Noor (light) TV**, set up in 2007 by the former warlord and president Burhanuddin Rabbani (who was assassinated in 2011) is believed to be influenced by Iran.
- **Ayana (mirror)**, owned by the Uzbek warlord and the newly elected first Vice President, General Abdul Rashid Dostum, it offers mainly Uzbeki and Dari language news content news; possibly influenced by Turkey.
- **Rah-e Farda**, owned by the Hazara ethnic leader, Haji Mohammad Muhaqiq, it focuses on reaching the Hazara community.
- **Tamaddon (civilization)**, owned by Ayatullah Asef Mohseni, the founder of the religious university Khatem al-Nabi’in (Seal of the Prophet), it pronounces as its slogan, “The Silent Majority”. Most content is believed to originate from Iran, with some productions developed locally in Afghanistan. Tamaddon and Emroz (today) television (owned by Najibullah Kabuli, a former Member of Afghan Parliament)

⁵⁴ Siddiqi 2011

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Tawhidi 2014

captured national headlines in 2008 with each accusing the other of spying for foreigners. In July 2010 Emroz was shut down by the government for inciting sectarian tensions.⁵⁷

- ***Dawa'a (invitation)***, owned by Rassoul Sayyaf, a former warlord and one of presidential candidates in the 2014 election that broadcasts content with Taliban-like propaganda.
- ***Zhwandoon (life)***, a private TV station, notorious for having pushed the country to the brink of an ethnic crisis in 2013 when in one of its roundtables, one of the panelists made inflammatory remarks against a particular ethnic group⁵⁸.

Print media

Print mass media such as newspapers, magazines, and news agencies have flourished in terms of numbers since the Taliban were toppled by U.S.-led coalition in 2001. Now there are nearly a dozen news agencies. Bakhtar News Agency (BNA) is state-run while some others such as Wakht, Pajhwok, Hindu Kush, etc are privately owned. Most operate from Kabul with regional reporters from across the country.

However, the impact and reach of print remains significantly inhibited on account of low literacy level; officially only 31% of the population is literate. Low profitability margins and weak distribution channels are other factors that add to the woes of print media industry. As a result, the print media does not play a very critical role in shaping public opinion in Afghanistan. According to a survey in 2011, only 1% of the population in Afghanistan gets their information from print media⁵⁹. The only publication which reports a half million copies is the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) newspaper, “Sade-e-Azadi” (Voice of Freedom), that carries national and international news in Pashto, Dari and English languages and this too has earned itself the sobriquet of ‘sandwich wrapper’⁶⁰ as it is used primarily to wrap hamburgers in restaurants instead of reaching readers!

Some of the other main publications are:

⁵⁷ Altai Consulting 2010

⁵⁸ AJSC 2014

⁵⁹ Cary 2012

⁶⁰ Tawhidi 2014

- a. *Hasht-e Sobh or 8am*⁶¹ - an elite daily known for its secular credentials; published privately. It is also called the *Afghan* version of the *New York Times*. It has been in circulation since 2006.
- b. *Mandegar* -- Private daily.
- c. *Anis* in Dari language and *Hewad* in Pashto language – Government funded.
- d. *Islah* - also government sponsored.
- e. *Arman-e Melli* or National aspiration – Private daily.
- f. *Afghanistan Times* – English daily⁶².
- g. *Daily Outlook Afghanistan* –privately owned, published in English as well as local languages.

It is evident that the media space is cluttered with many other publications as well as channels that operate in Afghanistan with various, commercial, political and ideological agendas. While this presents the Afghan people with access to a huge diversity of information and opinions, practical concerns need to be addressed for the space to gain traction and build solidarity over the cacophony of fanaticism and private monopolies in the sector.

V. New era – challenges and opportunities

Afghanistan’s media sector has flourished over the course of the past decade. That is undeniable. This sector boomed from being nearly non-existent to hundreds of mediums of expression, electronic as well as print, after the hardline Taliban regime was ousted in 2001. In the immediate aftermath of the ‘war on terror’, the U.S. Government as well as other members of the international community felt the need to not only justify their military presence to the Afghan people but also realized the importance of a free press in promoting democratic values in a fragile democracy wracked by instability and insecurity. Since then, the U.S. Government, the international community and other international aid organizations have pumped in hundreds of millions of dollars to develop the Afghan media industry⁶³.

The impact of the withdrawal of foreign troops

The withdrawal of troops will have direct as well as indirect ramifications for Afghan media. In the short to medium term, the security situation will likely witness a sharp deterioration. In terms of indirect effects, once the troops withdraw, Afghanistan’s economy will suffer a

⁶¹ www.8am.af

⁶² <http://www.afghanistantimes.af/>

⁶³ Calderone 2013 and BBC Media Action 2012

significant hit. While local business may eventually pick up on account of a ‘push for survival’ by young entrepreneurs and regional development agreements, the country’s economic prospects in the near-term remain shaky.

In terms of social challenges, the accusation of “westernization” especially by religious and political leaders will continue to undermine the independence of the media. For example, Abdul Sattar Khawasi, an influential Afghan parliamentarian, declared Jihad (holy war) in 2013 against ‘un-Islamic’ programs. He was particularly infuriated by a popular show, ‘The Voice’, in which young Afghan girls and boys sing in front of a jury and one of the jurists, a female singer, wore tight cloths and made an appearance without a veil.⁶⁴ However, the exact distinction between ‘Islamic’ and ‘un-Islamic’ media remains arbitrary. In another example of this growing critique of the media, Mir Farooq Hussaini, the spokesman of the Social and Religious Society of Western Herat city, condemned some television programs as “immoral”. In a public meeting in a mosque in the city of Herat where he addressed hundreds of Afghans, he compared the social threat of the media to suicide bombings. To quote:

*Some of the broadcasting of the current media in Afghanistan are far more dangerous than suicide bombings in Afghanistan. If suicide bombing kills humans, some of the media take away our people’s faith and beliefs.*⁶⁵

The Taliban spokesman shared these concerns and added that media that was not committed to the religion of Islam and national interests would incite ethnic differences and a conflict between religious and non-religious segments of society, and in this fashion would carry on what he termed ‘a cold war’ for the invading forces.

Given the traditional and religious nature of Afghan society, the opinions of religious and political leaders are rarely questioned or subjected to a critical evaluation. What is worrisome is that such accusations present the potential to turn from cultural critiques to existential threats since they implicitly support the standpoint of the extremists.

Insecurity – real and present danger

Reporting in a war-torn country is akin to walking a tightrope – one slip and one can risk personal safety with serious consequences. In the context of the media sector, Afghanistan remains a dangerous place for media personnel – international as well as national. Journalists face enormous pressure and are routinely threatened by all parties in the conflict - the insurgents, warlords, government, unofficial armed groups, and in some cases, even the ISAF

⁶⁴ Samandary 2013

⁶⁵ Saber 2013

forces. Asif Amin of NAI media watchdog reported that it was common knowledge that if a journalist did not portray the Taliban in a positive light, he or she would receive a death threat from the Taliban. On the flipside, if they highlighted the armed rebels over the government, then the Afghan government would sue them!

In the period 2001 - 2012, 22 journalists have reportedly been killed. A study released in 2011 reports that there were 67 “incidents of violence” – including beatings, arrests, injuries and deaths in 2009. This number declined to 26 in 2010,⁶⁶ and while other studies offer different numbers, the threat perception for journalists emanates from all kinds of actors. In fact, the Afghanistan Journalists Safety Committee has reported 35 incidents of violence and threats against journalists just in the second half of 2013. Of these, government officials were responsible for 63%, and armed groups including the Taliban accounted for the remaining.⁶⁷

As a result, on a lot of occasions, journalists self-censor because the story they want to cover could be perceived as ‘harmful’ by one or both sides of the conflict. Mr. Tawhidi, the head of NAI Media Watchdog said, “the spread of insecurity is at such a high level that even some of our journalists and colleagues are self-censoring, which makes it impossible to convey the things that journalists know.”⁶⁸

Reporting also remains handicapped by lack of access to public documents and records. To address this, the Afghan lower house of parliament (Wolesi Jirga), approved the ‘Right to Information’ Act in early 2014. This act will play a very important role in holding government departments and officials accountable; however, it is yet to be ratified by the new president.

Direct donor support and financial viability of the sector going forward

The U.S. government and its agencies, as a group, have been the single largest funders for the media industry in Afghanistan. According to the BBC Media Action 2012 report, USA had invested nearly 100 million dollars in a number of radio and television channels. Analysts note that the Moby Group⁶⁹ alone received \$ 2.7 million in grants from USAID to launch their

⁶⁶ Cary 2012

⁶⁷ AJSC 2014

⁶⁸ Majidi 2014

⁶⁹ Moby Group owns Tolo TV, Lemar, Tolo news, Arman FM, Arakozia, Kaboora Production, and Afghan Scene Magazine. Moby Group is the largest and most popular media company in Afghanistan and has been described by the New Yorker as “Afghanistan’s first mogul.”

diversified media company⁷⁰. USA also provided significant (though unnamed) funding to Shamshad, a Pashto channel and the Voice of America and Radio Liberty, to start special programs for their Pashtun audience along the Afghan-Pak border. Internews, an international organization that empowers local media worldwide, received \$22 million in 2010 from USAID to fund new media initiatives for programming to reach audience beyond the big towns in Afghanistan⁷¹. As a direct result of this contract, Internews developed and provided daily local language content to 40 radio stations across the country⁷².

Other international donors include the European Union, which was an active source of funding before the credit crisis hit the West. Asian governments such as Japan and India have also invested, though their support has been focused on rebuilding the infrastructure of the state broadcaster.⁷³

In addition to governments, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) too played its part in the coming up of the media sector in Afghanistan. In 2005, the ISAF launched a media cell in Kabul called ‘Sada-e Azadi’ under the direction of the then ISAF commander, General Sir David Richards, as a public relations attempt to shape Afghan public opinion. The media cell employed Afghan locals as well as international experts to promote a pro-military voice. Sada-e Azadi had a nationwide newspaper under the same name and a network of 30 FM stations around the country. However, the news impact of Radio Sada-e Azadi and its paper was quite limited⁷⁴ as the public remained suspicious. To quote a student from northeastern Badakhshan province, “they (military media) need to respect our culture and traditions. No-one trusts them because we all know they are only broadcasting for their own benefits.”⁷⁵ Analysts estimate that another 100 radio stations operated from ISAF or PRTs’⁷⁶ military bases across different provinces in Afghanistan giving rise to the popular phrase, ‘radio in the box’⁷⁷. The military-funded radio stations too were either taken over by locals or ceased

⁷⁰ Calderone 2013 and BBC Media Action 2012

⁷¹ BBC Media Action 2012, 16

⁷² This program was titled ‘Salam Watandar’. Altai Consulting 2010, 33

⁷³ USAID and the Department of State have provided \$166 million to support media development in Afghanistan – Huffington Post 2013 and BBC Media Action 2012.

⁷⁴ BBC Media Action 2012

⁷⁵ Altai Consulting 2010 report, 140

⁷⁶ Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) refers to units introduced by U.S. government in Afghanistan to support reconstruction efforts. PRTs were mandated with three main objectives; to improve security, to extend the central government authority and to facilitate reconstruction in respective province. These units were composed of military officers, diplomats and reconstruction experts. These units also functioned as a sort of parallel governance structure.

⁷⁷ BBC Media Action 2012

operations, once the PRTs left their respective provinces. However there is no exact figures or public documents on these and as such this information remains unverified.⁷⁸

The fact that this funding has been critical to driving the growth of the media industry is obvious. The future of this industry however is suspect. Mr. Sediqullah Tawhidi of NAI Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan notes that print media would be the first to face serious financial challenges once foreign donations dry up. This is directly linked to Afghanistan's weak domestic economy and lack of private business since low business means low marketing spends and thus low outlay on print advertisements. Whatever companies spend is directed to television and radio and in the absence of a strong private corporate sector, this sector's financial future remains uncertain. These systemic predilections are already evident. 'Kabul Weekly' that started operation in 2002 and was regarded as an independent newspaper had to close shop in 2011 because the paper could not garner enough advertisements to meet operating costs.⁷⁹ The Afghanistan Journalists Safety Committee (AJSC) noted in its latest report that in 2013, a total of 37 media outlets, of which 32 were print media and 5 radio stations, had become nonoperational across Afghanistan. While the AJSC has not provided the reasons behind the closures of these media outlets and there are no hard numbers available to suggest how many newspapers, or channels have shut down due to lack of financial resources; the vulnerability of the media sector as a whole cannot be ruled out.

The rise of social media

In what seems a bleak and dismal outlook, there is one development that shines like a beacon of hope for the beleaguered sector – citizen journalism and social media.

About 2.5 million Afghans or roughly 8% of the population, regularly access the internet either through internet cafes or through private home/mobile connections. In Afghanistan, Facebook is the most popular social media platform. It is seen, as not only a way of connecting with others but also a key source for news, information and entertainment. Afghan political elites too recognize the importance of being social. While they post their daily activities in local languages for their fellow Afghans on their Facebook pages, they use twitter to address international audience.

⁷⁸ Tawhidi 2014

⁷⁹ Calderone 2013

The importance of social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter, was quite evident during the 2014 presidential election in Afghanistan. All the presidential hopefuls had Facebook pages and Twitter accounts and some had even invested in social media advertising. Social media also mobilized the Afghan youth to vote. This was evident before and during the presidential elections as it influenced the turnout in the first and second rounds of voting. With the Taliban attacking the Afghan security forces in 2014, the Facebook generation turned against the insurgents and expressed themselves against the fundamentalists by participating in large numbers in the elections despite security concerns. This mass turnout ended up marginalizing the Taliban politically.

Social media by its very nature fosters openness, public debates and democratic values. Virtual interactions have increased informed discussions on insurgent networks, with many condemning their practices and empathizing with the victims. Social media has also led to greater social freedom and awareness. Young Afghan girls and boys post photos and express themselves, breaking social taboos. Men call their wives, sisters and mothers by their names on Facebook; a departure from tradition. The use of social media has also improved the rule of law in Afghanistan. Cases of abuses and human rights violations by law enforcement agencies have frequently been put up on Facebook, triggering corrective measures by the authorities.

The rapid rise of social media in short span of time in Afghanistan has paved the way for Afghans from all walks of life to express their opinions and concerns, and engage openly in debates that determine the social and political realities of their country. In the case of Afghanistan, social media has not only promoted citizen journalism and also provoked public debates on extremism. The relevance of this medium is evident in the fact that even the Taliban, which had banned the use of modern technology as anti-Islamic before they were ousted from power in 2001, is not only present but also active on most social forums in an attempt to leverage this medium.

As Afghanistan sets forth on the path of building just and democratic structures and institutions, media in Afghanistan will continue to remain susceptible to agendas of various armed actors including religious actors, fundamentalists, as well as local officials. According to Stella M. Sabiiti⁸⁰, a number of logistical issues could prevent media in Afghanistan from becoming effective and meaningful. These can be clubbed as:

⁸⁰ Stella M. Sabiiti expert on relations between media and peace

- Lack of ethics - Private ownership of media will likely imply that the medium is driven by a thirst for profits and ‘quick stories’.
- Lack of patience - Peace is soft news; it is also slow news since peace processes take longer to work themselves out. Conflicts on the other hand make for numbers and headlines that are more hard-hitting.
- Lack of or inadequate resources – this includes training of journalists, financial resources and appropriate equipment.⁸¹

Additionally Afghan media remains heavily influenced by various actors such as the Taliban, local warlords, and government officials. These challenges are compounded by subversive actions by Afghanistan’s traditional adversaries, Iran and Pakistan, which seek to undermine peace efforts directly by influencing public opinion, as well as indirectly by supporting extremist viewpoints and actions. These systemic challenges will continue to pose an existential threat to the current nascent peace that has only hesitatingly been brokered in Afghanistan. However, the rise of self-expression that has found a ready outlet in social media platforms may just go a long way in ensuring these threats come to naught.

VI. Recommendations and concluding remarks

The government of Afghanistan, the international community, national and international NGOs, and civil society need to urgently recognize the role and relevance of media especially in terms of its ability to engineer public debate in a as yet nascent democracy. In this section, we put forth some recommendations for clear action steps for each of these stakeholders.

International donors and agencies

International donors can play the role of industry-shapers to ensure that the vibrant media landscape that they have nurtured into existence does not succumb to factionalist tendencies in post-2014 Afghanistan. In this regard, they can play a critical role in addressing two main challenges – funding and training.

To hedge for funding challenges, independent media would need to find and tap indigenous sources of advertising. This will enable them to circumvent the traps posed by politically motivated funding. International donors can play a very crucial role in enabling Afghan media become self-sufficient by providing guidance on how these local entities can professionalize

⁸¹ Sabiiti 2006

their sales (this includes direct sales as well as ad management) and tap the wider international community for ad-hoc grants and private donations.

International agencies can also help address the skillset deficit that characterizes the media sector in Afghanistan. Trainings for journalists such as creative journalism can go a long way in helping journalists overcome personal biases, reshape attitudes, build awareness and reduce ethnic and tribal typecasting. Since on-ground reporters work in extremely high-risk contexts, Afghan journalists also need to be equipped with specialized knowledge on managing personal risk in the field and on strategic tools for conflict analysis and resolution to be able to report on developments in the field in a meaningful manner. Additionally, trainings can also be designed to help media houses develop socially acceptable content that accommodates cultural and religious sentiments. This is of utmost importance in a polity sharply divided by ethnic and sectarian differences.

Afghan Government

In the immediate aftermath of the withdrawal of the troops, the Afghan government is potentially a major source of advertisements. The government should seek independent bids so that private media can tap into this budget. Not only will this promote the coming up of the private sector and address their short term funding woes, it will also professionalize the space by forcing government officials to not indulge in nepotism or worse, employ inefficient state-owned agencies.

Over the medium term, the Afghan government should transform RTA into a public broadcasting service (PBS), an independent and impartial source of information for all Afghans. The Afghan state should avoid indulging in propaganda and move towards legal reforms that guarantee freedom as well as access to the press. It is also important for the government to come up with clear guidelines on what constitutes ‘Islamic’ versus ‘un-Islamic’ content to address the concerns of religious leaders as this issue if unaddressed could seed discord and become a rallying point for the rise of fundamentalism going forward.

Media partnerships

Media experts including Tawhidi suggest that the industry set up an independent trust fund, managed either by elected officials or by nominated members chosen by the media

community.⁸² This fund would play the critical role of reducing concentration in the sector and serve as a formal support structure for medium-size independent media. Another feasible option would be to reduce overall costs by sharing resources especially by radio stations. This will promote coordination as well networking among media outlets.

Think tanks

Deeper and more provocative research needs to be conducted to identify fully independent media channels and mapping these to their respective needs – funding, capacity development or outreach. Local as well as international think tanks can deep-dive and provide these as critical policy inputs to the Afghan government and to stakeholders from the international community.

Concluding remarks

Freedom of speech is a fundamental human right and media is one of the foremost upholders of this right since it is by definition, tasked with encouraging and enabling public discussion and open dialogue. However, with power comes the possibility of abuse. Hate media is an example of how freedom of expression can be deliberately misused to exacerbate tensions between different people and communities.

As the U.S. and NATO withdraw their combat troops from Afghanistan and international aid reduces, it seems that the media industry in Afghanistan will have to its own battle to wage – between the quest to remain free and independent while being hemmed in by financial constraints. Many media practitioners have raised concerns that the lack of funding may reverse the industry's systemic move towards free and independent reporting since channels may link themselves to regional intelligence agencies and/or agenda-driven affiliations to attract funding. These concerns are exacerbated by the threat of a worsening security situation once the external forces withdraw. Their exit will leave media dependent on ill-equipped Afghan security forces for safety and security of on-ground journalists. Overall, Afghanistan will remain to be a dangerous place for journalists to work and live in.

In this context, it is important to recognize public support and public need for independent forums as an independent source of news as well as information. Personally, I believe the need and demand of the Afghan people for free expression has been vital to the success of the

⁸² Tawhidi 2014 and Altai Consulting 2010

media thus far and the importance of this as a driver for sustained media revolution should not be underestimated.

Afghanistan has different color today with its media, we see a colorful Afghanistan. Afghans will still write and think freely after 2014 because our people are used to it now. No force can stop us regardless of what is going to happen. - Sediqullah Tawhidi of NAI

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