

An Explosion of News: The State of Media in Afghanistan

A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance

By Peter Cary

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The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), at the National Endowment for Democracy, works to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of independent media development throughout the world. The Center provides information, builds networks, conducts research, and highlights the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development. The Center was one of the of the main nongovernmental organizers of World Press Freedom Day 2011 in Washington, DC.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

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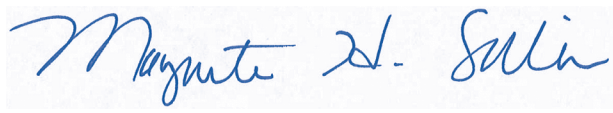
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Preface

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) at the National Endowment for Democracy commissioned this study of the state of Afghan news media. The report surveys the current media landscape, with particular attention to the hundreds of publications and dozens of broadcast outlets that have blossomed in Afghanistan following the ouster of the Taliban from power.

CIMA is grateful to Peter Cary, a veteran journalist with extensive experience in newspaper and news magazine reporting and editing for his research and insights on this topic. We hope that this report will become an important reference for international media assistance efforts.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Marguerite H. Sullivan". The signature is written in a cursive style and is centered on a light blue rectangular background.

Marguerite H. Sullivan
Senior Director
Center for International Media Assistance

Executive Summary

After the ouster of the Taliban from power by U.S.-led coalition troops in November 2001, the media scene in Afghanistan exploded. Under the Taliban, only one government radio station was allowed to operate, and there were no independent media. Ten years later, the Afghan media scene is a lively place, with more than 175 FM radio stations, 75 TV channels, four news agencies, and hundreds of publications including at least seven daily newspapers. Internet cafes can be found in major cities, and 61 percent of Afghans have mobile phones, which some use to listen to radio.

Afghanistan's main cities are close to media saturation—Kabul has 30 TV channels and 42 radio stations, and the smaller cities have 10 to 25 TV channels and approximately 20 radio stations each. Even the provincial capitals have local TV and radio. Foreign broadcasters such as the VOA, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the BBC, Deutsche Welle, and others augment indigenous media.

After the ouster of the Taliban from power by U.S.-led coalition troops in November 2001, the media scene in Afghanistan exploded.

Radio and TV are largely trusted as information sources and as a font of new ideas, and audiences say they influence their own opinions—they are a national communications channel. (Print media, especially newspapers, are not so well trusted and, with an Afghan male literacy rate of well below 50 percent, are not widely read.)

As might be expected with such a new and varied industry, the quality of content ranges from very good to poor, and the economic viability of the new media ranges from potentially high to quite low. To address the weaknesses, training programs and university courses have been established to teach everything from journalism practices and ethics to media business management and advertising sales.

The exponential media growth is due to the enthusiasm of Afghan entrepreneurs and to support from the United States, through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the U.S. embassy, and from European governments and other nations. It is also due to the work of many NGOs that they hired. Support from the United States, the biggest donor, has waxed and waned. From 2002 to 2005 USAID spend \$23 million to launch news media outlets and train journalists, and from 2006 to 2010 funding totaled \$20.64 million. That included a couple of lean years, 2007 and 2008, when spending was only \$3.3 million each year. But with the Obama administration's Afghan military surge of 2009 there also came a media spending surge.

USAID funded a \$22 million project called the Afghanistan Media Development and Empowerment Project (AMDEP) for 2011, and a separate \$7 million project to put news on cellphones was put to bid. Meanwhile, \$183 million was allocated to the U.S. embassy in Kabul

for a wide array of media projects in 2010 and 2011. And the Defense Department budgeted \$180 million for information operations in Iraq and Afghanistan for 2011 alone, some portion of which went to support Afghan media.

The effectiveness of all this spending is difficult to gauge, but the smaller and more focused projects—such as creating new radio stations—tend to be seen as generally successful, while the value of the larger and broader projects—such as an anti-insurgency message campaign—is harder to judge.

Afghan entrepreneurs have used the support to launch successful media outlets. The prime example is the more than \$2.7 million in USAID grants to the Mohseni family, Afghan expatriates who were urged to return to the country to use their business expertise in publishing yellow pages in Australia to launch a TV and radio network known as Moby Group. By 2011 they had built a \$20 million business that includes two TV channels, an FM radio broadcast, an advertising agency, a video and movie production company, and Internet cafes. Other private media groups with radio, TV, and print products have been started by Afghans with USAID support.

Cellphone use has expanded rapidly also. The Ministry of Communications and Information says there are more than 3,900 communications towers in the country, and more than 14 million Afghans, or about half of the nation's 29 million people, have cellphones. According to one survey, more than half of the subscribers use their cellphones to listen to the radio, and 10 percent use them to get news and information.

The population with access to the Internet is tiny—no more than 4 percent of Afghans—and mainly urban, but it is growing.

The population with access to the Internet, however, is tiny—no more than 4 percent of Afghans—and mainly urban, but it is growing. One study reported 20,000 Afghan bloggers in 2008.¹

Estimates of the number, type, and frequency of print publications vary substantially. Roughly 800 publications are registered with the government, though only about 300 of them, including seven daily newspapers, are publishing. But few are commercially successful or last very long. In a study done for USAID and published in October 2010, Altai Consulting estimated the revenues of the Afghan media sector at between \$75 million and \$95 million annually, generating profits of between \$30 and \$50 million. Advertising income and paid programming accounts for 60 percent of revenue, Altai estimated. However, not all media have developed the marketing and advertising skills to attract what ad money exists, and many Afghan media outlets—community radio stations are a good example—are only able to sustain operations with monetary support from the West, either through direct grants or through payments for the Western governments' advertising and messaging.

The NGO that has had the greatest presence in Afghanistan is Internews, a media development non-profit organization that operates world wide. Internews started working in Afghanistan for USAID in 2003 with a one-year \$1.45 million grant. Eight years later the grant had been renewed

and enlarged many times over, and Internews had much success to show: dozens of independent radio stations, a national public radio show, the training of thousands of journalists and managers, media advocacy and legal work, media training centers and more. It is now finishing the \$22 million AMDEP project, which extends and enhances its earlier efforts—the biggest one-year media project undertaken by any NGO in Afghanistan.

This said, the Western effort to create an independent media in Afghanistan is not without its critics. Some Afghan media managers and NGO media developers lament the lack of a long-term media development plan and sporadic annual funding by USAID. Others complain that the money and support pumped into fledgling media has created unreasonable expectations of commercial viability.

In a lengthy report published in 2010, the congressionally-funded U.S. Institute of Peace, argued that the West should focus on creating socially constructive media content rather than institutions that the economy could not support.

Reporters Without Borders ranked Afghanistan 147 out of 178 countries in terms of press freedom in 2010. However, Afghanistan has more press freedom than six neighboring nations, including Pakistan.

Some journalists decry the rapid growth of the entertainment sector, especially in TV, noting that its success is pushing aside more culturally valuable news and information programming.

And despite the rapid and widespread development of the Afghan media, the industry overall gets low grades for its independence and its lack of an investigative reporting ethic. The national television and radio agency, RTA, has been a disappointment as it has remained an arm of the government and not evolved into a public service broadcaster. Reporters Without Borders ranked Afghanistan 147 out of 178 countries in terms of press freedom in 2010. However, Afghanistan has more press freedom than six neighboring nations, including Pakistan.

Moreover, media owners and managers and their reporters live under constant pressure and threats both from the national government and the insurgency. Since 2001, 22 journalists have been killed in Afghanistan, though overall violence against journalists seems to be diminishing. A study released in 2011 said there were 67 “incidents of violence”—including beatings, arrests, injuries, and deaths—in 2009, but 26 in 2010. Threats come not only from the insurgency, warlords, and criminals but also from government security forces.

The constitution of 2004 guarantees press freedom with limitations: for instance, content is prohibited that is contrary to the state religion of Islam. Four media laws have been passed since 2002, and a committee that includes many journalists is working on a new, more press friendly version.

The presence of U.S. and coalition troops is itself a two-edged sword. On the one hand, the troops provide security and are a bulwark against a Taliban takeover. On the other hand, DoD's involvement with independent media can be considered problematic, as its support can distort the marketplace, and its messages make the messengers suspect in the eyes of the people.

Thus the new, vibrant, and expanding Afghan media face significant risks. One is the business risk that many radio, TV, and print operations will not be able to exist if direct and indirect donor support dries up. Another is the national government's continuing restrictions on the free press. A third is the physical danger faced by journalists daily. A fourth is that once U.S. forces draw down, the Taliban may gain considerable power and may eliminate or severely restrict press operations.

After Taliban Rule, a Media Boom

After the defeat of the Taliban by U.S.-led coalition troops in November 2001, the media scene in Afghanistan exploded. Under the Taliban, only one radio station had been allowed to operate, and it broadcast only Taliban messaging and religious programming. Ten years later, the Afghan media scene is a lively place, with more than 175 FM radio stations, 75 TV channels, four news agencies, hundreds of print publications including at least seven daily newspapers.² Internet cafes can be found in major cities, 61 percent of Afghans have mobile phones,³ and there are plans to turn mobile devices into a medium for news and information as well.

Media penetration is significant. Afghanistan's main cities are close to saturation—for instance, Kabul has 30 TV channels and 42 radio stations, and the smaller cities have 10 or more TV channels and as many as 20 radio stations each. Even the provincial capitals have a local TV station and one to three radio stations.⁴ Augmenting indigenous media are broadcasts from the outside, such as the VOA's Ashna TV and Radio Ashna, RFE/RL's Azadi Radio, as well as the BBC, Radio Turkey, and Deutsche Welle.⁵

Radio and TV have become the most trusted sources of information for topics important to Afghans, with the exception of religion. They are seen as a source of new ideas, and audiences say they impact their own opinions. In short, media, especially electronic media, are “the primary communication channel across the country.”⁶ A description of the main Afghan media elements reflects a huge variety of types of ownership, business models, emphasis, content, and viability in the media that exists today.

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Radio and Television Afghanistan (RTA)

Recognizing that a free and independent press is a cornerstone of any democracy, shortly after the defeat of the Taliban in November 2001 the international community turned its attention to building a media industry in Afghanistan. USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), which is designed as a quick reaction force to promote stability and civil society, attempted to revitalize the state-run broadcaster, Radio and Television Afghanistan, or RTA. Some progress was made, including the training of about 150 journalists at RTA by Internews, a non-profit doing media development work world wide,⁷ but OTI became frustrated at the resistance to change at RTA and eventually abandoned the effort to the BBC World Trust. Since then, UNESCO, the BBC, Deutsche Welle, and Canal France Internationale have all been involved in trying to transform RTA into less of an arm of the national government and more of a public service broadcaster, but their success has been limited.

RTA has two AM radio stations, nine FM stations, and two TV channels in Kabul.⁸ It has branches in nearly all 34 provinces, and its broadcasts reach all provinces. Each province

broadcasts RTA from 7 to 9 p.m., and each provides local programming. Its national staff in Kabul numbers about 1,600; each of the provincial branches employs about 30 people.⁹

The latest Afghan Media Law stipulates that RTA belongs to the Afghan nation and is to operate under an independent directorate. But a tug-of-war continues: Should RTA become a national broadcaster, with its “independent board” under the control of the government, or a public broadcaster responsible to its own board independent of government? The picture is clouded because the Ministry of Information and Culture gives RTA a monthly stipend of \$408,000, and additionally supports it with advertising, paid programming, and taxes on other TV antennas. The debate continues, with critics saying that the current RTA remains a state broadcaster uncomfortably friendly to the government of President Hamid Karzai.¹⁰

Military Radio

The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF; the U.S. and NATO military) operates Sada-e-Azadi, which broadcasts to the main areas of population from 34 FM repeaters. Its audience share is small—the Altai survey of 2010 puts it at 0.5 percent. Some, apparently, object to its programming. “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 benefit,” one student in Kishim told Altai.¹¹

ISAF forces also operate radio stations at their forward operating bases. Because they are small and can be set up quickly they have come to be known as Radios in a Box, or RIABs. Typically, they broadcast music, news, public service programming, and ISAF messaging to the nearby population. Media development workers say that some of their messaging—such as guidance on what to do when approaching a military roadblock—is useful to the audience.¹² Critics note that their messaging is largely uncoordinated. RIABs number more than 100, but there is no data on their overall market share. Members of the Afghan media hope that at least some RIABs will be transferred over to Afghans as ISAF troops depart.

In Afghanistan’s 37,000 villages, radio receivers are widely available and, indeed, Afghans listened to foreign broadcasts on short-wave even during Taliban rule.

Independent Local Radio and Community Radio

Afghanistan is a nation of 29 million people, and a majority live in its 37,000 villages.¹³ In those villages, radio receivers are widely available and, indeed, Afghans listened to foreign broadcasts on short-wave even during Taliban rule.

For the first year or so following the Taliban’s demise, it was thought that Afghanistan was not stable enough to support independent media, especially small media. But on February 14, 2003, USAID-OTI gave a \$1.45 million grant to Internews for a 12-month project called “Building Independent Media in Afghanistan.” The project’s main goal was to create a group of locally

owned and operated community, university, and commercial radio stations free from government control. (These would be separate from the 17 provincial stations already being operated by state radio, Radio Afghanistan.) The grant was renewed and augmented year after year, and by January 2012, 47 local independent radio stations—including several started by other NGOs, such as the now-defunct Canadian Institute for Media, Policy, and Civil Society (IMPACS)—had joined together in a national network.

The stations run the gamut from classic community radio stations—that is, run by non-profits and staffed largely by volunteers—to successful, individually-owned commercial stations, and everything in between. They create local content and broadcast it locally. In addition, they feed their local material into a national news and information program called *Salam Watandar*, or “Hello Countrymen,” a three-hour show modeled loosely on NPR’s *All Things Considered*, which is then available for all of them to broadcast.

To launch the stations, Internews and the other NGOs provided equipment—a transmitter, a tower, a generator, a studio—trained those who would run them and paid startup staff salaries. Ownership was transferred when the stations met management goals.¹⁴ Some of the smallest stations have a staff of three or four persons and operate on a shoestring. An example is Radio Nili Dai Kundi which is in the capital of Dai Kundi Province. Its operating expenses, said Michael Dwyer, Internews vice-president for Afghanistan programs, run about \$500 to \$1,000 a month.¹⁵ Other stations are a bit larger, with more employees and bigger budgets. For instance, Radio Rabia Balkhi in Mazar-i-Sharif) has expenses of \$3,000 to \$5,000 a month, Dwyer said.

Revenue for the stations comes from a variety of sources. As part of the *Salam Watandar* network, the stations share 68 percent of the advertising sold into that program. (The program is in the process of becoming its own non-profit organization.) Other sources of income are commercial ads the stations sell themselves or sell through media buying organizations. The telecommunications companies are probably the most prolific advertisers, but there are others. And ISAF and the U.S. government pay the stations to run their ads and messages. The amount of local advertising the stations raise depends on their own business skills, the size of their markets, and the time they spend on the air.

Not all of the community stations are small, and not all are commercially fragile. Sharq Radio in Jalalabad is probably the largest of the provincial ones. Started by Internews as one of its earliest projects, Sharq began broadcasting 12 hours a day, half in Pashto and half in Dari, Afghanistan’s official languages. Now it has turned into a small regional network with three radio stations, a TV station, a capacity to make feature films, a newspaper (*Shaiq*) and other related media businesses. Sharq TV broadcasts 18 hours a day, with 64 staffers and a monthly budget of \$20,000.¹⁶ According to Internews’s final grant report of November 15, 2006, Sharq Radio earned enough even then to be self-sufficient.

The Killid radio network had its origins in an Internews-established station in Kabul. Killid split off from Internews early and became a non-profit under the umbrella of the Afghan NGO, Development and Humanitarian Services Afghanistan (DHSA), and has since set up stations

in the main Afghan cities. The local stations employ about 25 people each and have expenses of about \$6,000 a month. Killid positions itself as the main Afghan cultural station with high quality programming including news and music. It has aired numerous investigations into such areas as distribution of electricity and the awarding of public contracts.

Rabia Balkhi was established by IMPACS, the Canadian NGO. It is managed by women, has a strong staff, and appears to be financially viable, broadcasting mainly stories on women's issues. Monthly expenses are reported to be about \$3,000. It does not aspire to grow beyond its region but is very good at what it does, Dwyer says.¹⁷ It broadcasts out of Mazar-i-Sharif.

Radio Ghaznawyan, a station in Ghazni, has taken off. It now has expanded into local TV, with no NGO support, as its owners spotted a ripe business opportunity in their province.

A station in Khost, the Message of Peace, or Sol-e-Paigham, is managed by a local businessman, Zaid Shah Angar. It is financially successful and plays a key role in the community. The station has a staff of 32 and monthly costs of about \$5,000.¹⁸ The Voice of Peace came up with the idea of broadcasting live cricket games, since cricket is popular in eastern Afghanistan, and its phone-in support from its audience was heartening, Dwyer said. It broadcasts 14 hours a day, partly local news, partly featuring *Salam Watandar*, and partly cricket. The local community gave the station a certificate of appreciation for its community service.

In October 2002, less than a year after the Taliban fell, a team from the NGO Comunica, which supports the development of new information technology, launched a fact-finding mission to see whether there was a future for community radio in Afghanistan. Community radio generally means locally-based non-profit radio that is often staffed by volunteers. Comunica concluded in its report that "community radio is not only a viable option for Afghanistan, it is also a low-cost and effective way of contributing to medium and long-term efforts for reconstruction, development, democracy, and nation-building."¹⁹

To the extent it focuses on local issues and reports local news, community radio is important to local residents and performs a public service. However, it is at risk of being drowned out by commercial radio stations and TV with bigger news budgets and more entertaining programming. And, as will be seen below, sustainability for some stations is a major concern.

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Commercial TV and Radio

By the end of 2010, Afghans living in Kabul were able to access 30 terrestrial television channels, of which more than 10 were also available on satellite, and 42 radio stations, five of which broadcast from outside Kabul. Two of the TV channels, Kabul RTA and ERTV (Ministry of Education), are government owned and run; the rest are private.

Of the 42 radio stations in Kabul, RTA is government run, Sada-e-Azadi is a military station, and five (Azadi, BBC, Ashna/VOA, Deutsche Welle, and Voice of Turkey) are foreign-owned. The remaining 35 are private, commercial Afghan stations.²⁰

Numerous other TV and radio stations broadcast to the rest of Afghanistan. USAID estimates about 75 TV channels and 175 FM radio stations exist throughout the country. Some are single stations or channels, others are part of media groups, and there is much in between. Examples:

Moby Group

The growth in private, commercial radio and TV has been spectacular, and at the top of the list is the Moby Group. It is run by the Mohseni family—brothers Saad, Said, Jaid and sister Wajma—though Saad Mohseni is the public face of the company. The Mohsenis are the children of an Afghan diplomat and lived in several foreign countries before the family settled in Australia shortly after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. With the fall of the Taliban in 2002, the Mohsenis returned to Afghanistan and shortly thereafter launched a radio network. They had about \$300,000 in capital, and USAID agreed to invest an additional \$228,000. In 2003, their first station, Radio Arman, went on the air.

By 2005, the Mohsenis had raised and invested an additional \$4.5 million, and USAID contributed \$2.5 million more. The business grew rapidly, and by late 2010 Moby Group owned Tolo TV and the Tolo News satellite channel, Arman FM Radio, a music recording company, a movie production arm, an ad agency, a magazine (Afghan Scene), and four Internet cafes. Its Pashto-only TV channel, Lemar, is very popular in the southern part of the country. Moby has annual revenues of about \$20 million, and is growing 50 to 70 percent a year, Saad Mohseni has said.²¹ According to its website it has 400 employees.

Moby's Tolo TV is the most popular channel in Afghanistan, probably because it is the most daring and innovative. It has produced an Afghan soap opera, *Raz Ha e Een Khana*, (Secrets of the House) broadcast Indian soap operas, and launched *Afghan Star*, a talent show patterned on *American Idol*. The shows have been controversial.²² In 2005 Shaima Rezayee, a female co-host of a Tolo MTV-like music show, drew criticism for her western-style dress and on-screen behavior. The show was cancelled, and not long after Rezayee was shot dead in her home. In

USAID estimates about 75 TV channels and 175 FM radio stations exist throughout Afghanistan.

another matter three years later, the attorney general brought criminal charges against Tolo and other stations broadcasting soap operas. (The charges were dropped two years later.)

Tolo's audience share hits 60 percent for its evening news show, but its tough news coverage has also gotten it into trouble with the Karzai government. One USAID official said that during a recent visit to Afghanistan he learned that there were six separate lawsuits filed against Tolo TV and Moby, filed by plaintiffs ranging from members of parliament to religious organizations.²³ Tolo TV has also raised the hackles of government officials with its forthright news reporting, and its journalists have been threatened and even arrested. But Saad Mohseni is a force in his own right, aided by his brash temperament, his media clout, and his relationships with foreign media moguls such as Rupert Murdoch. He does not hesitate to call top Afghan officials, including President Karzai, when he feels he is being treated unfairly. Mohseni claims that his entertainment shows give people, especially poor and underprivileged people, an outlet. The media, he says, "provides hope. New images. It's escapism."²⁴

Killid Group

Another large media organization is the Killid Group, which is owned by DHSA, an Afghan NGO operating since 1992. Killid publishes two magazines, *Killid Weekly* and *Mursal Weekly*, a women's magazine, and owns Radio Killid FM.²⁵ Launched by DHSA with support from USAID and the European Community (EC), Radio Killid started its broadcasting in Kabul in 2003. It expanded with equipment and training assistance from Internews, and set up semi-independent stations in Afghanistan's main cities: Herat, Kandahar, Mazar-i-Sharif, Ghazi, Khost, and Jalalabad.²⁶ The local stations have about 25 employees each and a budget of \$6,000 a month. It promotes itself as Afghanistan's cultural network and features long programs on Afghan writing and music and heritage. It also broadcasts popular music such as jazz and reggae.

Ariana

The well-established Ariana TV, the second most popular TV channel, also broadcasts from Kabul, reaching 75 percent of the districts in Afghanistan. It is available through satellite in Europe, North America, and the Middle East. It broadcasts in Dari, Pashto, Uzbek, and English, with 52 programs and 9 hours of live programs each week. The Ariana Television Network /Afghan Wireless Communications Company has two satellite TV channels and an FM radio station. It is privately owned by Ehsan Bayat, who also founded the Afghan Wireless Communications Company and the Bayat Foundation. Its managers say the outlet has 275 employees, including 25 journalists in Kabul and one in each province.^{27 28}

Yak

Yak ("One" in Dari) is a new and ambitious radio and TV outlet based in Kabul. It is privately owned by Fahim Hashimi, a wealthy Afghan entrepreneur, who launched it in February 2010. It has arranged to broadcast on antennas in 12 provinces, with an eventual goal of broadcasting to all provinces in the country. Yak produces more than 55 hours a week of original content.

In late 2010, according to Altai Consulting, Yak employed 320 staffers, including 41 full-time journalists. Its costs before expansion were running \$150,000 a month for salaries, \$100,000 for copyright fees, \$20,000 for satellite fees, \$40,000 for generators and power, and other expenses for a total of \$400,000. The station reported \$150,000 to \$200,000 in monthly ad revenue from businesses, mainly telecommunications and banks, and some additional revenue from public service announcements. Hashimi said the station's mission is to "counterinfluence warlords and fundamentalists," but he insists it is not "pushing the West in Afghanistan."²⁹

Others

There are many other smaller outlets as well. Saba TV, of Saba Media Organization, is supported by Coordination of Humanitarian Relief, an Afghan NGO. It is a two-channel TV station that broadcasts into Uruzgan province with a focus on human rights and education. It was established in 2008 and also operates Radio Nawa.³⁰ Noor Television was established in 2007 and is supported by the politician Abdullah Abdullah. It is said to be influenced by Iran.³¹ Aria TV, launched in 2010, runs only programming for children and teenagers. Some of it is original, and some, like "Thomas and Friends," "Pingu," and "The Simpsons," is produced by Western sources.

News Agencies

A significant amount of the content found in Afghan newspapers and on the radio is produced by news agencies. There are more than 11 of them, and most are based in Kabul. The most prominent, according to Altai, is Pajhwok Afghan News, or PAN. Pajhwok means "reflection" in English. According to its website, Pajhwok began in 2003 as a small project for reporting on that year's loya jirga, a "grand assembly" of tribal elders and delegates, which set up a post-Taliban transitional administration.³² With aid from the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, and later from Internews and the Open Society Institute, PAN grew to have eight regional bureaus and a headquarters in Kabul. It has about 122 employees, including 60 reporters, and produces about three dozen stories a day, published in Dari and Pashto, (about half are also published in English) as well as photos, audio, and video. Its revenue comes from NGO grants, news story sales, subscriptions, and advertising.³³

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Bakhtar News Agency, or BNA, is a government news agency, based in the Ministry of Information and Culture in Kabul. It employs about 150 people in Kabul and the provinces. Its main sources lie in the national government, the police, and the education and development departments.³⁴ Other news agencies include Roz, Hindukush, the woman-owned Wakht, and Afghan Islamic Press, which is based in Peshawar, Pakistan. It is not clear exactly how much agency content is used by the press. It has been reported that about 90 percent of the content of Kabul's two main dailies comes from agencies, but it is suspected that many of the media re-purpose news found on the Internet.

The International Scene

International broadcasting has long played an important role in Afghanistan, providing news of international events and covering the national government. Indeed, Radio Liberty began broadcasting into Afghanistan starting shortly after the Soviet occupation of 1985. The service covered Afghanistan by using stringers in Pakistan and other neighboring countries.

In 2002, RFE/RL created a new Afghanistan-only service called Radio Free Afghanistan. Also known as Radio Azadi (Freedom), it broadcasts in Dari and Pashto. Azadi started with two hours of original programming per day, having broadcasts alternate between the two languages, but programming has since expanded to 12 hours per day. One of its first services was to cover the 2002 loya jirga.

RFA set high journalistic standards. Its critical coverage of the national government provided the Afghans with a media watchdog. A survey done for the BBC in 2008 rated Azadi second to the BBC in terms of listenership.³⁵

During the Taliban reign, the Voice of America (VOA) only broadcast on short-wave, and it continued to do so until 2005-06 when it also turned to FM as Radio Ashna (Friend) and began to share the airwaves with Azadi. These days Azadi broadcasts from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. and Radio Ashna broadcasts the other 12 hours. The two share facilities and transmitters in five cities, but Azadi remains the more popular broadcast. In 2007, VOA began its TV broadcast, TV Ashna, which broadcasts six days a week for one hour through RTA.³⁶

Like the VOA and RFE, the BBC has long had a presence on the airwaves in Afghanistan. Its reach is wide—it uses 20 FM antennas and transmitters and broadcasts to every city and province in the country. The BBC employs more than 50 people, including 35 journalists, in-country. The BBC broadcasts in Dari and Pashto, and in English after midnight. All its programming is produced in Afghanistan except its international news, which is produced in London. All three international stations also broadcast on shortwave to reach rural areas.³⁷

Other countries broadcasting into Afghanistan include Germany (Deutsche Welle) and Turkey (Turkey Radio.) Al-Jazeera, headquartered in Doha, Qatar, reaches Afghanistan by satellite and has a Kabul bureau. It was the only TV network allowed to cover the Afghan war in 2001.

The Political Press

Afghan media outlets can be roughly divided into three categories: government-run, private, and political. In Afghanistan, the political media are thriving.

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Afghanistan, for instance, has numerous party-backed newspapers. Their pages are limited, their circulation is small (under 5,000) but they range the political spectrum from support of political mentors, to boosting ethnic groups, to anti-Pakistani or anti-Iran sentiments.

As for broadcast outlets, in 2006 about one-eighth of them could be called “partisan,” but by 2010 the proportion had increased to more than one-quarter. Similarly, in 2006 there were virtually no religious channels, but four years later roughly one-eighth of the broadcasters could be termed “religious.”³⁸

Politically-backed media are nothing new. Some, like Emrooz TV and Shemshad TV have fought a bitter rivalry with Tamadon TV, which supports Afghanistan’s Shiite leaders, for years. Such rivalries too often reflect the ideas of their foreign supporters, Iran and Pakistan. A TV journalist told Reporters Without Borders: “In what country can a powerful neighbour fund three TV stations? Iran’s influence has grown, but so has the influence of Pakistan and the United States.”³⁹

A significant portion of the political media are either owned or run by what are called “warlords.”

A significant portion of the political media are either owned or run by what are called “warlords.” Some of them are indeed the former regional commanders who fought the Russians, the Taliban, and each other, backed by their own militias. As donor funding dried up in the mid-2000s, the media turned even more to political parties or influential individuals, “including former warlords” for funding, said Aziz Hakimi.⁴⁰

It is now believed that the warlords could no longer raise militias and that they have done too well in peacetime to even want to. Still, during the fighting among warlords for control in the early 1990s, civilians were killed, some indiscriminately, and for that some warlords subsequently were labeled war criminals. Now, however, many of them have taken respectable positions in society. Some are political leaders, some are even members of parliament. Most of their TV stations feature lively one-sided political talk trashing political enemies, sprinkled with religious, sports, and news programs.

A consensus from various press reports has the following “warlords” in the television business: Abdul Rashid Dostum, a former Northern Alliance commander, owns a TV station, Aiena (Mirror) based next to his home in Kabul.⁴¹ The station often features video of Dostum pursuing Taliban fighters on horseback during the pre-2001 fighting.

Ayatollah Asif Mohseni, who is said to be backed by Iran, owns Tamadon (Civilization) TV. Haji Mohaqiq, an MP who is an advocate for the rights of Shiites, is also said to be backed by Iran. He runs Rah-e-Farda TV (Future Path). Burhanudin Rabbani, head of the political opposition, the Afghan National Front, owned Noor (Light), but he was assassinated in September 2011. Karim Khalili, also said to be influenced by Iran, runs Negah TV. Amanullah Guzar of the Northern

Alliance owns Sepehr TV. The Tajik warlord Atta Muhammad Noor owns Arzo TV. Two different warlords, Haji Arif and Yunus Qannoni, have each been ascribed ownership of Noorin TV (Lights).⁴²

As one Afghan journalist told *Foreign Policy*: “You can’t be a self-respecting warlord these days, and not have your own television station.”⁴³

There is also an active political print press in Afghanistan. For instance, there are a variety of small (5,000 copies) regular newspapers backed by political parties. They include *Cheragh*, which supports the party of Rabbani; *Mardom*, the official voice of Asif Mohseni’s party; and *Weesa*, which is linked to the party of Mohaqiq.

Some journalists worry that the political press is warping the public’s view of the media.

Faheem Dashty is chief editor of *Kabul Weekly*, a newspaper founded by Mujahideen commander Ahmed Shah Massoud, now deceased. “Most of the media are dependent on political parties, or individual politicians, governments, some foreign countries, and even some foreign intelligence services,” Dashty said. “Whenever there is an issue, a big issue—political, security, or whatever—ordinary Afghans are getting their information through the media, but this information is fake. Mostly this information is based on the interests of this politician or that, or this political party or that, or this country or that. So of course this is a big danger.”⁴⁴

Insurgent media activities include postings on various insurgency websites, communications to the press criticizing the government and foreign military, “night letters” threatening civilians, and taking credit for certain military actions.

Insurgent Media

The Taliban-driven insurgency has become increasingly active in the media realm, although much of that activity involves threatening phone calls and letters to journalists who have not portrayed the Taliban in ways they deem favorable. Perceived offenses by journalists would include not covering Taliban attacks or writing positively about government or ISAF defeats of Taliban forces.

Insurgent media activities include postings on various insurgency websites, communications to the press criticizing the government and foreign military, “night letters” threatening civilians, and taking credit for certain military actions. They rely heavily on spokesmen to relay their messages. Some analysts believe they are most effective at the local level (especially in Pashtun areas) and much less so at the national and strategic level.⁴⁵ Numerous so-called “pirate” stations broadcast religious and Taliban programming from Pakistan that targets Afghans.

In its survey of Afghans in 2010, Altai Consulting was able to identify one radio station openly run by insurgents (Shariat Ghag in Kunar district) and another station reportedly run by them (Amarat in Lashkar Gah). The insurgents are also said to broadcast from mobile radio stations in cars.⁴⁶

The Rule of Media Law

Afghanistan has had laws regulating the mass media since its 1964 constitution and its Press Law of 1965. Much—and, at the same time, little—has changed since then, as media law has continued to guarantee the independence of media from the government but at the same time required the media to respect and safeguard the state, the religion of Islam, and public order.

In modern Afghanistan, the media enjoyed some periods of relative independence but was tightly controlled by the occupying Soviets and subsequent Soviet-installed Afghan government from 1979 to 1992 and again by the Taliban from 1996 to 2001, which even banned the ownership of television sets.

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With the defeat of the Taliban in late 2001, the elements of democracy were put into place, and in 2004 a new constitution, approved by the loya jirga, guaranteed the right of freedom of expression and the right to publish without censorship. However, as in the past, it forbade the publishing of articles contrary to the state religion, Islam.

Media laws were passed in March 2002, April 2004, and June 2006. A new law was passed by the lower house of parliament in August 2008, overriding a veto by President Karzai, but Karzai sent it to the Supreme Court to check its constitutionality—a move that in effect placed it in limbo. The law contained a proposal that would shift control of RTA from the government, making it independent, and critics said that was why Karzai, on the eve of elections, was holding up the law. Generally, journalists were said to view the 2008 law as an improvement over previous ones, but some provisions in the law still worried journalists, such as a prohibition on reporting that is “against national security.”⁴⁷

In September 2009 the government finally approved and published the new Mass Media Law. Considered an improvement over previous laws, it still carried a large number of provisions troubling to independent media. For one thing, it allowed the government to maintain control over RTA.⁴⁸ Beyond that, it carried the usual Afghan press prohibitions: works contrary to the principles of Islam and offensive to other religions; works libelous or offensive to persons; works contrary to the constitution; and works that promote religions other than Islam. It also required that all proprietors of mass media companies be licensed by the government.⁴⁹

Despite the laws that ostensibly protect press freedoms, the government continues to use the restrictive elements of the constitution and media law to harass and punish media organizations and reporters. It has threatened to ban television programs contrary to Afghan or Islamic values and has forced media professionals to pronounce that their programming is “informed by Islam.”⁵⁰ Reporters have been arrested, jailed, and beaten by security forces.

By mid-2010, Altai reported, a Media Law Reviewing Committee had been formed to create new media legislation. The law being drafted had more than 50 articles in at least 10 chapters, and was the work of several journalists’ organizations, the Ministry of Information and Culture, and UNESCO. Afghan sources, however, say that the new legislation appears to be in political limbo.

At the same time, the government has steadfastly sought to limit reporting of “negative propaganda,” and coverage of Taliban attacks. In March 2010 Farida Nekzad, editor of the Wakht News Agency, which is supported by the National Endowment for Democracy, said she and other journalists were summoned to the National Directorate of Security where they were told they should not produce live coverage of insurgent attacks because the insurgents could benefit from the coverage. A presidential spokesman, however, said shortly after the meeting that the new rules would not amount to censorship.⁵¹

Whatever the mixed message, it is clear that the national media laws restrict journalism and media growth. Journalists say they practice self-censorship; watchdog journalism is limited. And to the extent that entertainment is restricted, commercial growth is held back.

What’s in Print

Because Afghanistan has a male literacy rate variously estimated at anywhere from 30 to 43 percent and a female literacy rate of only one-third of that, most news and information is transmitted by radio, TV, and print plays only a small part in the media scene. With low readership and low circulation comes low ad revenue, which makes it hard for print publications to survive.

Estimates of the number, type, and frequency of print publications vary substantially, depending on whose numbers are cited. Abdul Mujeeb Khalvatgar, executive director of Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, an indigenous Afghan media training NGO, said that Nai’s surveys found that while about 800 print publications were registered with the government, only about 215 private publications and 90 government publications were printed regularly. He said confusion over numbers existed because many publications had never printed or had gone out of business, and some had registered up to three different names for the same paper or magazine.⁵²

Despite the laws that ostensibly protect press freedoms, the government continues to use the restrictive elements of the constitution and media law to harass and punish media organizations and reporters.

Papers may be founded to support an idea or a cause or even a business. They may be one-offs started by journalists or educators who want to give voice to their opinions. In Jaghuri, in Ghazni province, local professionals returning from university have started five papers in recent years, Altai reported. Such publications may publish weekly or monthly—or just once and then fold.

Among the current newspapers, *Sada-e-Azadi* is published by ISAF every two weeks in Pashto, Dari, and English. The military distributes nearly one-half million copies free, a print run far exceeding that of other Afghan papers.

Nai counts five government-run dailies, the *Kabul Times*, *Anis*, *Haiwad*, *Islah Daily*, and *Afghanistan Times*. Some were founded decades ago, others more recently, but all are published in Kabul, circulated within the city and to a lesser extent outside. Nai lists another 85 magazines and newspapers that are government owned and run; most are printed weekly or monthly by the provincial governments or municipalities. The government papers tend to report on official events and explain government policies, especially on the front page, while the inside pages are filled with random news and feature articles plucked from wire services. Their quality is considerably lower than the privately-owned papers.⁵³

In Afghanistan, print media face a steep uphill battle. Television and radio are free, while papers can cost 20 cents and are seen by many as an unnecessary expense.

Of the private papers, *Daily Outlook* and *Daily Afghanistan*, the main dailies published in Kabul, are published by the same person, Hussain Yassa. *Daily Outlook* circulates 4,200 copies only in English; *Daily Afghanistan* prints 5,000 copies in Dari. They sell for about 20 cents and are distributed in 30 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. About 90 percent of the content in both papers comes from news agencies. According to their owner, Yassa, their revenues cover their \$42,000 budget.⁵⁴

A number of small, private national dailies of four to eight pages are also published, with circulation in the low thousands. This includes the sole dailies in Khandahar and in Herat, with circulation runs of 5,000 copies or less.

One of the more highly respected newspapers was *Kabul Weekly*. It printed 10,000 to 15,000 copies per week before it closed in March 2011. Its articles were mostly in Dari and Pashto with some in English, and it was distributed in 22 provinces. Its owner, Fahim Dashty, said the paper broke even in 2005 but slipped since, and its income was only covering 70 percent of its expenses.⁵⁵

Two other newspapers are worth noting. *Mandegar*, a somewhat partisan paper supportive of Abdullah Abdullah and his Coalition for Change and Hope party that is critical of Karzai. It is reported to be quite readable and is popular with students. It claims a circulation of 12,000. Another is *Hasht-e-Subh* which means "8 a.m." With a reported circulation of 15,000, mainly in the large cities, it is supportive of human rights. Its \$65,000 to 75,000 monthly budget is only

one-third covered by its revenues, so it lives on support from donors, including the Open Society Foundations, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the Heinrich Boll Stiftung (HBS), and the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC).^{56 57}

The Dari *Mandegar*, *Hasht-e-Subh*, and Pashto *Weesa*, are widely read in government circles and civil society organizations, yet as with other print publications, their readership is small compared with the audience for radio and TV.

Afghanistan is also awash in magazines, though the distinction between a magazine and a monthly newspaper can be fuzzy. The Killid Group's *Killid*, a 40-page weekly newsmagazine, is published in Dari, Pashto, and English. With a circulation of 20,000, *Killid* is the most popular and most widely-distributed magazine in Afghanistan. Killid also publishes *Mursal*, meaning "Mural," a 30-page magazine for girls and women with a focus on health and family matters.⁵⁸

In Afghanistan, print media face a steep uphill battle. Television and radio are free, while papers can cost 20 cents and are seen by many as an unnecessary expense. Since so many Afghans get their news from radio, the next day's newspaper can seem stale. Distribution networks are spotty, so most papers do not reach the provinces. In the cities, where most readers live, there is a plethora of competing publications. While the future of government-owned media is more or less guaranteed, truly independent commercial print media may find it hard to survive.⁵⁹

Cellphones

With the exponential growth of media across Afghanistan post-2001, there has also occurred a huge growth in the cellphone industry. By 2010, according to the U.S. Institute of Peace, there were five licensed cellular network operators, providing coverage to more than 70 percent of the population.⁶⁰

As of August 2011, Afghanistan, a country with 29 million people, had 16.8 million cellular phone subscribers, and the World Bank had forecast the number would reach 19 million by the end of 2011. Since 2007, the number of communications towers has doubled to nearly 4,000.⁶¹

Not surprisingly, 40 percent of cellphone users are young (15-24 years old) and urban. For instance, 85 percent of Kabul residents use cellphones as opposed to only 26 percent of rural residents. While most cellphone usage is for voice phone calls, some Afghans also use their phone for text messaging, e-mail, or for playing games. About half use them to listen to the radio or play games.⁶² They cannot yet be used to access the Internet.

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Efforts are also underway to make more use of cellphones for dissemination of information. For instance, in October 2010 RFE/RL launched an interactive SMS service using its Radio Azadi service that within a year gained 400,000 subscribers.⁶³ Subscribers get news through the service, but also use it to report news or voice opinions to Radio Azadi. The service also offers Interactive Voice Radio, by which cellphone users can call a number, choose a language and a news category, and then get news updates in that category several times a day.⁶⁴

USAID had a similar project underway that would make use of cellphones to disseminate news and information through audio feeds. It was dubbed “Mobile Khobar,” meaning “Mobile News” in Dari and Pashto, but it was cancelled on October 15, 2011, due to budget considerations and other reasons.

In the spring of 2008 the Taliban started attacking cellphone towers, claiming they were being used by ISAF to track their movement at night, and eventually took down 10 cellphone towers. Because of the attacks, and in order to protect their property and service, the four phone companies affected began turning off nighttime service. In July 2011, President Karzai became frustrated when he could not make a nighttime phone call to Kandahar, and he ordered the companies to turn on their towers or lose their licenses. The Taliban retaliated and destroyed 30 towers in just one 20-day period, so some phone companies have kept their towers off at night. Meanwhile, a \$68 million U.S. effort to create a parallel network of towers in Helmand province reportedly has not been successful.⁶⁵

Few Afghans can access the Internet in their homes. And the number of Afghans who have access to the Internet through their work places, Internet cafes, university, and schools is also quite low.

The Internet

Approximately 20 Internet service providers in Afghanistan connect to satellite links from other countries. In rural areas, the Afghan government has provided access points to its District Communications Network where citizens can access the Internet. Meanwhile, an optic fiber project is underway with the objective of providing high-speed Internet access by creating a 3,200 kilometer cable through the major cities and into the northern regions, but the project is progressing slowly.⁶⁶

As of 2010, Internet access in Afghanistan was estimated at close to 4 percent.⁶⁷ Internet access is limited by technical difficulties, as well as low literacy rates. Still, a 2008 study counted 20,000 bloggers in the country; falling subscription rates are expected to increase Internet use.⁶⁸

At this point, Internet use is hampered by the cost and availability of access. Universities, cafes, and some work places are wired, but Afghans who would access the Internet must use satellite service to do so. Few Afghans can access the Internet in their homes, and the number of Afghans

who have access to the Internet through their work places, Internet cafes, university, and schools is also quite low. The Internet audience is younger and urban and male.

Internews is working to establish multimedia production centers in various parts of the country. They will expand the idea of citizen journalism by providing access to computers and the Internet, and training on social media blogging platforms to teaching civil society organizations how to make videos and information commercials.

Cellphones, or other mobile devices, are not typically used to access the internet. Until the end of 2011, the service available was mostly 2G, which does not support Internet access. In some areas of Afghanistan 2.5G service, which does support e-mail and rudimentary Web access, is available.

“Mobile access to the Web, that’s likely to be what changes the game. More than anything else that I can think of,” said Dwyer of Internews.⁶⁹

The Funders and Their Projects

Following the ouster of the Taliban media growth might have occurred anyway, but the explosion that did result would not have happened without the infusion of massive amounts of funding from other nations. The aid took many forms; one of the most common was the contracting of NGOs to create and sustain media. Other aid included the purchase of production and transmission equipment (especially in radio and TV), direct grants to help existing media continue or expand, and payments to media for running government advertising or messages.

In terms of sheer money spent, the United States took the lead, but other contributors—some with cash, some with in-kind assistance—included the European Commission, the United Nations and its related agencies, the UK’s Department for International Development, and individual governments such as Japan, Germany, Canada, Italy, and India.⁷⁰ International NGOs that established a presence in Afghanistan included Aina and Droit de Parole (France), the BBC

The explosion in media growth after the ouster of the Taliban would not have happened without the infusion of massive amounts of funding from foreign nations.

Service World Trust (now BBC Media Action), Institute for War and Peace Reporting (United Kingdom), Media Action International (Switzerland), the Baltic Media Center (Denmark). The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and UNESCO have also played a part in media development.

Funding from USAID directed toward media development and training totaled about \$65 million from 2002 to 2011, but hundreds of millions of dollars more were spent on Afghan media activities by the State Department, the U.S. embassy, and the Department of Defense, as well as by VOA and RFE/RL and foreign broadcasters to increase their reach into Afghanistan.

Support from USAID came in two phases. In the first phase, support was channeled through OTI, an agency designed to deliver aid quickly and effectively to emerging democracies and countries emerging from conflict. One official at USAID compared OTI to the Marines, a quick reaction force that can seize the beachhead. Media is seen as a means of stabilization and reconciliation. By the end of 2005, one USAID official said, OTI had spent \$23 million on media development in Afghanistan. (OTI originally had planned to spend about \$8 million, but it was able to tap into an additional \$15 million from a non-specific earmark by Congress for media work in Afghanistan.)⁷¹

In a November 2006 grant report, Internews reported USAID had obligated \$7.8 million to Internews projects alone. Its accomplishments at the time were numerous: 31 new radio stations; the creation of the daily news and entertainment program *Salam Watandar* and *Bakhabar*, a news show; creation of an Afghan media and journalism training NGO; other training in journalism and business practices; supplying equipment; and technical support to Radio Killid.⁷²

The second phase began in 2006, when responsibility for Afghan media development was shifted to USAID’s Office of Democracy and Governance (ODG). If OTI was the Marines, establishing a media beachhead, ODG was the Army. Its movements perhaps were more bureaucratic, but its involvement could be more long-term. According to USAID, ODG’s funding for independent media from 2006 to 2009 totaled more than \$20 million—\$4.9 million in 2006, \$3.3 million in each of 2007 and 2008, and \$8.8 million in 2009.⁷³

USAID’s strategy of developing independent media had several components: creating small, community-run radio stations, as well as small, medium, and large commercial stations. It also included training journalists and media owners and managers, advocating for more favorable media law and regulation, and helping protect journalists from harm.

Afghan entrepreneurs attempting to develop commercially successful media are among those receiving USAID assistance, such as the \$2.7 million in grants to the Mohseni family.

Journalism Training

As the media sector boomed in Afghanistan, many Afghans with no journalism experience or training flocked into the field—in some cases out of professional interest and in some cases just to pay the rent.

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan was founded in June 2004 by Internews and was nourished with subgrants from Internews and support from European nations. It began operations in Kabul and eventually set up training centers in Mazar-i-Sharif, Jalalabad, Khandahar, and Herat. According to its executive director, Abdul Mujeeb Khalvatgar, Nai has trained about 3,400 journalists across Afghanistan in subjects ranging from basic reporting to investigative reporting, media management, business development, and computer literacy.

Nai’s goal is to become self-sustaining. To that end, it is looking at become an institute where students can obtain a two-year diploma, but for a fee. It is also considering using its studios to do commercial radio and TV production, and creating a “graduates club” to bring in new business. “I am very confident that we can make it,” said Khalvatgar.⁷⁴

A Surge in Media Funding

In 2009 President Obama inherited the conflict in Afghanistan and decided to flow more troops into the country the following year to accompany a new counter-insurgency strategy. With the surge of troops also came a surge of spending for “hearts and minds,” and media was part of that strategy. A \$22 million USAID project called the Afghanistan Media Development and Empowerment Project (AMDEP) was funded to run from November 2010 to October 2011 to enhance and build on the media development work done before. In mid-2011 USAID also took bids on a \$7 to 16 million project to develop news and information feeds to mobile phones.⁷⁵

Embassy funding for media work surged as well. In July 2010, Congress approved \$33 billion to support the troop surge and another \$4 billion for civilian-sector aid to Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁷⁶ David Ensor, who was the director for communications and public diplomacy at the U.S. embassy in Kabul, said that he was allocated \$183 million to spend over 18 months on new media projects. They included a 10-part reality series about the Afghan army, a popular TV police thriller called *Eagle Four*, a soap opera for young people set at an Afghan university, a set of live public affairs debates for TV, a mobile messaging service for cheap group texting, and other projects.⁷⁷

Among other projects, in February 2010, the embassy announced it was taking bids to create four multimedia centers at Afghan universities for a total of \$7.7 million.⁷⁸ In May 2010, the embassy announced it was giving grants from \$500 up to \$10 million for projects that could expand media engagement and build communication capacity.⁷⁹ In 2011, the embassy offered American universities grants of \$1 million each to enter into “journalism partnerships” with Afghan universities.

At the same time, the U.S. military launched an enhanced communications strategy, which included creating anti-Taliban messages and paying Afghan media to run them. (U.S. forces have a communications budget of about \$100 million for Afghanistan, one DoD official said in 2010;⁸⁰ for 2011, the military media budget for both Iraq and Afghanistan was said to be \$180 million.)⁸¹

Besides the military, the embassy, and USAID, other sources have pumped money into Afghan media. Direct and indirect grants came from the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor and its regional bureau; from Military Information Support Teams, which work with the embassy; as well as grants from the NED.⁸²

All told, the amount of money allocated for media development and support in Afghanistan has reached hundreds of millions of dollars. Yet it is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of all the projects. If a project is targeted and discrete—Internews’s creation of community-based radio stations, for example—success or failure is easy to calculate. On the other hand, when the U.S. embassy spends \$183 million on media activities over 18 months, there is room for skepticism. Ensor said the shows all have public policy functions—the popular cop thriller was designed to raise respect for Afghan police, for instance—but he acknowledged in September 2011 that it was not yet clear whether the shows had had the desired effect. He said the embassy was hiring a consulting firm to weigh the programs’ effectiveness.

All told, the amount of money allocated for media development and support in Afghanistan has reached hundreds of millions of dollars. Yet it is difficult to gauge the effectiveness of all the projects.

A bigger problem may be that the funding has been erratic. For example, Afghan elections in 2004 and 2005 helped create a sense that the nation was stabilizing, USAID’s media budget for Afghanistan dropped off, and funding was cut not just by the United States but by Europeans as well. “Today, international donors have stopped direct funding of media projects and it is unlikely that most print and broadcast media will be able to survive the funding cuts,” wrote Aziz Hakimi, former director of the Killid Group, in January 2009; he added that the EC had ceased direct funding for independent media altogether. His warnings were dire: Media organizations “could collapse or be forced to seek support of powerful individuals and political parties and compromise their independence.” Of course in January 2009 Hakimi, could not have foreseen the U.S. troop surge nor the concomitant surge in spending for independent media.⁸³

AMDEP

Of all the media projects undertaken by USAID in Afghanistan, the Afghanistan Media Development and Empowerment Project is by far the most ambitious. It was budgeted for \$29 million, all to be spent in one year. Five of its components, worth \$22 million, were bid and awarded to Internews.

In an interview at Internews’s Washington, DC, office, Dwyer and Dawn Stallard, program officer for Afghanistan, acknowledged that the grant was “a huge amount of money.” However, Dwyer said, Internews had restructured its administration in order to manage it, adding three people in Washington, and assembling in Kabul a dedicated team and local partners. The AMDEP project was designed to run from November 2010 to October 2011, but it was extended at no cost to the government until the end of January 2012 as not all the work was finished.

They noted that AMDEP was advertised as a project with six component parts and that Internews was the lead agent for five of them. (The remaining one was the project called Mobile Khabar, which was later cancelled.) AMDEP, they noted, was a natural extension and expansion of the work they had done so far in their Building Independent Media in Afghanistan projects through 2010. AMDEP would allow them to solidify and broaden what they had started. Under the contract, Internews was tasked with:

- Increasing the number of community-based radio stations that are part of the Salam Watandar network. By January 2012, there were 47 partner stations. Generally, though, USAID directed Internews to shift its emphasis in 2011 away from building new stations and toward upgrading and sustaining existing facilities.

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- Adding more local TV. As of January 2012, one new TV station in Helmand province was awaiting shipment of antennas, and another hoped-for one in Parwan province was pending review of its business plan. Studio upgrades were underway at stations in Takhar, Kunduz, and Ghazni. Rasaa TV was joining 7 TV amid plans to use a U.S. embassy tower in Khandahar to broadcast their satellite signals.⁸⁴
- Spinning off *Salam Watandar*, the daily three-hour news and information program launched and supported by Internews, into its own NGO, aided by a \$418,000 subgrant. In January 2012, that was still in progress. *Salam Watandar* will continue sharing two-thirds of its advertising revenue with its participating stations.
- Expanding the training facilities of Nai, the Afghan NGO established by Internews, from sites in Kabul, Jalalabad, and Mazar-i-Sharif to Khandahar and Herat as well.⁸⁵ Using a subgrant of \$2.7 million, Nai accomplished the expansion. Nai also was to improve the efficacy and usefulness of its training and develop ways to measure outcomes.
- Creating multimedia production centers to train Afghans to text, blog, and create audio and video productions. The centers also serve as free Internet access points, and the training is free. AMDEP's goal was to create 11 centers. By January 2012, the Welfare Association for the Development of Afghanistan (WADAN) using a \$3.7 million subgrant, had created four of them.
- Improving advocacy for journalists and solidarity among journalism organizations. The immediate goal was to strengthen journalist associations and train media lawyers. Internews partnered with Nai and the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania for media law and training courses and for curriculum development. For this component, Dwyer said, "some bits were deferred, but we have made major progress."
- Increasing assistance to established broadcasters, especially in the areas of business management, processes, and business development. Dwyer said that about \$1.5 million would go to Altai for research and monitoring work and the development of broadcast ratings. Included in this work is research for placement for new radio and TV stations (terrain, audience, markets, etc.) and audience research toolkits for established stations. Support the Afghan government in its policies and regulations for media. Albany Associates International was awarded a \$102,304 grant to provide technical assistance to the ministries that regulate and license the media.⁸⁶

Mobile Khabar

On July 29, 2010, USAID issued a request for proposals for an AMDEP project it called “Mobile Khabar.”⁸⁷ The idea behind the project was to give users of mobile phones in Afghanistan audio access to news and information. And it could allow the mobile phone users to preselect the kinds of stories they want to hear by just punching in a code on their cellphones.

The program would derive revenue from commercials inserted between the news stories. The agency’s goal was for Mobile Khabar to be self-sustaining after several years and probably run by a non-profit.⁸⁸

USAID originally saw several benefits to the program: greater opportunity for Afghans to access information, opportunities for more citizen journalism, and a greater reach for the media producing the information. The content would come from radio or TV programs, print news stories or news agency stories read aloud, and mobile blogs. It would provide a national audience for local news stories.

As conceived, the project was to cost \$7 million the first year with two one-year options taking it to \$16 million total. It was put out to bid in July 2010, and a \$16 million contract was awarded in February 2011 to Motion Matters Corporation of Bristow, VA.⁸⁹ However, the award was protested by a competing bidder, and both bidders were asked to resubmit bids; then, on October 16, USAID cancelled the project.⁹⁰ Motion Matters CEO Naquib Hatami said he was told the cancellation was due to “budget issues.” USAID officials declined to discuss the project.

In late 2010 Radio Azadi, the Afghan voice of Radio Free Europe, created a similar interactive news and alert system for mobile phone users. In its first year it garnered 400,000 subscribers. Its features allow subscribers to send news and opinion messages back to Azadi, and Azadi says it has used some of that information to create news stories.

A Very Dangerous Place

On September 8, 2011, NATO acknowledged that a U.S. soldier killed an Afghan journalist working for the BBC when the soldier accidentally mistook him for a suicide bomber. As tragic as the death was, the circumstances were even more disturbing. Ahmad Omaid Khpulwak was at an RTA TV station in Tarin Kowst in Uruzgan province on July 28 when the station, the governor’s compound, and a market came under attack by insurgent gunmen and suicide bombers. The insurgents killed 19 people. One ISAF soldier combing through the compound found Omaid, as he was called, hiding in a bathroom and shot him too, thinking he was an insurgent.⁹¹

“(The report) said he appeared to be holding up something that U.S. troops may have thought was a trigger for a suicide bomb but concluded it may have been his press card,” the BBC reported.

On September 13, 2011, an RTA cameraman covering a major attack on the U.S. embassy was shot and wounded. At last report, his right leg was paralyzed. An Iranian TV cameraman, Farhad Taqadosi, went into shock after a stray terrorist rocket in the same attack hit his office. He was taken to a hospital where he later died.⁹²

In January 2011 an Afghan journalist and author, Razaq Mamoon, was disfigured when acid was thrown on him as he was walking in Kabul. His writings had been critical of Iran and of the Afghan government.⁹³

Clearly, Afghanistan is a dangerous place to be a journalist.

Attacks on journalists come from an insurgency intent on destroying elements of the government and offending democratic institutions, from government and security forces who don’t like what the press reports, and from utterly random sources that may not have targeted them at all, such as friendly fire and roadside bombs. They face threats and intimidation from local warlords, criminals, state institutions such as parliament and the ministries that oversee the media, and conservative elements and individuals. They also face lawsuits over programming.

Intimidation and threats from government security forces and police are common. For instance, on August 26, 2011, three photographers, including one from Pajhwok news agency and one from the Associated Press, said they were insulted and beaten by police while covering a blast at Herat police headquarters. The photographers told Media Watch that rough treatment and beatings from police were not unusual—stemming more from the lack of police training, however, than from government instigation.⁹⁴

Intimidation and threats from government security forces and police are common.

That said, some journalists have been victimized by Afghan’s national government and its restrictive media laws. Sayed Pervez Kambaksh, 23 at the time and a student journalist trainee, was sentenced to death for allegedly downloading an article that was critical of the treatment of women under Islamic law. In late 2008 his sentence was reduced on appeal to 20 years, and after intense international pressure he was secretly pardoned by President Karzai in September 2009 and was reported to be living outside the country.⁹⁵

In April 2008, the minister for information and culture, Abdul Karim Khurram, ordered Tolo TV and some other stations to take Bollywood soap operas off the air. The racy soap operas were said to be “anti-Islamic.” Tolo would not, and the attorney general brought criminal charges against the station. Tolo owner Saad Mohseni protested to Karzai, apparently to no avail, but in spring 2010 the charges were dropped.⁹⁶

In July 2010, the government shut down Emrooz TV, a station based in Herat known for its anti-Iranian and anti-Shiite positions, which was accused of endangering national unity. It also banned two other TV shows—one aired by Yak and the other aired by Tolo TV—for being “anti-Islamic.”⁹⁷

Afghan reporters may easily find themselves caught in the middle of the conflict. The government is strongly opposed, and has even forbidden, reporting on Taliban attacks, claiming that such reports encourage the insurgency. On the other hand, reporters critical of the Taliban will find themselves threatened or attacked by insurgents. Kamran Mir Hazar, a journalist working for Internews’ *Salam Watandar* show and editor of KabulPress.org website, found himself detained and jailed by the Afghan National Directorate of Security police twice—once for five days—in 2007 for reporting critical of the government,⁹⁸ but upon his release he was threatened with death by the Taliban for alleged anti-Taliban reporting.⁹⁹

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Others, of course, have been murdered. In September 2010, Sayed Hamid Noori, the vice president of Afghanistan’s Association of Independent Journalists, was found stabbed to death just outside his home in Kabul. The murderer has not been found, nor a motive established.¹⁰⁰

Zakia Zaki, a woman who owned Radio Sada-i-Solh or Peace Radio, was shot dead in her bed in July 2007 by gunmen who broke into her house in Jabal Saraj, one hour from Kabul. She had reportedly criticized local warlords.¹⁰¹ Her station was one of the first to be supported by Internews in 2002. Ajmal Naqshbandi, a “fixer” who arranged interviews for journalists, was captured by the Taliban with a reporter and driver in 2007. The driver was beheaded, the reporter was released, and Naqshbandi was also beheaded after an arranged prisoner swap went awry.¹⁰²

Radio Zohra in Kunduz, has received phone calls from people purporting to be associated with the insurgency threatening them if they do not stop women’s programming, Dwyer said. “And one of the more outstanding things is the resilience of journalists and small media owners in the face of that kind of threat,” he said. “It’s kind of amazing at times. They might bend a little at times, according to their own understanding of what they can get away with at any one time, but there is a commitment to their cause that has prevailed. So Radio Zohra continues its programming.”¹⁰³

In a survey released in July 2011, Nai reported that 22 journalists—6 women and 16 men—had been killed in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2011. But if there is any good news, it is that the trend of attacks against journalists, even with insurgency-related violence up nationwide, seems to be diminishing. Nai tracks other incidents of violence, including threats, arrests, beatings, and kidnappings. According to Nai’s data, 2009 was the most violent year for journalists in Afghanistan, with 67 incidents reported. In 2010 there were 26 incidents. Nai recorded eight incidents in 2011: Through October 7, 2011, eight incidents had been recorded: three beatings, three threats, one arrest, and one death of a BBC journalist, apparently killed by the Taliban in Uruzgan province. Nai had not listed an Iranian cameraman who died later from injuries during a Taliban attack in Kabul in September 2011.¹⁰⁴

The Committee to Protect Journalists recorded 24 work-related deaths of journalists since the U.S. invasion in October, 2001, the death of one journalists’ driver, and two other deaths of journalists not confirmed to be work-related.¹⁰⁵

In June 2011, however, the Committee to Protect Journalists warned of a new threat, this one from Afghanistan’s Council of Religions Scholars. The council had decried Tolo TV and a newspaper, *Hasht-e-Subh*, for “immorality” and “animosity toward Islam.” The council apparently was offended by some of Tolo’s Western-style programming and by an article in the paper that looked at radical religious training for girls. The council advises President Karzai on religious and cultural matters.¹⁰⁶

If there is any good news, it is that the trend of attacks against journalists, even with insurgency-related violence up nationwide, seems to be diminishing.

Afghan media developers and supporters note that the nation has more press freedom than other neighboring states, including Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and even Pakistan. But Reporters Without Borders has consistently graded the nation low in terms of press freedom. Its 2010 ranking among 178 countries is 147 (it was ranked 125th in 2005).¹⁰⁷ Freedom House rated Afghanistan as “not free” and ranked it 163rd out of 196 countries in 2011.¹⁰⁸

“In areas where the rule of law is mostly undeveloped, any journalists doing a story that challenges anyone in power or any other vested interest is potentially at risk,” Dwyer said.

The U.S. Military: A Two-Edged Sword

In October 2010 CIMA published a report that examined the intersection of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) information operations, including in Afghanistan, with the attempts by media to remain free and independent.¹⁰⁹ The report concluded that the Pentagon had lost track and control over its information operations, and the lack of supervision had resulted in poor coordination and a number of scandals that directly affected independent media. The report recommended that the DoD name one office to take full oversight over all information and psychological operations. It further recommended that the Obama administration develop a media strategy in pursuit of national security.

Three months later, on January 25, 2011, then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates issued a memorandum that ordered a “realignment” of strategic communications and information operations in the DoD. He ordered that the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy become the principal staff adviser for all such operations to provide a “single point of fiscal and program accountability” and a “single entry point” for DoD components doing information operations. The memo officially changed the term “psychological operations” (PSYOP) to “Military Information Support Operations,” or MISO.

The memo also created a new definition for information operations that makes it clear that it is a tool for war fighting—to “influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp the decision-making of adversaries.”¹¹⁰

This should leave no doubt that Pentagon information operations and their sub-components are military operations. Christopher Lamb, director of the Center for Strategic Research at the National Defense University’s Institute for National Strategic Studies, writing in July 2010, argued that what was then called PSYOP (now MISO) should not be expected to be benign, nor supportive of civil institutions. “This is no minor issue,” he wrote. “Military operations are conducted primarily and ultimately to defeat enemies of the United States. This means that in most, if not all, situations the purpose of psyop is to make military operations more effective, not look out for the interests of other parties.”¹¹¹

The issue arises because of various roles that the DoD has played regarding media in Afghanistan. They include: setting up small radio stations at forward operating bases; buying air time at small and large radio and TV outlets to run messaging; doing infrastructure support for small radio stations; helping Afghan reporters get access to coalition troops to gain favorable press; printing billboards that support the local government; using broadcast equipment, as seen on YouTube, to help local leaders blast their message to farmers in their fields.¹¹²

“In areas where the rule of law is mostly undeveloped, any journalists doing a story that challenges anyone in power or any other vested interest is potentially at risk.”

— Michael Dwyer, *Internews*

Altai Consulting in its report to USAID takes note of the variety of foreign military operators in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom troops, ISAF forces, Special Operations Forces, Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), and District Stability Teams. Altai argues that there is little coordination among them. For instance, the military forces operate more than 100 Radios in a Box across the country, each run by its own base. ISAF’s Combined Joint Psychological Operations Task Force runs Sada-e-Azadi Radio and a newspaper. It has its own TV production studios and operates a website (<http://sada-e-azadi.net/Joomla/>). It uses them to broadcast information to residents, run information campaigns, and put out counter-Taliban messaging. “They are also among the major clients of advertising companies in Afghanistan,” Altai reports.¹¹³

Much of the information operations activity is driven by the perception that the Taliban are winning the information war. There is argument within the military as to the effectiveness of Taliban messaging, and the problem is exaggerated, perhaps, but the successes of the Taliban include curtailing ISAF military activities such as bombing, artillery, and house-to-house searches; recruiting for the insurgency; and fomenting dissent among the population against the Afghan government.¹¹⁴ In 2007, al-Jazeera aired a segment about a new Taliban media production center, designed to create radio and video to court public opinion. Altai Consulting found at least one radio station openly run by insurgents.

In 2007, al-Jazeera aired a segment about a new Taliban media production center, designed to create radio and video to court public opinion.

The Pentagon’s answer is to fund more information operations activity. For instance, the DoD’s budget for 2011 included \$180 million for psychological operations (which include a variety of communications and support) in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Pentagon asked for \$300 million for military information support operations in its 2012 budget, but Congress cut the number back by \$125 million.¹¹⁵

Of the \$180 million for MISO activities in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2011, more than 95 percent would be for “large service provider contracts as well as small contracts for local service providers that perform printing and other production activities,” a Defense Department official told the *Washington Post*’s Walter Pincus.¹¹⁶ As the earlier CIMA report showed, the Pentagon has a mixed record with its use of contractors to do information operations—with some contracts resulting in embarrassing fiascoes.

Another use of Pentagon money involves direct spending by Provincial Reconstruction Teams. These include representatives from DoD, the State Department, USAID, and sometimes the Agriculture Department or the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). They help Afghan communities improve their infrastructure or do other development.

Numerous reports leaked by WikiLeaks in its Afghan journal cite successful efforts by military members of PRTs to pay relatively large amounts of money to small radio stations for air time.

In one document from August 2007, a PRT military member reports negotiating with Panjshir Radio to run 60 minutes a day of “coalition and IRoA [Islamic Republic of Afghanistan] messages/information operations.” If the funding is secured by the military, the radio station will receive \$6,000 for a two month trial period, and the station will use it to buy equipment and improve programming.

Another document from November 2006, reports giving “12 hours of PSYOP radio content programming” to a radio station in Ghazni province for \$3,900. The leaks portray a symbiotic relationship between some of the radio stations and the military funders. One leak in particular, stands out—a 2008 account of a meeting between military personnel and the director of a major Afghan news agency. In the meeting, the report says, the director “proposed a partnership with the PRT” and offered to run PRT articles and photos on his news service.¹¹⁷

Too much support for independent media—either through payments for messaging and advertising or infrastructure support—can create an unhealthy dependency, according to Hakimi, the former director of the Killid Group. Worse, he wrote in a recent article, mixing too closely with the Western military can put reporters in serious danger.

Hakimi cites “the example of a small US military funded radio station that broadcasts, as part of the military’s psychological operations or ‘psy-ops,’ into the Kamdesh district of Nuristan, along the Pakistan border—the target of a US counter-insurgency effort to defeat Taliban-led militants. The journalists working for the radio station are unable to move outside the district centre, for fear of being killed by the Taliban, who see the radio station as a propaganda tool of the US military. The international military forces and their governments must be made to recognise the unacceptable risks their media policies create for Afghan journalists in the midst of the current conflict. This situation is simply untenable and morally unacceptable.”¹¹⁸

Sanjar Sohail, the publisher of the daily newspaper *Hasht-e-Subh* in Kabul, voiced similar objections in an interview in the *British Journalism Review*. Referring to the *Voice of Freedom* newspaper published by ISAF, he said: “You can buy this paper by the kilo in the bazaar and people use it to wrap their meat or bread. But it impacts on our job. We are trying to give people the truth but often they think we are lying, because of all that propaganda. What we need is a more responsible media.”¹¹⁹

In February 2010, the United States Institute of Peace convened a meeting of more than 50 media and Afghanistan experts, including military officers, to discuss the current state and future of Afghan media. When they turned to the issue of countering extremist propaganda, the report states: “There was general acknowledgement that extremist propaganda cannot be effectively dealt with through counter-propaganda. Instead, the provision of a robust and credible media environment that encourages an exchange of ideas around need and solutions is vital in mitigating extremist messages.”¹²⁰

Playing to the Audience

Coupled with the exponential growth of media in Afghanistan has been a shift in audience and audience preferences. Simply put, as more media outlets emerge and present their offerings to the public, tastes and preferences change. Despite the rapid rise of radio as a communications medium, it is gradually being overtaken by television.

In 2010, Altai Consulting conducted a week-long audience survey of 1,500 individuals to determine their media consumption preferences. Sixty-three percent of Afghans reported being regular listeners to radio, while 48 percent reported regular viewing of television. The highest TV usage is in urban areas, where 87 percent reported owning or having access to televisions, and 77 percent reported daily viewing. In rural areas, only 34 percent reported having access to television, and 22 percent reported daily usage.¹²¹ These numbers track with, but are slightly higher, than those found in a BBC survey in January 2008.¹²²

Despite the large number of publications in Afghanistan, print usage remains low because of the country's literacy rates. Thus only 13 percent of Afghans surveyed reported regular reading of print publications.

The audience for Internet remains low—measured in 2010 at 4 percent—due to low literacy rates and the high cost of connectivity, which is primarily by satellite.

Among the national TV channels, five dominate the audience—Tolo, Ariana, RTA, Lemar, and Yak, the entire group taking 82 percent of the national viewership. Tolo alone has 45 percent of the audience.

When asked what types of shows they prefer and watch, 51 percent of those surveyed said “national news.” However, a tracking survey found that two-thirds of viewing time is spent watching entertainment, with serials consuming nearly half the viewing time. It is possible that the psychological effects of the survey prompted respondents to say they watched more news, but it is also possible that they have little choice: only entertainment programs are on during prime time, when most television is watched.

Indeed, the three most preferred TV shows, according to the Altai survey, are *Deal or No Deal* and two serials, *Kyunki* and *Kasauti Zindagi Kay*, all broadcast by Tolo TV. Other serials and music shows fill out the top ten, with one news show, *Dari News 20* broadcast by Ariana, in seventh place.¹²³

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It is worth noting that the population does not entirely trust or approve of television. Typical objections are that it is anti-Islamic, that it is superficial, and that it could be more useful. While attitudes are changing, the majority of Afghans still feel that children and women should not be allowed to watch TV without supervision.¹²⁴

Radio front listenership is more diverse. About 40 percent of the audience share is spread among 105 different stations, and RTA, the state-run national broadcaster, which is a network of 32 stations, takes another 18 percent. Most of the stations are FM, but Radio Afghanistan, Azadi/RFE, the BBC, and Ashna/VOA also broadcast on AM, which helps them reach distant rural areas.

Radio listeners seem to be more serious than TV viewers. In the 2010 Altai study, 54 percent listed national news as their preferred programming, followed by music (45 percent), religion (30 percent) and local news (24 percent). Thus national news and local news totaled 78 percent. In a survey done for the BBC in early 2008, the patterns were similar: 87 percent said they listened to the radio for news, 71 percent for music, 33 percent for radio dramas, 29 percent for health issues, and 28 percent for religious programs. A majority of Afghans (92 percent) surveyed told the BBC World Service Trust that it was important for them to stay informed about Afghan current events, and 58 percent said it was “very important.”¹²⁵

Independent local stations, including classic non-profit community radio, can be quite popular. Close in, their FM signal quality can be very good and they transmit in the local language and dialect. In Panjshir province, for example, Radio Khurasan has a 54 percent market share; seven others local stations have market shares ranging from 38 to 29 percent. One, Sada-e-Nilli in Daykundi, a tiny station with a monthly budget of under \$1,000, has a 29 percent audience share in its province.

Perhaps the most important evaluation of media for developers is the issue of trust. Afghans are sophisticated media consumers and are healthily skeptical, having been fully exposed to propaganda during the era of Soviet occupation and under the Taliban regime.

That said, the Altai study found that radio and TV—but not so much print media—are a trusted source of information. In a survey, for instance, Afghans were asked to choose their most trusted source of information from among a variety of sources, from relatives and shopkeepers to the various forms of media. In all categories except religion the respondents overwhelmingly chose radio and TV. For instance, 46 and 45 percent chose radio as their most trusted source for Afghan news and local news. Television, at 39 percent, was rated highest as a trusted source

Afghans are sophisticated media consumers and are healthily skeptical, having been fully exposed to propaganda during the era of Soviet occupation and under the Taliban regime.

for international news. Even for religion, where 39 percent most trusted their local mullah, 26 percent rated TV as the most trusted source for news on religious matters. Overall, when asked if they trust television, 46 percent said that they did, though 40 percent said “not much.”

Afghans said they find public service information campaigns useful, but they also indicated they did not hunger for more of them. Some said that the media aired “un-Islamic ideas.” One respondent, a male villager, told Altai, “The mullahs get annoyed because no one is going to the mosque to pray in the evenings, because everyone is watching serials.” Others complained of shows airing “sensationalistic debates, or programs against national unity.”

That said, the survey found clear evidence that media overall are having a positive impact on Afghanistan. For instance, 30 percent of respondents said they often discuss what they learn from the media with friends and family, and 60 percent said they do that at least occasionally. Overall, the study found, media “are perceived as a source of new, positive ideas” and more than 80 percent of those surveyed said the media “have had an impact on their own opinions.” Indeed, more than 20 percent said that both radio and TV have changed their minds on issues.¹²⁶

Business Sustainability

Most independent media in Afghanistan were launched and to some extent sustained with outside help and funding. The challenge now is to get the media to be able to sustain itself.

Some radio stations are making it already. For example, an Internews report said that as early as January 2006, nine radio stations were earning enough locally to be self-sustaining. Sharq Radio, Internews reported, had earned more than \$8,000 its first several months of operation and by July 2004 was earning enough to be self-sufficient.¹²⁷ For others, the income-expense ratio is tighter, but Dwyer said he believed that even if government and NGO support were withdrawn, the independent stations created by Internews could survive. “Maybe not be able to expand, but survive,” he said. The Altai report of 2010 prepared for USAID published a similar finding. Virtually all of the small local stations established since the fall of the Taliban are still broadcasting, it noted, and “these will most probably at least survive, if not thrive.”¹²⁸

For independent media to survive, grow, and thrive, there is still much to be done. Media must strive to develop other commercial means of support besides advertising and paid programming.

However, the report also noted that small stations with very limited reach have trouble pulling in advertising and are certainly going to lose market share to larger regional stations with more polished content. Larger, regional radio stations have more opportunity to grow and obtain advertising.

Altai Consulting estimated the revenues of the total Afghan media sector at between \$75 million and \$95 million annually, generating profits of between \$30 and \$50 million. (By contrast, advertising spending in the U.S. in 2010 was \$151.6 billion.)¹²⁹ Most of the growth in the Afghan private media sector, however, has been in

the realm of entertainment, which, not coincidentally, attracts the most advertising. Spending on TV advertising alone was estimated to reach more than \$30 million a year. However, the estimate of the amount spent on print advertising was less than \$1 million. Advertising income and paid and sponsored programming accounts for 60 percent of revenue, Altai estimated.¹³⁰

Azis Hakimi, former director of the Killid Group, notes the “general lack of an advertising culture” in Afghanistan. He also points out that the recovering Afghan economy does not have enough companies or products that require advertising, making it “impossible” for the media to be supported solely by ads.¹³¹ A chart prepared by Altai shows the breakdown of current media revenue sources: advertising and paid programming, 60 percent; military, 19 percent; neighboring countries, 13 percent; other income including self-funding, 8 percent.¹³²

Thus, for independent media to survive, grow, and thrive, there is still much to be done. Media must strive to develop other commercial means of support besides advertising and paid programming. Some larger regional radio stations already have diversified into television and

into other media services such as video and ad production and even print. Some media groups have emerged, including Moby, Ariana, and Killid. Some broadcasters have developed what might be called national networks; they include Yak, Killid, Ayna, and Watandar.

The biggest urban stations such as Moby Group’s Tolo TV, have done especially well by adding more TV and radio channels and other media businesses. Others are expanding too. Awa-Nama is an audio and video production house that started doing production and only recently has been integrated into a TV outlet, Channel 7. It was founded in 2002 and is now described as a “full media company” doing everything from development to production to media buying to monitoring. It does productions for Tolo, Ariana, and RTA, among others.¹³³

The advertising sector is also growing, but it is disorganized and not yet highly professionalized—relying on personal contacts and non-standard ad rates, and replete with kickbacks and bribes. However, an ad buying and placement business is developing. A handful of organizations, such as the Afghan Radio Association, Cetena, MediaCom, Sayara, Wise Communications, and Lapis are able to create and sell advertising and place it in appropriate media.¹³⁴ A portion of the AMDEP program being funded by USAID is dedicated to providing a rating system for radio listeners and TV viewers.¹³⁵

It is safe to say that infrastructure improvements can only help the media picture, but those improvements would have to be strategic and targeted.

Generally, media infrastructure in Afghanistan is underdeveloped. It is safe to say that infrastructure improvements can only help the media picture, but those improvements would have to be strategic and targeted. For instance, Kabul is well-covered with broadcast towers, but there are rural areas where signals do not yet reach. Unlike radio, community TV is only in its infancy, so a major investment in TV technology would be useful for expanding that sector. And sometimes smart use trumps high expenditure. The plan to use a U.S. embassy-built radio tower in Kandahar as a satellite signal repeater for Rasaa TV and 7 TV is a good example.

It seems likely that newspaper and magazine production and readership would grow if the print distribution network were better, but security plays a major role in distribution to areas in the south and east. In most places the market dictates where cellphone towers get built, but from time to time the Taliban launch campaigns to attack and destroy the towers.

The government recently announced a push to begin 3G wireless service, and several companies have bid on the project. As of January 2012, there was 2.5 G service but no 3G. And 3G, when it becomes available, is also expected to be expensive. However, cheap smart phones are flooding in from China, so mobile access to the Web is not far off, and cost reductions are expected.

Besides wireless service, the government is working toward hard-wired Internet. The World Bank has given a \$50 million grant to the Afghan government to complete a national fiber optic project, with connections to five neighboring countries. Even that cable will not cover all

provinces, but it is expected that further fiber optic development and wireless will eventually reach all of the country.¹³⁶

Because broadcast frequencies were originally allocated on a case by case basis, the entire broadcast spectrum as allocated by the government needs to be restructured. A portion of the AMDEP grant overseen by Internews is dedicated to making improvements there. Media law in Afghanistan continues to develop, with four successive laws approved since 2002 and another one in the works. The latest version is being developed by a Media Law Reviewing Committee, consisting of numerous players: two Afghan journalists associations, the Ministry of Information and Culture, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, and UNESCO. While the version in draft form is considered an improvement over previous media laws, it is unclear whether it will be finalized and ultimately approved by Parliament.

Training journalists and especially owners and managers in business development has been a major effort undertaken by Internews. While the AMDEP project expands the number of training centers to five cities, Internews and Nai have made it a priority to shift training courses from mere delivery of information to more useful, hands-on training. Concurrently, efforts are underway to measure the outcomes of journalism business training to make sure that it is being put to use. Quality of content is constantly improving, and as many as 2,000 journalists are undergoing training in a media sector that employs about 10,000 people.¹³⁷

It is not yet clear, however, whether any planning is underway for dealing with the insurgency when it comes to media issues. And that remains the elephant in the newsroom.

The Taliban Endgame

After being defeated and ousted by U.S. troops in 2001, the Taliban regrouped in Pakistan and then began a drive to retake the country. For those who hope for a free and independent press in Afghanistan, not to mention a free society, the developments of the recent months are worrisome—especially if past is prologue.

When the Taliban took control of Kabul on September 26, 1996, and created the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, it was clear that its brand of radically conservative Islam had no tolerance for a free press. According to a report by Reporters Without Borders in 2000, the Taliban immediately locked the doors of the national TV station and banned all television broadcasts. They allowed only one radio station, which they ran, and it broadcast only religious programming and propaganda—not even music. By 2000 there were only 10 print publications in the country, all published by the Taliban government.¹³⁸

None of the participants of an NPR radio show seemed to doubt that to the extent that the Taliban is able to establish ascendancy in Afghanistan, it is likely to revert to its old ways.

A few foreign journalists continued to operate in Afghanistan, but at their peril. Forbidden: interviews of women; photographs and videos of all living creatures. Violations resulted in arrest, or worse.

Ten years later, Afghanistan is a different country with a democratically-elected government and a constitution that guarantees press freedom. But as the Taliban and its brother organization, the Haqqani Network, grow bolder, the specter of the Taliban playing a significant role in Afghanistan’s future seems more and more real.

Moreover, the emergence of Western-style press and media entertainment brings with it a paradox. “The Taliban actually show some of these programs to people in the villages and say, ‘these programs are anti-Islamic and they are infidels.’ In fact, these kinds of programs increase soldiers for the Taliban,” Abdul Karim Khurran, the former minister of information and culture, said in 2010.¹³⁹

Asked about the future, Afghans voice a mixture of optimism and pessimism. On an NPR radio show hosted in Washington by Kojo Nnamdi and in Kabul by Khalid Mafton, who is the media officer of the Open Society Foundations office in Kabul, a number of the Afghan participants, including members of the media, expressed concern about a Taliban takeover of their country as soon as U.S. and international forces leave.

None of the participants seemed to doubt that to the extent that the Taliban is able to establish ascendancy in Afghanistan, it is likely to revert to its old ways. One participant said she asked a taxi driver recently about the possibility of reconciliation. His answer, “We don’t want to see feet and hands hanging on the trees again,” made it clear that he was opposed.

But not everyone foresees the Taliban running the country. “We know if the Taliban come back there will be no independent media,” said Sanjar Sohail, publisher of a Kabul daily, “but the Taliban are perhaps not as strong as we think.”¹⁴⁰ That said, some journalists think their influence is already being felt. They pointed to a call from the Ministry of Culture and Information in February 2012 for all female TV news presenters to wear headscarves and avoid heavy makeup as an effort to placate the Taliban during nascent peace negotiations.¹⁴¹

Naquib Hatami, a Pashtun and an Afghan by birth who visits the country frequently, said he believes that support for the Taliban is weakest among the youth, who are very tired of war and who do not support the insurgency. “The Taliban cannot win this war,” he said.¹⁴²

Others are similarly sanguine, for a variety of reasons. Some U.S. officials, who asked not to be named, said that Afghan security is now strong enough to prevent a Taliban takeover of major cities and portions of the north and west. Others noted that progress is being made toward talks with the Taliban and the Haqqani network. “If we go this way, I am hopeful and I am optimistic for the future of Afghanistan,” said Abdul Mujeeb Khalvatgar, director of Nai.¹⁴³

Some say the key to maintaining media independence is to make sure that if the Taliban enter into peace talks, they do so under the framework of the constitution, which guarantees press freedoms. Some even suggest that the Taliban of old may not be the present Taliban, noting that they have gone from being media-haters to savvy media users. “The Taliban understand the importance of media and they have also moved with the times,” said Dawood Azami, BBC World Service news editor in Afghanistan.¹⁴⁴

Some say the key to maintaining media independence is to make sure that if the Taliban enter into peace talks, they do so under the framework of the constitution, which guarantees press freedoms.

Indeed, in what may reign as one of Afghanistan’s great ironic moments, in March 2010, the Taliban issued a statement criticizing the Karzai government for its curbs on the press, lauding the “courageous efforts of the fact-finding and courageous journalists, reporters and photographers” and their reporting of Taliban attacks, which the government tried to restrict.¹⁴⁵

The hope, of course, is that if the Taliban gain a measure of power, they might also respect the fact that Afghans now highly value their media. “There is not a lot of gain to be made in attacking and destroying facilities which have community support,” Internews’ Dwyer said. “I mean I can’t think what’s going to happen in Afghanistan in 12 months or 24 months but what we’re hoping to do is build a media sector that is as resilient as possible and build as much community support for the role of media and journalists in Afghan society so that whoever is governing Afghanistan understands that the media are part of the landscape. It’s not something that can be turned off, just turned off.”¹⁴⁶

Conclusion and Recommendations

The effort of Western nations to create an independent media in Afghanistan is not without its critics. Some lament the lack of a long-term media development plan and the on-and-off annual funding by USAID. Still others believe that at least some of the hundreds of millions of dollars put into media activities in Afghanistan have been wasted, while direct grants to radio and TV have created unreasonable expectations of viability. “I think USAID has totally distorted the media marketplace,” said one U.S. government official whose agency also works in Afghanistan.¹⁴⁷

The Congressionally-funded U.S. Institute of Peace said in its 2010 report that the new Afghan media had neither been able to counteract the effects of insurgent communications nor had it created a free press that would be able to survive after donor funding had ended. It suggested that the West should focus on creating socially constructive content rather than institutions that the economy could not support.¹⁴⁸

Others decry the rapid growth of the entertainment sector, especially in TV, noting that it is pushing aside more socially valuable news and information. Not coincidentally, the highly popular entertainment sector also draws the most advertising support, which bolsters its commercial success to the detriment of serious radio, television, and print. This poses a dilemma for supporters of serious journalism.

Still, the findings of this report show that the press in Afghanistan is lively and vibrant, growing fast, and considered by the Afghan people to be a valuable part of their culture. The issue is how to keep it on track and prevent its demise—either politically or commercially.

The overarching recommendation is that the United States and other partner nations develop a clear long-term policy to assure the continued existence and success of free and independent Afghan media. The U.S. government and partners should create a transparent and comprehensive media support plan and work with the Afghan government and Afghan media to implement it.

Among the components of this plan:

- Work with the Afghan government to create a fund, overseen by an independent committee, to support fragile but important media.
- Commit to constant and level multi-year funding with a clear development plan in mind. Do not withdraw funding as U.S. troops withdraw from Afghanistan.
- Continue to put pressure on the Afghan national government and its security apparatus to support and defend free media through improved media laws and police protections.

- Devise ways to build the advertising industry in Afghanistan. For example, U.S. aid to Afghan businesses could stipulate that a portion of the grant go to advertising. U.S. contractors in Afghanistan could be required to advertise in Afghan media.
- Work to consolidate advertising market practices, including an ad market rating system, audience indicators, and brokerage services.
- Consider developing more socially constructive content in order to reach more people. Surveys show Afghans want more religious, educational, and cultural programs, as well as positive news about their country and its people.
- If the Afghan government and ISAF enter into talks with the Taliban, make sure that media guarantees are part of the negotiations.

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