

The Media in Afghanistan

Post-Conflict Development and Policy Implications

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April 28, 2009

Abstract

This paper argues that the initial success of the development of the Afghan press after the post-9/11 fall of the Taliban regime is threatened by several current challenges and requires a robust policy response to ensure the survival of an independent, fair, and accurate Afghan media. It first explores the state of the Afghan press during and immediately after Taliban rule, then discusses the development of the press after the fall of the regime in late 2001. This section includes a case study on the development of the radio, which is Afghanistan's largest media sector. The paper then discusses the current challenges to the sustainability of the Afghan media's initial success. These challenges include the deteriorating security situation, the weak judicial system, and the unsustainable financial model. Finally, the paper proposes policy recommendations to meet these challenges in the areas of journalist protection, popular demand, government-media relations, military-media relations, and financing.

Introduction

After years of civil war and oppressive Taliban rule, and amid ongoing hostilities, Afghanistan is working to rebuild its political and social institutions. An essential element of a free and democratic society is a vibrant, healthy, well-protected press. The Afghan press was virtually non-existent during the Taliban regime, but the development of the media sector after the Taliban's fall has been one of the most successful areas of the reconstruction effort since 2001. The 2004 Afghan Constitution provides for freedom of expression and of the press. The international community has helped to build television and radio stations, start publications, provide training for journalists and businesspeople, and create distribution networks.

Afghans have quickly integrated the press into their daily lives after having had little or no access to any media outlets during Taliban rule. Due to a variety of socioeconomic and logistical factors, the radio sector has been the most successful. The country now has hundreds of community radio stations that reach even the most remote areas. Afghans have become reporters, editors, disk jockeys, and producers. Local residents own and operate most media outlets and distribution networks, and women play a prominent role in many of these organizations.

However, the Afghan media is in a fragile state. The initial success of the media's development is now jeopardized by several trends within the country. First of all, the deteriorating security situation and growing influence of the Taliban have placed journalists at higher personal risk. Elected officials have also been known to intimidate journalists. Secondly, the Afghan legal framework does not provide full protection for freedom of the press. Without a clear legal precedent, journalists cannot be sure if their reporting will place them in jeopardy. Finally, the Afghan economy is so weak as to prevent local media outlets from funding their own operations, but the international donor community has begun to reduce funding. The current financial model is unsustainable.

These three challenging areas require a robust policy response from the international community as well as from the Afghan government. The United States' increased troop levels will be matched with an increase in civilian resources, and sustaining the media sector should remain a priority. The U.S. must exercise its influence on the Afghan government to develop stronger protections for the press and a better capacity within the justice system to prosecute threats to journalists as well as to protect the rights of the press. While the economy remains poor, the international community must sustain funding and develop a long-term financial plan for a domestically sustainable media sector. This policy response requires, however, that both

Soulé

international and domestic actors acknowledge the value of a free and protected press and do not pursue other goals at the expense of freedom of expression in Afghanistan.

The press under Taliban rule

Before the Taliban were overthrown in 2001, Afghan citizens had only very restricted access to media. During Taliban rule in Afghanistan, media of all kinds were banned almost entirely. Upon seizing Kabul in 1996, the Taliban immediately took control of the national television headquarters and stopped all broadcasts. The Taliban's fundamentalist interpretation of Islam prohibited all images of living beings, both still and moving. Therefore, film, television, and the internet were banned throughout Taliban rule. The former state television building was used instead as a military barracks.¹

Most media that remained in operation after 1996 was co-opted by the Taliban for use in the regime's propaganda operation. There was one state-run radio station, Radio Sharia, which operated in Kabul under strict control and was used only to send out religious messages.² Literacy rates, already at low levels, deteriorated. Any printing facilities in existence were used to spread messages in adherence to fundamentalist Islam.

Despite the regime's efforts to eradicate all contact with the outside world, the Afghan population did not abandon its desire for media. A very small group of elites had access to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Voice of America (VOA) and listened in secrecy. Most other Afghans listened in on radio broadcasts from abroad, primarily from Iran, when they were not under the Taliban's scrutiny. Citizens hid their radios when Taliban officials ran

¹ USAID, "USAID's Assistance to the Media Sector in Afghanistan," PPC Evaluation Paper No. 3, October 2005, p. 16. Available at: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADC219.pdf. Accessed March 26, 2009.

² United States Institute of Peace, "Media and Conflict: Afghanistan as a Relative Success Story," Special Report 198, January 2008, p. 2. Available at: <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr198.pdf>. Accessed March 26, 2009.

Soulé

household checks. For the vast majority of Afghans, limited access to contraband radio was the only media access available. As a result, a strong radio culture developed during the time of the Taliban's rule.³

While the domestic press was virtually nonexistent, a small number of foreign correspondents reported from Afghanistan during the Taliban rule. They operated under tight restriction by the state. Visiting journalists were required to stay at the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul and were only provided access to official government spokesmen and translators.⁴ Thus the news both within and from Afghanistan was controlled by the Taliban to a large extent. By the time of the September 11th attacks, very little communications infrastructure remained. In addition, few Afghans had been trained in journalism, production, or business.

Success story: post-Taliban media development

Immediately the United States launched its attacks and quickly removed the Taliban from power, the international community began its rebuilding effort. The strong radio culture was leveraged to develop a local press. Radio was the backbone on which the new media sector was built. According to the United States Institute of Peace, three important factors were essential in creating the Afghan media from 2002 onwards: the proliferation of local media, the government's increased capacity to communicate, and the international media that filled in the gaps and was suddenly more accessible to the Afghan population. The parliamentary elections in 2005 demonstrated the success in the development of the press. The elections were heavily and

³ United States Institute of Peace, "Media and Conflict: Afghanistan as a Relative Success Story," Special Report 198, January 2008, p. 2. Available at: <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr198.pdf>. Accessed March 26, 2009.

⁴ Kate Clark, "The struggle for 'hearts and minds': the military, aid, and the media," in Antonio Donini, Norah Niland and Karin Wermester, eds., *Nation-Building Unraveled? Aid, Peace, and Justice in Afghanistan*. Bloomfield, Conn.: Kumarian Press, 2004, p. 85.

Soulé

accurately covered by domestic as well as foreign outlets, and the government cooperated with the press to ensure fair and accurate coverage.

The proliferation of local media was only possible due to the strong radio culture that developed during the Taliban's rule. The growth of the radio sector is discussed in detail below. Other segments of the media grew but have not had as great of an impact as radio. Televisions are relatively expensive, and most households in rural areas cannot afford a TV. In a survey published in January 2008, 89% of urban households but only 26% of rural households reported having access to a television either in the home or in a neighbor's home. There are some broadcast and cable stations in the cities and some access to satellite television remotely but most Afghans do not watch television regularly due to the economic constraints. Only 47% of people had viewed a television within the past month.⁵

Print media has had much less success due to the country's poor educational system. Newspapers and magazines have had little traction because of very low literacy rates in the country. Approximately 29% of men and approximately 13% of women are able to read.⁶ Newspaper delivery is also very difficult given the terrain and the poor security in some areas. Only 13% of Afghans reported reading a newspaper or magazine within the past month.⁷

The second critical factor was the development of the Afghan government's ability to communicate with its citizens. The capacity for dialogue between Afghan citizens and the government was and remains a key part of the overall stabilization and reconstruction mission of

⁵ Afghanistan Media Survey, Report Prepared for the BBC Trust, by D3 Systems, Inc. and ASCOR-Surveys, Vienna, Virginia: ASCOR-Surveys, D3 Systems, 2008, p. 13. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/ar2007_08/afghanistan_research.pdf. Accessed March 28, 2009.

⁶ United States Institute of Peace, "Media and Conflict: Afghanistan as a Relative Success Story," Special Report 198, January 2008, p. 2. Available at: <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr198.pdf>. Accessed March 26, 2009.

⁷ Afghanistan Media Survey, Report Prepared for the BBC Trust, by D3 Systems, Inc. and ASCOR-Surveys, Vienna, Virginia: ASCOR-Surveys, D3 Systems, 2008, p. 13. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/ar2007_08/afghanistan_research.pdf. Accessed March 28, 2009.

Soulé

the country. During the Taliban's rule, there was very little communication between the regime and the citizens aside from religious edicts, so this capacity had to be built from the ground up. The new government was trained not only in communicating with its own people but also in dealing with the large international media presence in Kabul.

The third factor for success was the infusion of international capacity, equipment, and funding to the media sector. The U.S. had funded Radio Liberty in Afghanistan throughout the Soviet occupation in the 1980s and thereafter, and that broadcast was replaced with Radio Free Afghanistan (RFA) in 2002. Because local stations had not yet developed by 2002, RFA became the most reliable source of coverage of the *loya jirga* in 2002. Coverage was broadcast in both Dari and Pashto. Over time, local and national outlets developed into accessible and reliable sources of information. Grants from the U.S. and other outside governments to media development firms, including Internews, most notably, were instrumental in providing the equipment and training necessary to create local media outlets. Together, RFA and local media outlets demonstrated to Afghan citizens the value of the press not only in disseminating information but also as a channel through which Afghans could demand the rights of citizenship.⁸

The government and the press worked well and worked well together during the 2005 parliamentary elections. The press operated with relative freedom and disseminated information to the population about candidates, platforms, and voting information. The Afghan Media Commission, created by the government ahead of the elections, monitored coverage for hate speech and worked to elevate moderate voices during the election. The Commission established the Sponsored Advertisement Program (SAP) to ensure equal air time for men and women

⁸ United States Institute of Peace, "Media and Conflict: Afghanistan as a Relative Success Story," Special Report 198, January 2008, p. 6. Available at: <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr198.pdf>. Accessed March 26, 2009.

candidates, compensating for women's inability to campaign at mosques and most schools.⁹ By all accounts, both the media coverage and the government's cooperation with the press during the elections were successful.

Case study: Afghan radio

Development of a robust radio network throughout Afghanistan was the greatest success in the media sector. The underground radio culture of the Taliban period had laid the groundwork for the sector's success once international funds started funneling into creating a domestic press. Among Afghan citizens, there was a rapid paradigm shift from seeing radio as either a propaganda machine for the Taliban or a clandestine window to forbidden access to a source of information and entertainment controlled by citizen demand.

In addition to the legacy radio culture, radio held the greatest opportunity for growth due to a number of socioeconomic factors. For one, electricity is only available in larger cities and there only in the afternoon, but most radios are battery-operated. Only 42% of Afghans have access to electricity in the home at all, and then only for a few unpredictable hours at a time.¹⁰ Radio stations are relatively inexpensive to operate and maintain, and the frequency can be broadcast to a wide area regardless of the road or security conditions.

Directly after the Taliban fell, USAID built Radio Afghanistan using the infrastructure of the former Radio Sharia, the state-run radio. However, the station never gained traction due to its

⁹ Yll Bajraktari and Emily Hsu, "Developing Media in Stabilization and Reconstruction Operations," United States Institute of Peace, Stabilization and Reconstruction Series, October 2007, p. 9. Available at: <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/srs/srs7.pdf>. Accessed March 30, 2009.

¹⁰ Afghanistan Media Survey, Report Prepared for the BBC Trust, by D3 Systems, Inc. and ASCOR-Surveys, Vienna, Virginia: ASCOR-Surveys, D3 Systems, 2008, p. 6. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/ar2007_08/afghanistan_research.pdf. Accessed March 28, 2009.

legacy of censorship and propaganda and resulting mistrust among the population.¹¹ This original misstep was corrected when USAID turned to Internews, an international media development organization, to build community radio stations. To date, Internews has established 32 independent community radio stations estimated to reach 11 million people, or 37% of the population. The agency's "station in a box" package of technical start-up needs costs \$12,000 to \$70,000, depending on the needs of the locality. To distribute national content to local stations, Internews established the Tanin and Salaam Watandar distribution networks. Tanin delivers burnt compact discs of national content by car to local stations. The network distributes between 250 and 300 radio programs each month. Salaam Watandar provides a digital feed of live news and entertainment programming for re-broadcasting.¹² These distribution networks have created a continuity of coverage throughout the country, ensuring that Afghans, to some degree, have heard similar versions of national news events that have not been co-opted by Taliban or government factions.

Radio is now further entrenched as the predominant media outlet for Afghan citizens. Eighty-six percent of Afghan households have a working radio in the home, and 88% report having listened to a radio within the past month. Nearly 60% of Afghans report listening to radio in 2008 more than they did two years before; only 6% reported reading newspapers or magazines more often. Urban listeners have access to a greater variety of stations but rural listeners can access international radio on short- and medium-wave frequencies.¹³ The most popular stations in the country are the BBC Afghanistan broadcast and Radio Arman in Kabul, the nation's first

¹¹ USAID, "USAID's Assistance to the Media Sector in Afghanistan," PPC Evaluation Paper No. 3, October 2005, p. 22. Available at: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADC219.pdf. Accessed March 26, 2009.

¹² Internews website. Available at: www.internews.org/activity/infrastructure/radio.shtm. Accessed March 25, 2009.

¹³ Afghanistan Media Survey, Report Prepared for the BBC Trust, by D3 Systems, Inc. and ASCOR-Surveys, Vienna, Virginia: ASCOR-Surveys, D3 Systems, 2008, p. 15. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/ar2007_08/afghanistan_research.pdf. Accessed March 28, 2009.

private commercial radio station, which was initially funded by USAID and is now funded through advertising. It is the first fully commercially funded media outlet in the country.

During the immediate post-Taliban time period, radio played an integrative role in building common experience and promoting a multilingual, multicultural society. Afghans listen to the radio as their primary source of news, but 71% listen to the radio for music and 33% for serial radio dramas.¹⁴ Radio programming is broadcast in mixed language, usually in both Dari and Pashto for the larger stations. In the immediate post-Taliban period, multilingual radio programs underscored the need for ethnic acceptance and reconciliation in the country and provided an immediate tangible step toward creating a stable multilingual state.¹⁵

Challenges to the freedom of the press in Afghanistan

The freedom of the Afghan press has deteriorated significantly since the initial burst of growth in local media outlets and since the successful coverage of the 2005 elections, which remains the largest single media success. This deterioration is due to several factors, including the worsened security of Afghanistan, the lack of clear legal protections and weak judicial system, and the unsustainable financial model of the media sector.

Deteriorating security situation

The security situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated significantly in the past several years, erasing much of the initial progress made in the development of civil society, including

¹⁴ Afghanistan Media Survey, Report Prepared for the BBC Trust, by D3 Systems, Inc. and ASCOR-Surveys, Vienna, Virginia: ASCOR-Surveys, D3 Systems, 2008, p. 17. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbctrust/assets/files/pdf/review_report_research/ar2007_08/afghanistan_research.pdf. Accessed March 28, 2009.

¹⁵ United States Institute of Peace, "Media and Conflict: Afghanistan as a Relative Success Story," Special Report 198, January 2008, p. 3. Available at: <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr198.pdf>. Accessed March 26, 2009.

Soulé

the media. As President Barack Obama remarked last month in announcing a revision of U.S. strategy,

The situation is increasingly perilous. It has been more than seven years since the Taliban was removed from power, yet war rages on, and insurgents control parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Attacks against our troops, our NATO allies, and the Afghan government have risen steadily.¹⁶

Attacks against journalists and media outlets have also risen significantly as the security situation has disintegrated.

According to organizations such as Reporters without Borders, media safety has been worsening since 2005. In 2008, two Afghan journalists were killed and 50 were threatened or attacked. The Taliban is known to kidnap members of the press, send threatening text messages and phone calls, and employ contacts within news organizations. Threats come from not only the Taliban and other criminal gangs but from public officials as well.¹⁷ Most of the attacks, kidnappings, and intimidations took place in Kabul, as more journalists have been forced to stay in the city rather than venture into the provinces due to poor security.

In addition to putting reporters and disk jockeys at personal risk, the security situation has diminished the press's ability to report accurately. As regions of the country become more dangerous, particularly in the south and the west, they become what Reporters without Borders calls "black holes" of reportage.¹⁸ Journalists who are unable to access the site of a story often receive several versions of the facts from the Taliban, the president, the defense minister, ISAF, NATO, and the U.S. Often, however, the Taliban is able to reach the radio stations and other

¹⁶ President Barack Obama, "A New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan," prepared remarks, March 27, 2009.

¹⁷ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Press Freedom Getting Worse in Afghanistan, RSF Says," January 15, 2009.

Available at:

http://www.rferl.org/Content/Press_Freedom_Getting_Worse_In_Afghanistan_RSFSays_/1370440.html. Accessed March 26, 2009.

¹⁸ Reporters Sans Frontières, "Afghanistan: what gains for press freedom from Hamid Karzai's seven years as president?" March 2009, p. 6-7. Available at: http://www.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/Report_Afgha_Eng.pdf. Accessed March 28, 2009.

Soulé

media outlets first and threaten punishment if their version is not reported as accepted fact.¹⁹ This year's scheduled presidential and parliamentary elections will only exacerbate the pressure on the press. Intimidation by the insurgents and by public officials could deteriorate the quality of reporting. While it is difficult to determine if this is already the case, the increased level of violence towards and threats against journalists as well as the poor security situation outside of the major cities, which makes reporting in rural and Pashtun areas much more difficult, create a more restrictive environment for journalists. Such an environment is less conducive to free and fair reporting than Afghanistan was in 2002.

The Afghan judicial system

The Afghan media also faces considerable challenges from within the justice system. The right to freedom of expression is protected in Article 34 of the Constitution of Afghanistan:

Freedom of expression shall be inviolable. Every Afghan shall have the right to express thoughts through speech, writing, illustrations as well as other means in accordance with provisions of this constitution. Every Afghan shall have the right, according to provisions of law, to print and publish on subjects without prior submission to state authorities. Directives related to the press, radio and television as well as publications and other mass media shall be regulated by law.²⁰

However, this right is often challenged against other language in the Constitution. Article 3 states, "No law shall contravene the tenets and provisions of the holy religion of Islam."²¹ Reporters, disk jockeys, and television celebrities have been accused of violating Islamic law. In addition, the media law passed by parliament in 2004 prohibits works and materials contrary to Islam and the Constitution, "defamatory" works, and "all works and materials that harm

¹⁹ Reporters Sans Frontieres, "Afghanistan: what gains for press freedom from Hamid Karzai's seven years as president?" March 2009, p. 6. Available at: http://www.rsf.org/IMG/pdf/Report_Afgha_Eng.pdf. Accessed March 28, 2009.

²⁰ The Constitution of Afghanistan, Article 34, January 3, 2004. Available at: http://www.supremecourt.gov.af/PDFfiles/constitution2004_english.pdf. Accessed March 29, 2009.

²¹ The Constitution of Afghanistan, Article 3, January 3, 2004. Available at: http://www.supremecourt.gov.af/PDFfiles/constitution2004_english.pdf. Accessed March 29, 2009.

Soulé

psychological security and the moral wellbeing of people.”²² President Karzai, catering to conservative elements within the country ahead of the election, was in support of this legislation but has not yet signed it into law.

The tension between free speech and protection of Islam in the Afghan justice system is illustrated by two well-known cases that were brought before the courts in 2005-2006 under the Constitution’s mandate to respect Islam. In the first case, a man who had converted to Christianity publicly declared so on television. Under *Shari’a* law, he faced a mandatory death penalty for apostasy. The case created a great deal of tension in the country and the man had to be exiled to Italy. This case clearly delineated the acceptable realm of freedom of speech and of freedom of religion and obfuscated future public dialogue about Christianity or other religions. The case was a clear signal to the press that discussing such topics could put journalists in personal danger.

In the second case, a male editor of a woman’s magazine, Ali Mohaqiq Nasba, was charged with blasphemy for writing articles about Islam that asserted that Islamic law discriminated against women in some respects, *Shari’a* law prohibits harsh corporal punishment, and conversion from Islam is morally forbidden but not a criminal act. A group of 200 religious clerics demanded the editor’s execution for these statements, while moderate Afghan factions, journalists, and Western groups argued for clemency. Ultimately Nasba was sentenced to a short term in jail, but his case demonstrated to other reporters and editors the risks of criticizing Islam or *Shari’a* law in an open manner.²³

²² Aunohita Mojumdar, “Afghanistan: Media Outlets under Siege,” Eurasia Insight, Dec. 29, 2008.

²³ Astri Suhrke and Kaja Borchgrevink. “Negotiating justice sector reform in Afghanistan.” *Crime, Law and Social Change*, October 2008, p. 223. Available at: <http://www.springerlink.com/content/n5147p5588k43362>. Accessed March 28, 2009.

In addition, government officials have themselves targeted and intimidated journalists. The international community dedicated much effort to developing the Afghan government's ability to handle the international press, but the government was not well trained to work with the domestic press, particularly from provinces outside of Kabul. Therefore, the relationship between the government and the local media was not strong enough to endure the weakening security situation. The government, threatened by poor security and accusations of corruption, has restricted press access significantly.²⁴

Women have also been targeted specifically for appearing on television and working as radio personalities despite having made significant gains in the media industry since 2001. Women are small minority in the Afghan media, but estimates suggest as many as 1,000 women work in the press.²⁵ These women have played an important role in integrating Afghan society and acclimating greater numbers of people to seeing women as a viable party of the workforce. In addition, there are a number of media outlets created specifically for women, including the radio station "The Voice of Afghan Women" and several women's magazines. Such productions include women in the public discourse in an open manner that was never seen under the Taliban. However, despite this progress, it is still difficult for women to operate as reporters in some areas, especially in the south of the country. Gender-based attacks have increased along with the growth in the overall level of violence against the press.

These cases and incidents of intimidation and violence against journalists have demonstrated to the press that certain topics and people cannot be discussed and that women

²⁴ United States Institute of Peace, "Media and Conflict: Afghanistan as a Relative Success Story," Special Report 198, January 2008, p. 4. Available at: <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/sr198.pdf>. Accessed March 26, 2009.

²⁵ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Afghanistan: Women Journalists Fight Restrictions, Threats," by Golnaz Esfandiari, May 2, 2009. Available at: <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1068082.html><http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1068082.html>. Accessed on March 29, 2009

cannot cover all of the issues or operate in all areas. The consequence of threats, detention, and prosecution is that the media avoids writing about sensitive issues, including Islam, national unity, gender equality, or the behavior of specific public officials and warlords.²⁶ The press, in particular the print press, has increased its self-censorship on such hot-button topics. Mohammad Hassan Wolesmal, editor of the *Afghan Milli Jarida* (Afghan National Magazine) says, “Media freedom ends the minute you touch a warlord or government official.”²⁷ This sentiment severely encumbers the autonomy of the Afghan press.

Therefore, while the development of the Afghan media has opened up the political process to citizens, the media’s inability to report on government misconduct and corruption, the Taliban, or local warlords hampers the ability of the press to vet stories and disseminate the truth. The government’s lack of transparency and the Taliban’s message control threatens to make the press a propaganda tool for these actors rather than the source of fair and accurate reporting for Afghans. Citizens should have accurate and full coverage of political activities, particularly corruption and misconduct, in preparation for the upcoming elections. A low-functioning media does not just damage itself in the long-run but can also contribute to the local and central government’s weakness. Omitting critical information in self-censorship only perpetuates a cycle of malfeasance governance and does nothing to serve the population. It is also dangerous for the public to expect to receive full and accurate coverage from its local press only to be provided extremist and government propaganda. The creation of national unity depends upon Afghan citizens’ awareness of what is happening in Kabul as well as events in other areas of the country, including Taliban movements and incidents in the ongoing U.S.-led war.

²⁶ Freedom House, *Freedom of the Press – Afghanistan (2006)*, April 27, 2006, p. 1. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4734519d23.html>. Accessed March 27, 2009.

²⁷ Sayed Yaqub Ibrahim, “The Limits of Press Freedom,” *Afghan Recovery Report*, no. 214, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, May 4, 2006. Available at: http://www.iwpr.net/?p=arr&s=f&o=261527&apc_state=heniarr200605. Accessed March 28, 2009.

Financial model

Finally, the business model of the Afghan press is unsustainable. Local media outlets lack the funding, training, and business acumen necessary to survive without continued international support. However, the international donor community has reduced its funding in recent years and the current global financial crisis further reduces the possibility that the donor community will continue to be able to fully fund the Afghan press.

The system was developed with heavy contributions from the international community with a goal of making media outlets self-sustaining through growth in advertising revenue. Most stations to this point, however, are not self-sustaining and rely on contributions from Internews and other agencies to meet costs. While building up the media outlets, the international donor community assumed that the security situation would continue to improve and that the economy would begin to rebound in 2006 with a growth in the Afghan private sector. The private sector would then provide enough advertising revenues to sustain the press.²⁸ Afghans are not attractive to advertisers given their low per capita income, so the private sector has only been able to support the most popular stations in Kabul.²⁹ Salaam Watandar, the station in Kabul set up by Internews, does make substantial advertising revenue and parses that out to stations in need of support. As USAID notes, it is also difficult to assess the true financial health of stations in an all-cash market when station managers have incentive to either overstate revenues or plead poverty to gain more assistance.³⁰

Business acumen is also lacking in the Afghan press. International donors have provided some training, but very few stations have been required to cover costs with revenue or develop

²⁸ Aunohita Mojumdar, "Afghanistan: Media Outlets Under Siege," Eurasia Insight, Dec. 29, 2008.

²⁹ USAID, "USAID's Assistance to the Media Sector in Afghanistan," PPC Evaluation Paper No. 3, October 2005, p. xi. Available at: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADC219.pdf. Accessed March 26, 2009.

³⁰ USAID, "USAID's Assistance to the Media Sector in Afghanistan," PPC Evaluation Paper No. 3, October 2005, p. 13. Available at: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADC219.pdf. Accessed March 26, 2009.

long-term business plans. In a conference with Afghan media managers, Internews found that most felt they needed more training in business planning and some way to develop business strategies.³¹ The lack of higher education in the country during Taliban rule, and the difficulty in creating business programs has made it extremely difficult to find trained business professionals to manage stations. Therefore, Internews and other agencies have found it difficult to hand over station management and funding to local interests. Given these financial challenges, Internews would consider it a success if 60% of the stations survived in the long term.³² For the media to be sustainable, however, more media outlets need to be enduring elements of Afghan daily life. The lack of a financial model threatens to undermine the great effort international actors have expended to develop the industry.

Policy proposals

Any one of these challenges would present a significant threat to the sustainability of an independent press in Afghanistan. However, the country, mired down in a war, financially insolvent, and judicially weak, is facing these challenges simultaneously. The overarching priority for both the domestic and international actors should be to maintain freedom of expression and protection of the press throughout the war effort. The substantial progress made in the media sector in the beginning of the reconstruction should not be sacrificed to other goals, even if the security situation remains as it is or worsens.

The United States Institute of Peace identifies four key components for the creation of a self-sustaining press in a post-conflict environment. These components are content creation,

³¹ Internews, "Afghanistan Media Review and Planning Workshop," American University of Afghanistan, June 14-15, 2006, p. 13. Available at: <http://www.internews.org/pubs/afghanistan/InternewsMediaWorskhopReport200612.pdf>. Accessed March 27, 2009.

³² USAID, "USAID's Assistance to the Media Sector in Afghanistan," PPC Evaluation Paper No. 3, October 2005, p. 17. Available at: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADC219.pdf. Accessed March 26, 2009.

distribution, viewership, and outside revenues. The Afghan press has made significant strides in most of these areas, but policies are needed both domestically and from international donors to sustain that progress and ensure the durability of the press establishment.

The policy proposals below seek to build upon the progress made in Afghanistan and to address the current challenges threatening to erase that progress. However, none of these policies will have much traction without the trust of the Afghan people in the press as an independent and fair mechanism for providing information. Since 2001, Afghans have developed a degree of trust in the local media if not in other domestic institutions. Afghan sources are viewed almost as reliably as the BBC, a trust that has grown out of non-existence since 2001.³³ This trust, however, is fragile, and will erode quickly if the press is seen as a tool of the Afghan government, the insurgents under the Taliban, or international forces.

Protection for journalists

The U.S. and its allies in NATO are taking substantial steps to address the security of Afghanistan and reduce or eliminate the influence of the Taliban, al Qaeda, and other extremist elements. The increased war effort is likely to improve security eventually, but journalists require more protection in the interim. Personal security of the press is of particular concern in an election year, as parliamentarians and the President are up for reelection for the first time. The Afghan press should be expected to provide clear and accurate coverage of the elections without fear of retribution. In the long run, protection for journalists, especially when they are reporting on controversial issues, will encourage good governance.

³³ The BBC has broadcast into Afghanistan since the 1970s and is cited by most sources as the most widespread and trusted source of news in the country.

Policy recommendations:

- The Afghan Media Commission’s mandate, which now includes monitoring the content of the press and hate speech, should expand to cover threats made against the press. Members of the press should feel comfortable reporting threats, even when made by public officials.
- The AMC should prosecute officials who intimidate. Just as the Nasab case had an impact on journalists’ willingness to write freely, so would the open prosecution of members of the government who have threatened journalists.

Media for public consumption

It is essential for the Afghan people to feel connected to the press and be able to set the media agenda. The content of the Afghan press should not be determined exclusively by international donors. To be sure, donors have a stake in developing meaningful content, but to a large extent this content must be consumer-driven. In the original influx of international funding, donors focused on creating news media outlets. However, the population demanded a mix of news and entertainment. While USAID has expressed regret over allowing its funded stations to broadcast a majority of entertainment programming, public wishes must be taken into consideration in order for the public to feel as if the media is a local institution rather than an internationally-determined one.³⁴

The press, like all Afghan institutions, needs to develop and sustain popular legitimacy. Only if Afghan consumers feel that the press is there to meet their needs will they eventually take ownership of the press as it becomes self-sustaining over time. Allowing popular demands

³⁴ USAID, “USAID’s Assistance to the Media Sector in Afghanistan,” PPC Evaluation Paper No. 3, October 2005, p. 18. Available at: http://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PNADC219.pdf. Accessed March 26, 2009.

Soulé

to shape content creates a positive cycle of consumption and allows eventual domestic control over the national press agenda and its future development. USAID, the primary U.S. organization for funding the media, and its British counterpart, should employ public opinion data to help their Afghan counterparts in the media determine content. This policy would provide incentives to local managers to take greater control of their media operations and, in the long-run, lead to a more sustainable and legitimate sector.

Policy recommendations:

- USAID should perform or contract out periodic public opinion surveys of households to determine media use, media preferences, and desired programming.
- These data should be used to develop content and then reevaluated to ensure the content is meeting consumer needs.
- The Afghan government and press currently lack the mechanisms to carry out public opinion polls. USAID or their associated agency should provide training on polling and on creating content to meet consumer needs.

Reform government-media relations

Given the legacy of the Taliban and that regime's use of the press for its own purposes, it is imperative for the civilian government of Afghanistan to develop a functional relationship with the press and to respect professional boundaries. To date, however, the relationship between the government and the press is dysfunctional and is fueled by mistrust. Over the last several years, the government has become increasingly opaque and less willing to work with the press toward creating a system of mutual benefit for releasing important government information.

International donors and Afghan media management should ensure that no one station or set of stations is viewed as favored by the government. Development of the government's ability to communicate its information should be divorced from efforts to create or enhance new stations in order to maintain established boundaries.

The Afghan government does not currently see wisdom in greater transparency and seeks to keep itself at a far distance from the press, particularly during the election cycle. However, it is of particular importance at this time to reestablish a healthy relationship and a functioning mechanism for communicating government policies to the populace, not merely propaganda or overly controlled messages. This change is unlikely to occur organically among domestic players. Therefore, the U.S. and its allies must employ diplomatic channels to convince President Karzai and members of parliament of the long-term benefits of transparency. If the relationship is functional, the Afghan government would be able to convey its message, and the citizenry would trust that the press is reporting accurately.

Policy recommendations:

- At all times, efforts to develop local media outlets should be kept separate from efforts to develop the government's own communications apparatus.³⁵
- The U.S. and the United Kingdom, who have been the main supporters of the Afghan media, should exert diplomatic pressure on the Afghan government to increase transparency and access to local media.
- President Karzai or his successor should develop strategic communications to provide information directly to the domestic and international press.

³⁵ Yll Bajraktari and Emily Hsu, "Developing Media in Stabilization and Reconstruction Operations," United States Institute of Peace, Stabilization and Reconstruction Series, October 2007, p. 1. Available at: <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/srs/srs7.pdf>. Accessed March 30, 2009.

Soulé

- The government should work with one of the national distribution networks, Tanin or Salaam Watandar, to provide official communications akin to a weekly radio address or press conference.

Reform military-media relations

The increased U.S. military effort to eliminate al Qaeda and the Taliban is likely to produce a significant number of civilian casualties. The U.S. military needs to maintain as much transparency as possible and include the local press in its efforts to do so. Public opinion suggests that, while Afghans are upset about civilian casualties, very few support the Taliban and do not want the oppressive regime to regain power. Therefore, the U.S. should make public its rationale for conducting its activities and how those activities contribute to weakening the Taliban.

Opening up some aspects of U.S. and NATO military operations to the press will speak to the transparency the U.S. requires from the Afghan government. The U.S. should be viewed as an example for the Afghan government, not as an adversary to it and certainly not as an adversary to the population. International forces do carry out a large number of reconstruction missions, including building schools and medical facilities in the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). These activities are well-publicized. The U.S. and its allies should make a greater effort to acknowledge mistakes and encourage transparency in reporting. Openness is only fair to the population of a country stifled by war and may lend positive support to the war effort.

Policy recommendations:

- U.S. commanders need to establish a clear protocol of communications with Afghan media so that, when civilian casualties occur, the information is disseminated more quickly and more accurately than the information provided by the Taliban.
- Due to security concerns, the U.S. military has been reluctant to embed reporters with units in Afghanistan. This was a successful strategy for engaging the U.S. press in Iraq and should be extended to Afghanistan as much as possible to include both international and domestic reporters.

Judicial system reform

The Afghan justice system presents many opportunities for policy response. The press will not feel comfortable reporting on controversial issues or even basic government activity until the justice system has established a clear precedent protecting freedom of speech. That, in turn, is impossible with the language of the current legislation. The laws governing the Afghan media are a source of confusion for both the press and the judiciary. The courts have been as of yet unable to set a precedent on the contradiction between language protecting free speech and the language protecting Islam. Several laws governing the media have been passed into legislation but the press has no guidance on which laws and provisions take precedence over others.

The Afghan press has seen many examples of persecution, intimidation, and violence. However, the press has not yet seen a court uphold its freedom to report. It does not have an ally in the judicial system. Such a long time period without legal guidance, and without feeling protected by the system, hinders the media's willingness to take investigative risks, to discuss

Soulé

issues important to the population, and to report on malfeasance. This reluctance, if systemic, will damage the media's ability to survive after the end of the current international intervention.

Policy recommendations:

- Reconcile the language of the Constitution on freedom of the press with language protecting Islam through clear legislation. The legislation should include guidelines on acceptable reporting
- Create a governing body to establish media standards, license new outlets, and regulate broadcast entities.
- Create an established channel for complaints about the press and adhere to strict guidelines about what does and does not constitute a violation.
- Develop professional organizations for journalists, media professionals, and lawyers in order to foster a body of knowledge and sustainable professional networks of experts.

Financial reform

The Afghan media has a strong foundation upon which to build sustainability. Studies of post-conflict press development have shown that a previously closed society will consume a lot of news at the beginning, but long-term sustainability depends on entertainment content to bring in advertising revenue. The current number of media outlets in Afghanistan will in all likelihood not endure through the end of the conflict. However, the international community can mitigate the number of failures through targeted policies.

Policy recommendations:

- For the immediate future, the international community needs to sustain its financial support of the Afghan press. Funding cannot be reduced at this time, as media outlets would be forced to close.
- Conduct in-depth economic analyses of each media outlet to determine which stations could be supported with advertising revenue. Run analyses against various long-range economic forecasts. Determine which outlets are completely unviable without international support.
- Based on these analyses, develop a long-term financial plan with each viable entity.
- Establish training programs for journalists, radio broadcasters, and business managers at local schools.
- Provide continuing education opportunities for these trained professionals and encourage networking among them.
- Identify skilled ex-patriots who could be able to manage some of these businesses. The most successful radio station, Radio Arman, was a joint venture between international funding and a group of Afghan-Australian brothers.³⁶
- Continue efforts to educate the broader public about the appropriate role of the press in Afghan society.

Future prospects for the Afghan press

A coherent strategy to ensure freedom of the press in Afghanistan requires that the many actors act in accord. While the dire security situation makes cooperation on free speech

³⁶ Yll Bajraktari and Emily Hsu, "Developing Media in Stabilization and Reconstruction Operations," United States Institute of Peace, Stabilization and Reconstruction Series, October 2007, p. 11. Available at: <http://www.usip.org/pubs/specialreports/srs/srs7.pdf>. Accessed March 30, 2009.

Soulé

extremely difficult, most actors would benefit from a free, fair, and accurate press, save the Taliban, warlords, and corrupt government officials. Implementation of any policy recommendations will be piece-meal by nature and may be immediately challenged by extremist elements within the country. However, the infrastructure and knowledge capital developed after 2001 is strong enough to withstand the current challenges if international funding is continued in the near-term.

Afghan citizens have shown a rapacious desire for news and entertainment content, and the vast majority of Afghans have integrated some form of media into their lives. The 2005 elections demonstrated the benefit of an open press when exercising the rights of citizenship. This year's elections will occur in a more challenging environment, but the government has the opportunity to ensure transparency and encourage a thorough vetting of candidates and platforms in the public sphere.

One distinct element of uncertainty is the recent overhaul of U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, which presents challenges and opportunities for the Afghan media sector. On the one hand, the U.S. is in a position to exercise its influence on the Afghan government and judicial system for better protection of speech and of the press. On the other hand, the influence of the U.S. on so many aspects of the Afghan state may diminish citizen trust in public institutions further, particularly if the press is viewed as a mechanism for propaganda for the U.S.

Even if the security situation is resolved and Afghans retain their trust in the press, much of the press's ability to survive, of course, depends on the local economy's ability to eventually develop a private sector capable of supplying advertising revenue. As long as the country remains mired in war and the economy remains tied to the opium trade, media outlets will not be

Soulé

able to sustain business on ad revenues alone. Consequently, the international community's commitment to free speech may be the driving force behind the Afghan press for the foreseeable future.

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