

# Policy Briefing

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## The media of Afghanistan: The challenges of transition

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# Executive summary

The media of Afghanistan, like all other sections of Afghanistan society, is undergoing transition. This briefing examines what transition might mean for a sector that has the potential to shape Afghan opinion and hold government

to account but now faces considerable uncertainty.

“The country has, over a decade and from nowhere, developed a commercially profitable, increasingly professional, vibrant and popular media.”

The Afghan media is widely seen as a success story. The country has, over a decade and from nowhere, developed a commercially profitable,

increasingly professional, vibrant and popular media which is playing a critical role in the cultural and political life of the nation. Although much of it is home-grown, the independence, energy and character of this media have been

substantially enabled by the support of the international community.

But there is a flip side to such success. Afghanistan is a fragile, fractured state and has one of the most fragile and fractured media, where almost anyone with sufficient funds and the opportunity to move quickly has been able to establish a media presence. This environment has enabled the flourishing of television, radio and other media established and owned by powerful political and religious leaders, or by those with allegiance to them. Some fear a future of increased ethnic, sectarian and factional strife being played out through the airwaves.

Though there are some very successful commercial television channels, there is no independent and widely trusted national media capable of transcending or creating communication across the fracture points in Afghan society. Most media is either localised or seen as serving political, religious or other agendas. The future of the national broadcaster, RTA, still the only broadcaster with a truly national presence, is uncertain.

While journalism as a whole has expanded greatly, investigative journalism remains limited. The sustainability of the newly established commercial media is widely questioned. With the total annual advertising market in the country estimated by some at little more than







FABRIZIO FOSCHINI

#### Front cover image

After the defeat of the Taliban in 2001, old radios and television sets were recovered from their hiding places and repair shops opened in the bazaars to help people reconnect with the world. The Afghan media has come a long way since then but progress remains fragile.

**Left** Kabul's historic Asmayee mountain is now known as 'TV mountain' – bearing witness to the recent proliferation of TV and radio stations.

\$20 million, there are real concerns that if donor support declines much of the media will wither or fall prey to factional, religious or extreme forces.

There is no shortage of such forces. A number of media outlets already play upon ethnic and sectarian tensions. The Taliban, notorious when in power for shutting down media and banning video tape, have embraced the web and run one of the most effective media strategies in the country. In 2012, the mood music is one of compromise with the Taliban. Concern in the country is growing that new found media freedoms may be the price of that compromise.

The role of donors in media support in Afghanistan is probably greater than in any other country at any other time. Such support is largely responsible for the development of such a substantial media sector, but it faces criticism that it is poorly

coordinated, short term and not informed by aid effectiveness principles; that it focuses too heavily on advancing the agendas of the donors; and that in some sectors it is distorting the media market in ways that create dependency and inhibit the development of genuinely sustainable Afghan media ventures.

Within Afghanistan and among the country's well-wishers, there remains a commitment to the development of a free and independent media capable of holding authority to account, of enabling national and civil dialogue and of informing the citizenry of the country about the issues that affect them. What has been less evident so far is a clear and coherent strategy for bringing this about, especially among the donors who support the media sector.

“Some fear a future of increased ethnic, sectarian and factional strife being played out through the airwaves.”

## Fragile media in a fragile state

Afghanistan is one of the world's most fragile states. It has suffered war and civil war on and off for more than three decades and is still experiencing serious conflict. This policy briefing reviews the current media environment in Afghanistan and its prospects as international forces withdraw and the country moves towards greater control of its own destiny.

“In the media field, the prospect of change has increased a sense of vulnerability.”

For many years, Afghanistan had no significant indigenous media. War, occupation and the puritanical excesses of the Taliban regime in the 1990s destroyed its media infrastructure.

Its journalists and artists became refugees and its war-weary population came to depend on international broadcasters for news of what was happening in their own country. That has now changed dramatically.

Since 2001, when the international community intervened to dislodge the Taliban regime, huge resources have been allocated to the long and contested process of rebuilding Afghanistan as a working democracy. That process has not prevented a renewed and costly insurgency in the south and east of the country, but a new constitution has been agreed, a directly elected presidential system of government established, presidential and parliamentary

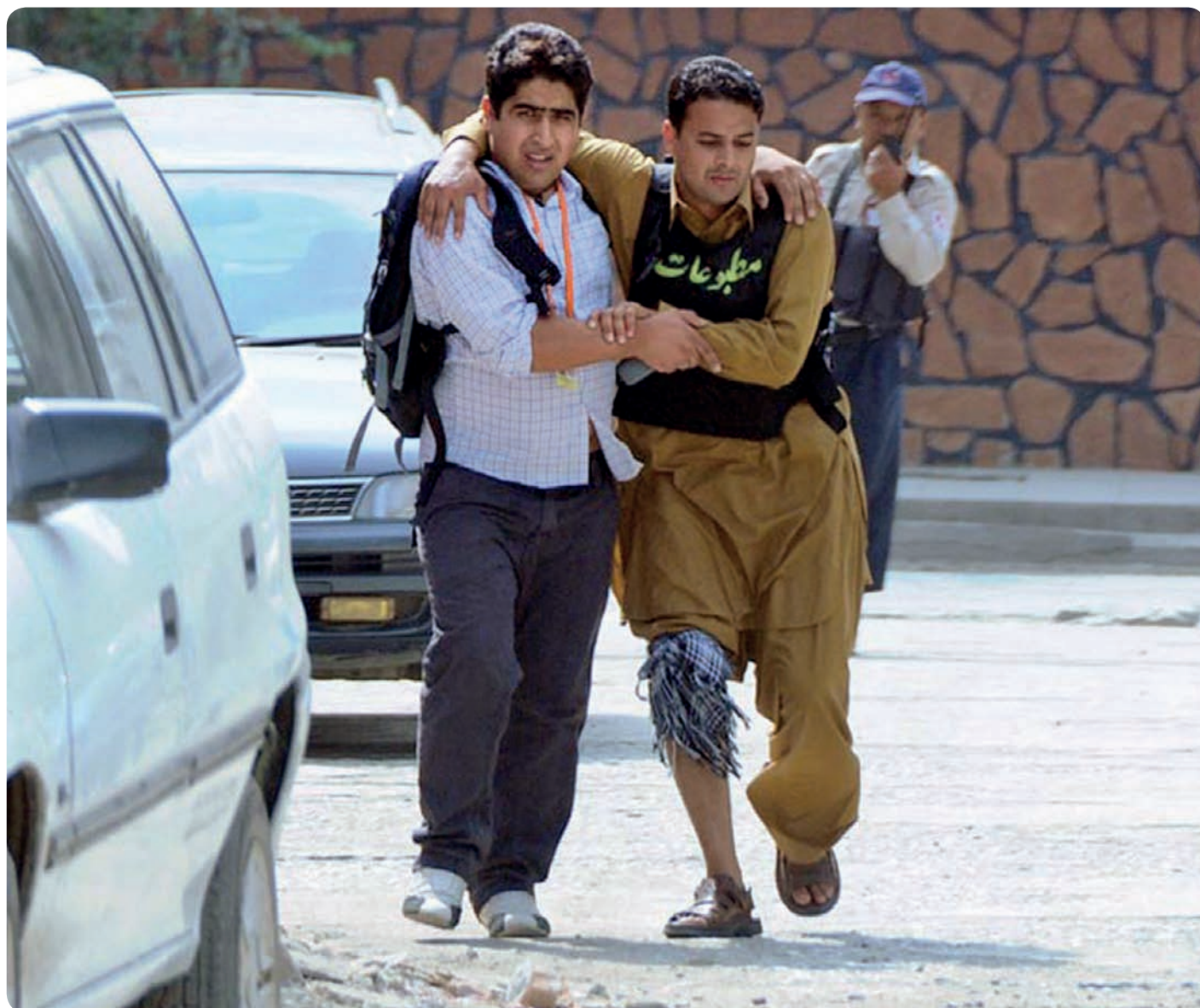
elections held, and the rights of Afghan citizens to freedom of association and expression guaranteed.

There has also been a remarkable opening up of the media, with Afghanistan joining the South Asian media mainstream. Afghans now access a multi-channel television world, as well as a growing network of FM radio stations. Mobile phone ownership is widespread and journalism has become a popular profession. The transformation of Afghanistan's media is seen as one of the success stories of the last ten years and a key element in the creation of a more plural and accountable society.

None of these changes has happened without stresses and strains in a country with strong local traditions, a resilient tribal culture, and a predominantly rural and illiterate population. The creation of a centralised presidential system of government has created new tensions in a country made up of a number of diverse regions and languages. The initial western commitment to state building and the creation of a liberal democracy now seems over optimistic in the face of very different, often entrenched, Afghan realities.

Today, Afghanistan is in 'transition' mode. The US and the UK have set end dates for their active military

**Below** Afghan journalists put their lives on the line to report for domestic and international media. The country's 'fourth estate' is growing in influence but still faces many challenges.





engagement; there is talk of political reconciliation with the Taliban and a mood of growing uncertainty. The international presence has brought important changes in the field of development, education, health, human rights (particularly women's rights) and in the growth of civil society. But, as the west begins its military disengagement, there are fears that fragile progress in many of these fields may be vulnerable to a new political settlement or to worsening civil war.

In the media field, the prospect of change has increased a sense of vulnerability. Many different donors and Afghan stakeholders have been involved in the creation of the new landscape – pursuing different political, commercial, religious and other agendas. In that sense it has been as complex and contested a process as the state-building project or the quest for political reconciliation. As the western military umbrella begins to be withdrawn, there is real concern that important media initiatives may falter and media freedoms will become more restricted.

This is an important moment, therefore, to take stock of what has been achieved over the past ten years. How credible is the newly established Afghan media? Is it serving the Afghan public interest or has it been co-opted? How dependent is it on donor funding? What is the role of the Afghan state as broadcaster and as regulator? As the international community implements timetables for

transition, this report assesses the media's strengths and weaknesses and suggests some key areas for future donor engagement.<sup>1</sup> It is based on interviews with dozens of Afghan media, civil society, government and other figures, as well as with donors. It is also informed by a small number of focus group discussions, held in Herat and Kabul districts.

### The policy briefing falls into six parts:

Part 1 provides a brief overview of how Afghanistan's media landscape has been transformed over the past decade.

Part 2 examines the effects of this transformation on Afghanistan's culture and politics as media reflect the struggle between tradition and modernity.

Part 3 looks at the status and pressures facing journalism in the country.

Part 4 examines the role of donors in support to the Afghan media and the implications of a reduction in such support.

Part 5 examines the shortage of independent national media and the challenges faced by Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA).

Part 6 looks to the future and provides some conclusions drawn from the analysis.

## State-building in Afghanistan

More than 250 years after Ahmad Shah Durrani assumed the throne and defined the territory that became Afghanistan, the goal of building a modern, stable, functioning state remains a distant dream. While the remit of the state is largely accepted by urban Afghans, the rural population maintain centuries-old traditions and systems of governance. The power of local tribes and ethnic groups has been fostered over generations, particularly during the 19th century where their loyalty was sought by – and often oscillated between – Afghan rulers and the big neighbouring powers of Russia and British-run India.

In an already conservative society, this encouraged deep suspicion of outsiders. Marginal tribes rejected government conscription and taxation, which in turn limited the ability of the state to generate resources on any significant scale. Suspicion also hampered efforts to mould the country's diverse ethnic groups into one nation with common interests. Based on the lessons of recent history, today's marginalised Afghan communities see the use by their rulers of nationalism – usually with strong religious fervour – as a way to institutionalise their dominance.

Although it remains an inherently conservative country, Afghanistan has not historically been a closed or an intolerant society. The region has been home to Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, Hindus and Muslims and it was this cosmopolitan past that created the richness of different cultures and civilisations that is Afghan history. Sadly, the ignorance of this rich history remains widespread.

In the 19th century, when Afghanistan was the focus of intense Anglo-Russian rivalry, the Afghan leadership's attitude "rested on the premise that Afghanistan's neighbours were essentially hostile and bent on territorial annexation".<sup>2</sup> This resulted in a "policy of militant independence, strict isolation, and middle-course balancing of powers which attempted to check pressure from one of its neighbours by obtaining support from the other".<sup>3</sup> This policy was justified by Afghan rulers as the way to prevent invasion by neighbouring countries.

Abdur Rahman Khan, Amir of Afghanistan in the last years of the 19th century, used the analogy of a 'swan' caught in a lake

surrounded by hostile predators. He wrote at the time: "On one bank of the lake there lay, watching and waiting, an old tigress – the British Government in India. On the other (bank) was assembled a pack of greedy wolves – Russia. When the swan approached too near to one bank, the tigress clawed out some of his feathers, and when on the opposite bank, wolves tried to tear him to pieces. He resolved therefore to keep secure from either foe in the middle of the lake".<sup>4</sup>

Throughout its modern history, the state has used religion to legitimise itself, to mobilise the population when needed and to maintain stability. This policy has ensured that conservative religious groups represent a strong power base, which has proved both an asset and a threat. The paradoxical nature of this power was demonstrated in the overthrow of the reformist King Amanullah Khan, though it played a more unifying role in resistance to the British and, more recently, to the Soviet invasion of the 1980s. In the 19th century, the reliance of state institutions on support from religious communities sometimes held the country hostage, as their will was imposed on the wider population. More recently, the *Jihad* against the Soviets and the subsequent civil war strengthened the forces of Islamic conservatism, while destroying the state and its infrastructure.

In the absence of a strong central state, Afghanistan's regions have resorted largely to local governance, drawing on what are often tribal traditions to manage their lives. While the state has installed provincial and district level governments, these have often been dominated by local power brokers who use this situation to further personal or tribal agendas, while accumulating wealth, rather than representing the central government.

Contemporary efforts to rebuild the state and create a modern media sector have to contend with the same historical trends – the tension between modernity and tradition, centre and periphery, state and religion. While both internationals and Afghans tend to congratulate themselves on the achievements of the sector, it is easy to forget that the media is a powerful tool, which is prone to the same pressures as those faced by the state.

## PART I

# A media and communications revolution

Before the Soviet period, Afghanistan, like most of its neighbours, had a monopoly state broadcaster, Radio and Television Afghanistan (RTA), and no commercial sector at all. Though RTA had a long history, dating back to 1925, it was generally perceived as the voice of the government. In times of crisis, Afghans turned to the BBC and Voice of America for news on events in their own country. Such dependence on foreign radio stations, which attracted huge audiences during the war years of the 1980s and 90s, made Afghans into very discerning listeners.

Such discernment has been necessary in the more crowded and complex media market that has emerged. After 2001, the Interim Government made no attempt to return to the old monopoly. It embarked instead on a policy of opening

“The Afghan media is being hailed as one of the remarkable successes of the new Afghan state.”

up the media and – remarkably – granted licences for TV, for radio and the press more or less on demand. This was a reflection, in part, of the new realities in South Asia, as the satellite revolution led to an explosion in access across the region and, in part, of the views of the new Government and its principal backers. President Karzai favoured the expansion of the media as a pillar of the new democracy and initially even supported plans for RTA to be given its independence.<sup>5</sup> The Americans favoured the emergence of a strong commercial media sector. The Europeans supported a more diverse media as a way to strengthen the influence of civil society.

Ten years later, the Afghan media is being hailed as one of the remarkable successes of the new Afghan state. In Kabul alone, there are now over 30 terrestrial television stations and Kabul's Asmayee mountain is festooned with television masts. In all, 50 licences have been given to a variety of operators in the capital on a 'first come, first served' basis and the spectrum has become exhausted. In the country as a whole, television and radio expanded at about 20% a year from 2006 onwards and by September 2010 there were over 75 terrestrial TV stations, and 175 FM stations (of which 34 belong to the Government).<sup>6</sup> Larger provincial capitals like Herat or Jalalabad now boast four or five local TV stations and ten or more local radio stations, while smaller provincial centres are less well served.

Of the two media, television has been expanding more rapidly. A comprehensive survey by Altai Consulting for USAID in 2010 found a decline in radio ownership and listenership in recent years: 68% of Afghans said they listened to radio – down from 83% in 2005. TV viewing, however, had risen to 48% and was still going up.<sup>7</sup> TV is now the dominant medium in the cities and is beginning to make an impact even in remote villages. Radio, however, retains its traditional relevance, especially in rural areas. A 2011 survey by the Asia Foundation found that radio is still the preferred medium for 45% of the population, compared to 28% for TV. But in the urban areas, 68% said that they relied on TV as their main source of information.<sup>8</sup>

Mobile phones have also proliferated. Initially, they operated only in Kabul and were extremely expensive. But the infrastructure has been extended to all major cities and the cost of calls has fallen. There are now four major companies competing with each other. The first two to be established were the Afghan Wireless Communication Company (AWCC) and Roshan in 2002. These were joined in 2006 by MTN, an international

company operating in Africa and the Middle East, and Etisalat, which is headquartered in the UAE. The take up of mobile phones has been phenomenal and has had a remarkably empowering effect, particularly on young people. According to the Asia Foundation Survey of 2011, 66% of the population now have access to a functioning mobile phone at home (up from 44% in 2007). The figure for urban areas is said to be as high as 88% and for rural areas a remarkable 60%.<sup>9</sup> All statistics in Afghanistan need to be treated with caution, not least because growing instability makes it difficult to survey all parts of the country, but the mobile phone has become increasingly ubiquitous and has transformed people's lives.

Internet usage, however, remains low at approximately 4%, due to limited literacy and few fixed line connections.<sup>10</sup> There are internet cafes in urban areas, which are frequented mostly by young men. Mobile phones with internet connections remain the exception.

The print media is recovering far more slowly from years of suppression of freedom of speech. "Those bookless years have affected us" said one commentator, "though it is improving a little". Hundreds of new journals have started up, but most have low circulation. The fortnightly free newspaper *Sada-e-Azadi*, published by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has the widest national circulation at an estimated 500,000 copies. The only Afghan daily newspapers with any sort of national footprint have print runs of less than 15,000 copies and do not break even. Because of high levels of illiteracy, only 13% of the population read a newspaper and this figure is falling with the rise of television.<sup>11</sup> In a nationwide survey in 2011, only 1% of the population identified newspapers as their main source of information.<sup>12</sup>

## Making sense of a diverse media landscape

As in every country, the media landscape of Afghanistan is a product of economics, politics and technology. The economy is weak, which raises questions about the media's economic sustainability. The country's politics are highly fractured, raising questions of whether and to what extent different political interests are controlling or attempting to control different elements of this diverse landscape. And technology is changing rapidly, raising questions about the implications of increased access to information across the country.

Five main categories of media can be found in Afghanistan.

- Mainstream commercial media, predominantly television
- Local FM radio, mostly externally funded
- Ethnic, religious and political media
- Taliban media
- Government-controlled media, principally Radio Television Afghanistan.

## Commercial television and radio: a new and flourishing industry

The most dramatic change in Afghanistan's media landscape has been the remarkable success of commercial mainstream television and, to a lesser extent, radio. A flourishing new industry has been created that bears all the hallmarks of a self-confident, increasingly professional and commercially sustainable private media sector. The main developments in this sector are shown in the box opposite.

## Commercial television and radio: main actors and owners

The most popular of the new national TV stations is Tolo TV, which has acquired remarkable dominance in urban areas and a 45% share of the national audience according to the Altai survey of 2010.<sup>13</sup> Tolo broadcasts in Dari and its sister station, Lemar, which broadcasts in Pashto, has a 6% audience share. These stations are run by the Moby Group, the most successful media company in Afghanistan. It grew from 7 to 700 employees in seven years and regularly adds new ventures to its portfolio. In

2010 it started a 24-hour news channel for Afghanistan. It also has a satellite channel aimed at Iranian audiences, which is a joint venture with Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation.

Moby's chairman, Saad Mohseni, is an Australian-Afghan businessman who lives in Dubai. He has managed the growth of the family business with flair and acumen and has been the subject of a flattering profile in the *New Yorker*, which described him as "Afghanistan's first media mogul."<sup>14</sup> Moby received initial seed money and support from the US Government for its radio and its TV initiatives. While it still earns money from American commissions, it now has some financial independence with positive revenue streams from its various businesses. Mohseni has developed a cadre of competent young media professionals who are committed to his vision and run the different channels with some autonomy.

Moby's flagship channel, Tolo TV, is seen as part of western efforts to offer Afghans a more international and cosmopolitan vision of the country's future. "It has promoted a sense of normalcy, a connection with western culture" according to one observer. But, in a very conservative society, it has drawn flak for challenging and undermining Afghan culture. Moby's vulnerability is more political than financial: it backed Abdullah Abdullah, the former foreign minister, in the 2009 Presidential election and derives much of its popularity from what is seen as its anti-government stance. The late Richard Holbrooke, America's former envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan, is quoted as saying that Mohseni is "not just another free-media guy, a very attractive, charismatic entrepreneur. He is deeply, deeply involved in a political drama with President Karzai".<sup>15</sup>

Tolo would argue that it is simply doing its job in holding the Government to account. Its critics claim that it provokes conservative elements to win western support. It undoubtedly draws strength in its bold journalism from the protective umbrella of the international presence.

Ariana, the country's second most popular TV station, has the most extensive footprint among the private channels. Launched in 2005 by Ehsan Bayat, an Afghan American who owns AWCC, the leading mobile phone company, it broadcasts in Dari, Pashto, Uzbek and English and has better reach than Tolo in rural areas. A 2010 survey gave Ariana 19% of the national audience.<sup>16</sup> It is culturally more conservative and politically more cautious than Tolo and is watched more for entertainment than for news and public interest programmes. It carries Indian and other imported soap operas dubbed into Dari and Pashto and has gained popularity for its version of 'Who wants to be a millionaire?' and for game shows, including a cookery competition.

Shamshad TV was launched in early 2006 to reach the Pashto-speaking populations of southern and eastern Afghanistan and the border regions of Pakistan. Its founder and owner, Haji Fazel Karim Fazel, who also runs a successful de-mining organisation,



**Above** This bank of microphones at a Kabul press conference tells its own story of media expansion

said "the Pashtuns are suffering from the cancer of illiteracy and fundamentalism" and need to be given hope for the future. "If you leave them alone," he said "they will become alienated and join the Taliban".<sup>17</sup> He has developed an innovative model for Pashto broadcasting, with recording studios in Pakistan as well as Afghanistan, and a mix of programmes featuring artists from both sides of the border. Like the other two channels, Shamshad has attracted support from the US Government because of

the strategic fit with its own priorities but its mixture of cross-border dialects has restricted its appeal, particularly in southern Afghanistan, where Lemar is more popular. Shamshad is seen as lagging behind the market leaders in programme quality and registered only a 2% audience share in the same Altai survey, with its largest audiences in the east of the country.<sup>18</sup>

ITV or Yak TV has made remarkable headway since its launch in February 2010. Started by Fahim Hashimy, an entrepreneur with oil interests and good links to the Government, Yak TV has over 300 staff. It operates on a similar scale to Ariana but offers a mix of entertainment, news and public interest programmes. Like Tolo, the channel supports the international presence but aims to be both socially progressive and rooted in Afghan culture. Hashimy said he is trying "to counter the influence of warlords and fundamentalists" and to be "pro-West without pushing the West in Afghanistan".<sup>19</sup> The channel resonates with Afghan audiences through its efforts to reflect opinion in the regions, as well as Kabul. It carries live debates with audience participation and hard-hitting current affairs programmes. Many commentators see its rapid achievement of a 5% audience share as a sign of the sector's increasing maturity.<sup>20</sup>

Moby's Arman Radio is the market leader among the new commercial radio stations, with an 8% audience share nationwide and much higher audiences in Kabul and other cities.<sup>21</sup> Launched with US financial support in 2002, this was the Moby Group's first media initiative and its choice of western music provoked much criticism in the early days. It has since adopted a more acceptable mix of western, Asian and traditional music, which has won new audiences. It is, however, a music and chat station targeting young urban people and does not have strong news coverage or provide a forum for a national conversation.

The Killid Radio group emerged in 2003 from a network set up by the US media organisation Internews. With a 5% audience share,<sup>22</sup> Killid is a not-for-profit public media initiative that is part of the wider Development and Humanitarian Services for Afghanistan (DHSA) group. Its founder, Shahir Zahine, said it has become "an independent and self-sustaining network",<sup>23</sup> though it receives some subsidy from the wider group. It also runs two popular weekly magazines and a profitable company that provides public communication programmes for international donors. The success of its first radio station in Kabul encouraged expansion to other urban centres, with Herat added in 2005; Kandahar, Jalalabad and Mazar in 2008; and Ghazni and Khost in 2010. Killid's mix of public interest programming and entertainment has gone down well with urban audiences, though its decision to air Russian and Chinese broadcasts has raised eyebrows. The group encourages each station to emphasise local issues, while providing national news and programme services from Kabul. The popularity of the Killid stations shows the success of the model, attracting national advertising at premium rates.



**Radio with a purpose: donor-funded local FM radio**

External donor support has played a major role in the development of Afghanistan's media – an issue examined in more detail later in this briefing. This is particularly the case for local radio, driven less by commercial and more by development imperatives.

One example of particularly successful and intensive support to local radio is summarised in the box below. The sector has experienced substantial investment, innovation and commitment. In a few cases, local TV and radio stations even compete successfully with national and international stations. Examples include Sharq TV and Radio in Jalalabad, Arzu TV and Radio in Balkh, Hewad TV in Kandahar, Paktia Ghag radio, and Baharak radio in Badakhshan.

“The future of many local stations remains uncertain.”

However, these stations are exceptions to the rule, and the future of many local stations remains uncertain.<sup>24</sup> Even in a large city like Herat, which is relatively peaceful, local advertising is limited, which restricts programme range and quality, and most local TV and radio stations struggle to break even (See ‘The View from Herat’, page 18).

One serious problem is that so many stations compete for very limited local advertising. The Chief Editor of Radio Muzhda in Herat, a city which now boasts 13 local radio stations, said the Government seemed to have licensed them without concern either for the market or the qualifications and plans of those running them. “Sometimes we think that the Ministry of Information and Culture is trying to destroy the sector” he said.<sup>25</sup> Abdul Salam Rahimy, a former Deputy Finance Minister, who now runs Saba TV and Nawa radio, made the same point. “Creating more units is not helpful” he said. “Many of them will go; many of the early ones really are struggling”.<sup>26</sup>

Much of this extraordinary expansion of the Afghan media has been at the expense of the state-run broadcaster, Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA). Since 2002, its infrastructure, studios and transmitters have been restored, largely with support from the donor community. However, despite its state of the art equipment, its television service is losing staff and viewers to the new commercial channels. RTA TV is

still in the top three preferred channels but has fallen well behind Tolo and Ariana; its audience share has come down to 7%.<sup>27</sup> RTA radio services seem to be doing better, with an 18% audience share nationally, higher than any other broadcaster, though this disguises similar trends.<sup>28</sup> RTA radio has superior reach in the rural areas, where it faces much less competition than the TV channel. It also broadcasts in more local languages. But in the urban areas it is losing out to the new commercial stations. Since 2002, there have been a number of efforts to reform RTA and make it more effective – none of which have worked – but, as this briefing discusses later, its future remains a matter of considerable public interest.

**The emergence of ethnic and religious media**

Afghanistan's open licensing regime has also permitted politicians and religious leaders to set up their own media and many have done so over the past five or six years. They are sometimes referred to as ‘warlord’ channels because they have more restricted agendas than mainstream commercial media. In some cases, they have provoked divisive conflicts and prompted concerns that they are exacerbating an already worrying trend towards the ethnicisation of Afghan politics.

The Uzbek military leader, Abdul Rashid Dostam, was a trend setter when he started Ayna TV, set up in 2004 with support from the Turkish Government and run by his brother from Sherberghan. Three years later, Atta Mahommed Noor, the most powerful political figure in Balkh province, set up Arzu TV and radio, which broadcasts from Mazar-e-Sharif.

Many Mujahideen leaders, who struggled against the Soviet invasion and who still influence politics today, have also set up channels. Former President Burhanuddin Rabbani, the head of the Jamiat-e-Islami, who was assassinated in September 2011, established Noor TV. Sheikh Asif Mohsini, the Shia leader, has created Tamadon TV, one of the most successful of these channels, reputedly with support from Iran. Haji Muhammad Muhaqiq, the Hazara leader and head of a faction of the Hezb-e-Wahdat party has Rah-e-Farda TV, a radio station and two newspapers,

**Accountability through local radio**

The main driving force for radio's expansion has been the US media organisation Internews, which has helped to set up over 40 local FM radio stations across most of the country and trained hundreds of Afghan producers and radio technicians to staff them. It also runs a distribution service, the Tanin network, which provides a range of programmes from different sources to over 90 local media outlets to supplement their own output.

Local radio journalists are, in general, less qualified and less well paid than their national counterparts but at their best they help to address local issues and make government more accountable. “In Logar, there was no lady doctor in the hospital ... and through the radio, people were able to bring pressure to bear on the authorities to get one appointed” said Charmaine Anderson, former Internews Director in Afghanistan. The organisation has pioneered a radio programme linking local communities with their MPs in Kabul. “The community were asking: why haven't you been to see us? ... It has given them enormous

power and a greater interest in the selection of their own representatives”, said Anderson.<sup>29</sup> Some of the stations have set up a paid SMS messaging service “which is getting news to people who are not in the target area of the stations”<sup>30</sup> and has proved its value during floods and other emergencies.

Internews has strengthened the local competitiveness of its network of stations by offering them a centrally-produced current affairs programme called *Salam Watandar* for 90 minutes each morning and evening. The programme, launched in 2003, draws on national and local news sources and its sizeable audience attracts national advertising from the big telecom companies and banks. *Salam Watandar* provides quality journalism but the fact that local stations are, in effect, being paid to air the programme may impede pro-active partnership. Internews said that the programme is “on the way towards sustainability” and that “pared-down, it could survive” if current levels of support are reduced.



while Vice President Karim Khalili, who heads another faction of the same party, has Negah TV. Both of these channels champion the interests of the Hazara people. Professor Abdul Rab Rasool Sayyaf, a Saudi-backed former Mujahideen leader and confidante of President Karzai, has Dawat TV, which carries his own sermons and propagates the Wahabi point of view, while Haji Arif Noorin, who is thought to be close to Marshal Fahim, the other Vice President, has established Noorin TV, which is seen as a Panjsheri channel and attracts interest for that reason.

It is difficult to judge the impact of these channels. Qualitative research carried out for this report suggests that most urban viewers watch a mix of national, local and ethnic or religious channels. Those who watch only ethnic or religious channels are in a small minority. Audiences for these channels are much smaller than for commercially successful channels like Tolo or Ariana. The most successful of them – Tamadon, Noor and Noorin – have just 2% of the audience or less;<sup>31</sup> and even this level of success seems to be because they are actively looking beyond their own constituencies. The economics of such stations are far from transparent. They are not driven by a commercial agenda and carry little advertising. However, to win audiences in the present competitive market they need to invest in a range of entertainment, news and other programmes to attract an increasingly demanding public. To this extent, the sheer economics of the new media market imposes some restrictions on the influence of ethnic and religious channels.

Despite their small audiences, however, some have proved their capacity to provoke sectarianism, prompting demands for more effective regulation. Noorin broadcasts a programme called *Talak* that is widely criticised for encouraging character assassination on the air. “It is completely unethical” commented one journalist. “They swear at people and make accusations with no evidence, no documents, no proof”. The station also acquired notoriety in 2010 for its criticism of women’s shelters in Kabul, accusing them of being dens of prostitution.<sup>32</sup> In March 2011, its extensive coverage of the burning of the Quran by the maverick American pastor, Terry Jones, helped inflame Muslim sentiment across the country, according to some interviewed for this report, and may have played a part in the subsequent attack on the UN offices in Mazar-e-Sharif.

Another station that became notorious was Emrooz, which was closed down by the Government in July 2010 for “inciting sectarian tension and threatening national unity”. Owned by Najibullah Kabuli, a former Member of Parliament and a leading critic of Iranian influence in Afghanistan, Emrooz was engaged in a battle of the airwaves with the Shia leader, Sheikh Mohsini, and his channel, Tamadon, which is seen as pro-Iranian. This intensified sectarian feeling and threatened to affect relations with Iran.

The Government’s decision to close down the station for a period – without bringing any charges or allowing any defence – was a sign of the serious view it took of the situation. It also highlighted the ineffectiveness of the existing regulatory framework to deal with such misuse of the airwaves and attracted criticism from both national and international media organisations.<sup>33</sup>

The fact that many of these channels enjoy the backing of neighbouring states or of powerful national figures makes it difficult to act against them. However, there is a danger that these trends could become more pernicious

in the absence of an effective regulatory regime. “I am very worried about warlord media...” said a human rights specialist, “because they are taking their political agendas onto the screen. Even if you radicalise a thousand people in Kabul, it can prove dangerous in the long term”.<sup>34</sup>

Some ethnic and religious media have already attracted niche audiences and provoked the public. They could become more dominant if other, more independent, stations lose funding and influence in the post-transition period.

### **The Taliban and the media**

During their harsh rule, the Taliban closed down cinemas and destroyed televisions and video recorders. They were comfortable with radio and newspapers but, like many strict Muslims, saw the visual image as problematic.

Since 2001, they have changed their views and become much more media-savvy. While they do not have their own TV channels, they do have a website presence that is updated regularly and makes prominent use of video footage. They keep the organisation on message and have pro-active spokespersons for the northern and southern zones of the country. “Their message is very consistent, clear, quick and available” said a BBC journalist based in Kabul.<sup>35</sup>

As a result, the Taliban obtain regular coverage of their point of view in all the main Afghan and international media. They also monitor the media and bring their own pressures to bear on journalists, even those working for international agencies, if their statements are not carried. According to one commentator, journalists are privately sceptical about many Taliban claims “but report their statements without much questioning, whether they are true or not”.

It is difficult to create an authoritative picture of Taliban attitudes towards the present media landscape, but some of their thinking can be gleaned from former representatives. According to Abdul Hakim Mujahid, a former Ambassador to Pakistan and representative in New York during the Taliban period, who now sits on the High Peace Council, “they have accepted the modern world of communications”. As the creator of the website, *www.taliban.com*, during his time in New York, he is “happy with that”. He says the Taliban were not against the Internet... “the problem was the rural mentality and the urban mentality; the rural supporters had issues with modern technology...”<sup>36</sup>

In his view, some of the new TV stations work well (he mentioned particularly Ariana, Shamshad, Tamadon and Noor). However, he criticised Tolo for its “negative thinking” and for the “constant interruptions” by its journalists in interviews and round table discussions. He dismissed the proliferation of local radio stations. “There are 250 FM stations but they cannot do 10% of what BBC and Azadi are doing... The people of Afghanistan do not want them... Men and women in studios asking people for their jokes: it is 90% rubbish.” He said the media should be “faithful to the unity of the Afghan nation and not to disunity... Local radio in local languages will decentralise the people, whereas we are in need of centralising the government.”<sup>37</sup>

While he does not speak for the Taliban, he does reflect some of their conservative thinking, believing that many

“The fact that many of these channels enjoy the backing of neighbouring states or of powerful national figures makes it difficult to act against them.”

stations work against Afghan culture and that their staff are “being forced to adopt western values”. “They are contributing to a sense of xenophobia” he said, “and playing into the hands of the Taliban, who are fighting to protect our Afghan culture and Islamic culture.” He argued that “after 30 years of war, we are in need of constructive public thinking... The challenge is to attract people to rational rather than emotional approaches”.

On the ground, however, the Taliban continue to battle ISAF and Afghan forces and use the new media to propagate a narrower vision of Afghanistan's future. Journalists travelling in Taliban-controlled parts of the country report that the Taliban use video clips of bombed convoys or slain commanders in a highly systematic and

effective way to create support for their cause. These clips are distributed by mobile phone to supporters and local media to keep them informed of Taliban activities. “The speed at which these clips appear is extraordinary” said one Afghan journalist who had been travelling widely in the north of the country. “All young people have at least one on their mobile phones”.<sup>38</sup>

There are also reports that in areas of Taliban influence unaccompanied songs about Islamic themes have enjoyed a revival of popularity thanks to new phone models with video as well as audio formats. In Jalalabad, the popularity of these Taliban songs is reported to have been facilitated by attacks on music shops selling more traditional Afghan music.

## Religious and ethnic media – expert and public views

Afghan opinion is divided over ‘warlord TV’. Some see it as unfortunate that powerful politicians have been able to arm themselves with media megaphones and fear this will intensify ethnic and sectarian divisions. “One channel is pure Pashto, one Tajik, one Uzbeki,” said one former independent MP. “They are not bringing people together because everyone is watching his own channel”.<sup>39</sup> The case of Noorin TV is often cited as evidence of the malign influence of such channels on public opinion, particularly in the absence of a functioning regulatory system.

Qasim Akhgar, the Editor of the daily *Hasht-e-Sobh*, who has worked as a journalist since the 1970s, said “in those days linguistic and ethnic divisions were seen as issues to be tackled but they were not so divisive among intellectuals”.<sup>40</sup> A leftist, Akhgar criticised the Mujahideen for “playing up the ethnic factor” and the international community for contributing to present trends through political compromises with Afghan power-holders. He also lamented the fact that “quite a lot of people’s writing is coloured by ethnic divisions”.

The Afghan Human Rights Commission monitors media trends, and one of its commissioners, Nader Nadery, argued that “the entire mediascape is very worrisome... contributing to the ethnicisation of the political agenda”.<sup>41</sup>

Some public figures disagree, arguing that there are advantages in political and religious parties having to explain themselves to the public. “It does have a divisive impact but I don’t see it in that light” said Haji Muhammad Rafiq Shaheer, a former MP from Herat. “Let them say what they want to say! We have to go through this phase because we have just come out of a crisis... So far it has been positive. It has given everyone a tribune to talk about what they want. If they want to play music or broadcast religious programmes, it is better to put them in the public domain for debate than bottle them up and then try to impose them by other means”.<sup>42</sup>

Haji Muhammad Muhaqiq, the Hazara leader, admitted there are problems. “Quite a lot of the tendency in the media is as it was in the conflict: just as people were trying to kill each other in the conflict, so they are trying to defame each other in the media.” But he argued that channels like his own play an educational role. “There were quite a lot of perceptions of discrimination in the past. But this is no longer the case. Things are not being brushed under the carpet; they are being discussed in an

open way. That is the value of these stations.”<sup>43</sup>

Faizullah Zaki, an Uzbek intellectual and senior member of General Dostum’s Junbesh party took a similar view: “I would not look so much on the negative side... We have lived for generations in a state where our language and culture were not recognised. Now we have so many stations in Uzbek. Take Ayna: they began with news; now they have started other programmes. It will expand on the basis of demand... One of the reasons for the failure of our politics has been the ignoring of the diversity of Afghanistan. True national unity will only come if we recognise ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity”.<sup>44</sup>

Public opinion on ethnic and religious media is also divided. A surprising number of people appreciate the role of the new TV stations in catering to special linguistic groups. “It is to the benefit of us all to have broadcasting in our own languages” said one illiterate woman. “If each community has a TV station in its own language, it will be able to pick up information easily” said a villager from Guldara district. “I think it is good to have stations like Shamshad TV which ...serve ethnic groups and people speaking specific languages” said a professional from Herat. Several interviewees felt strongly, however, that each TV channel should broadcast in all languages. “In this way” said one woman “all TV channels will be able to have viewers all around the country”.

All interviewees were critical of channels that stir up hatred between communities or tribes. “Sometimes TV creates concern for us” said one illiterate woman “because they are broadcasting for their own tribe and cause conflicts and disunity among the people”. A village headman said: “If every tribe has its own TV station, it would cause division among the tribes. Nowadays everyone gets a licence, but the Ministry of Information and Culture cannot control them. Such TV stations can cause any kind of problem – tribal, political and social. We were witness to conflicts between Tamadon and Emrooz TV stations. Such TV stations do not work for the benefit of the people”. A woman working at Kabul university felt that “increasing the number of TV channels run by ethnic groups not only causes conflict but also deteriorating social conditions”. A teacher took a more measured view: “We are happy for their existence... but I think it is good if they do not criticise each other... We can name *Talak* programme of Noorin TV, which clearly humiliates others...”





## PART 2

# Modern versus traditional: how media reflect a country in cultural flux

**Above** *Afghan Star* – a popular talent show on Tolo TV – provoked a divisive debate about Afghan culture and showed the painful limits of the new freedoms.

The creation of this dynamic, mixed media environment, particularly the growth of television, has opened windows on other societies and stimulated new aspirations and anxieties. Most viewers rely for news and entertainment on the many terrestrial Afghan channels, which are licensed by the Government and subject to its controls. Satellite and cable connections, which bring direct access to foreign channels, are the preserve of the better off, and not even all of them. “Cable and satellite is a good facility for rich people; we only watch local channels” said one young woman in Kabul. Others were opposed to cable because of “foreign influences” and “immoral programmes”.<sup>45</sup>

From the beginning, however, popular Afghan channels have carried a great deal of foreign content, particularly films and soap operas from Hollywood and Bollywood and more recently from Mexico, Turkey and Korea. According to some estimates, this strand of programming accounts for as much as 50% of the TV schedules, with Indian soap operas attracting large prime time audiences on channels like Tolo and Ariana. Most are dubbed into Dari and Pashto and are heavily pixelated to meet the censor’s requirement that sari-clad women should be properly covered for

Afghan audiences. They offer glimpses of very different worlds and generated considerable controversy at first, just as they did in other countries when they were first introduced, such as India and Pakistan in the 1990s.

Opposition to the story lines of some of the soap operas has come as much from women’s groups as from religious authorities. “Some Indian soap operas have had a negative impact on perceptions of what being a modern woman involves” said Zarin Hamid of the Afghan Women’s network. “Women are portrayed at home, constantly plotting, and there are stories of illegitimate births and destructive relationships”. Turkish soap operas, on the other hand, “have better portrayals of women, with children but working in an office and going out and about”.<sup>46</sup>

Foreign drama imports are being complemented with new, if still nascent, Afghan dramas and soap operas. Tolo TV took up the challenge with Eagle 4, a US-funded production with a very American storyline,

“The creation of this dynamic, mixed media environment, particularly the growth of television, has opened windows on other societies and stimulated new aspirations and anxieties.”

in which women police officers work as part of a team and share risks with their male colleagues. Lemar broke new ground with an Afghan soap opera set in eastern Afghanistan. But these are exceptions. Interviews in

“A major worry for civil society and for independent media organisations is that the prospect of political reconciliation, which is much talked about as a means of achieving peace, is strengthening the hands of conservative forces, ushering in greater restrictions on media freedom.”

Kabul and Herat highlighted the lack of quality Afghan content on television and public demand for fewer foreign programmes and more featuring Afghan society and its problems (see box below).

Tolo TV has projected a modern Afghanistan, encouraging western lifestyles and clothing, with youth to the fore, and men and women mixing together more than they do traditionally. It has been popular with the younger generation, particularly in the north, but has attracted criticism from more conservative elements.

Saad Mohseni of Moby Capital has been “denounced as un-Islamic ...for allowing women to appear alongside men in his radio and TV networks, for showing Indian soap operas showing unveiled women and for allowing women to compete with men in one of Tolo TV’s hit shows, *Afghan Star*”.<sup>47</sup> *Afghan Star*, a popular

documentary film based on the talent show, which was distributed internationally, depicted both the aspirations of Afghan youth and the real limits of the new freedoms they enjoy.

Some conservative critics say that Tolo pushes a western agenda and is unnecessarily divisive. “Tolo have their prejudices about people” said Haji Muhammad Muhaqiq, a Shia leader with his own TV station, “particularly if they were involved in the *Jihad*. Because people come from that group, they condemn them irrespective of what they have done since.”<sup>48</sup> It is an accusation of bias that he also extends to the donor community. “Donors are not too interested in media that are indigenous. They are interested in media that are modern and progressive. We have a station that is more traditional and no donor is interested to support it.”

A major worry for civil society and for independent media organisations is that the prospect of political reconciliation, which is much talked about as a means of achieving peace, is strengthening the hands of conservative forces, ushering in greater restrictions on media freedom. “The Council of Ulama (a national body of Muslim clerics) are pushing for the Talibanisation of the media” said former MP, Mir Ahmad Joyenda. “Sayyaf (leader of *Itihad-i-Islami*) is saying that the media are the problem... It is a trend that is increasing in government.”<sup>49</sup>

### Public responses to the media revolution

The new media and the greater access to information has been welcomed across the gender, literacy and geography divides. “If we compare the past and the present,” said one businessman, “we can see the change in people’s life and understanding.”

“Many problems have been solved by the new means of communication” said a poor woman in Guldara district. “Now, people can talk to their relatives by cellphone immediately”. “One of the strengths of the new media is that most of our people now have access to TV, radio cell phones, and internet” said one educated woman. “The weakness is the poor quality of the programmes and the fact that they serve their own interests not the people’s needs.”

There is criticism of the reliance on foreign serials and the overall lack of quality broadcasting. According to an artist from Herat, the effect of the new media in “increasing people’s general knowledge... is positive but the effects of the TV serials are negative”. “TV has not helped people to improve mentally” said one middle class Herati woman, “it has just raised people’s knowledge of style and fashion”. There is widespread concern that Afghan culture is being undermined, with Indian serials coming in for particular criticism. “They have even had an effect on our clothing and daily activity” said an actor. “When they talk, they use

Urdu and English words and now we are not even wearing our Afghan clothes any more”.

“International influences have had a bad impact on our young girls” said one poor woman from a village, “because they watch others wearing un-Islamic clothing on TV and are encouraged to imitate them”. “These movies and serials have caused more girls to run away from home and have increased quarrels between husbands and wives” according to one educated Herati woman.

A literate woman with four children related how her husband “frequently mentioned the beauty of the girls in the series and movies and ordered her to beautify herself like the girls or leave him”. The woman commented: “If an old man is so affected by movies and serials what hope is there for the young people and children!”.

Most of those interviewed appreciate the new media job opportunities. But many criticise the poor quality of the programmes. “To be honest, I hate the programmes on all TV channels because I don’t see any good and high quality programmes in any of them” said an actor. “What Afghan people need is educational and cultural programmes, not serials” said a woman.



## PART 3

# Independent journalism: its growth, impact and limits

There is a tradition of independent journalism in Afghanistan, but it ended, effectively, in the 1970s (see box on page 15). Establishing a new journalistic corps in the country after the end of Taliban rule meant starting from a very low base.

Since 2002, a great deal of journalism training has taken place, supported by different donors and carried out either by international or local organisations. Radio training has been carried out by international broadcasters and NGOs such as the BBC World Service Trust (now called BBC Media Action), Deutsche Welle, Internews and IWPR. Print media training has been carried out by international and local NGOs and visiting experts. One of the largest locally-based organisations, NAI, claims to have trained 4,000 journalists over the past seven or eight years.<sup>50</sup>

The training has ranged from basic journalism and broadcasting to specialist courses on gender, human rights, the environment, disability and investigative reporting. It has also varied in quality and has been piecemeal, with significant duplication of effort.

Unfortunately few training organisations have kept records of the career paths of their trainees, making it difficult to track their progress. Many trainees have moved on to other careers in public relations, education or government, while others have found it difficult to put what they learnt into practice in their proprietor-run media houses.

But despite these shortcomings, the transformation of the sector has been remarkable, particularly as opportunities for journalists to work professionally were extremely limited during the Taliban period.

According to a BBC correspondent who worked in Kabul at that time, a few remarkable Afghan journalists were employed by international news agencies, such as the BBC, Agence France Press, Reuters, and Associated Press.<sup>51</sup> They played a key part in international coverage of Afghanistan and were much admired for their courage and capability, but they were only a handful of people. Today, Moby Capital alone employs over 200 Afghan journalists and producers in its various TV, radio and print outlets. According to conservative estimates, the TV, Radio and newspaper sectors now employ over 10,000 media personnel. The character and quality of their work varies enormously, as do the terms and conditions under which they are employed. There is still a shortage of competent Afghan journalists but the profession is making its mark and has the scope to grow into an important pillar of the emerging civil society.

One remarkable success is Pajhwok, now the leading national news agency. Pajhwok reports on political and other developments and uncovers uncomfortable truths, despite the pressures on its staff. Since 2002, the long-established government news agency, Bakhtar, has had to compete with ten other news agencies, but Pajhwok has established itself as the front-runner. A former BBC correspondent, who has monitored its progress, describes it as “an Afghan agency of considerable calibre”.<sup>52</sup>

Set up originally by IWPR, Pajhwok has benefited from prolonged on the job training, in contrast to the stand-alone training courses that have been the norm. The agency has reporters in all the main provinces and towns and a growing list of customers, international and national.

But, like many news agencies, it is struggling to become self-sufficient. Its award-winning Managing Editor, Danish Karokhel, who has been at the helm since Pajhwok became independent of IWPR, says it is now 65% self-financing, depending for the rest on the Open Society Institute and other donors.<sup>53</sup>

In the commercial TV sector, Tolo is a major player with a strong current affairs team that runs a 24 hour news operation. Tolo journalists like Mujahid Kakar have a reputation for subjecting officials to tough questioning, while its news reporters round the country make use of mobile phones and under-cover filming. The round table discussion is a daily staple of Afghan channels and many are little more than a series of monologues. But the best of them, like *Gofteman* on Tolo, are more probing.

Many TV stations take a rather passive approach to news. “In terms of investigative journalism,” said one well informed foreign commentator “there is pretty much nothing”.<sup>54</sup> But there are some exceptions, such as *Gozarash Yak* on Yak TV, which investigates the failures of government departments and private companies, or Saba TV’s investigations into human rights abuses.

Radio has done less well. Successful commercial stations like Arman are mostly music-based and urban in their appeal. Killid has a strong journalistic focus (and has produced some remarkable series on Afghan history and on war crimes) but its outreach is limited to a few urban centres. In the field of national radio news, somewhat surprisingly, no indigenous broadcaster has emerged to rival the dominance of the international broadcasters.

These broadcasters maintain substantial bureaux in Kabul and networks of local stringers in all the main provinces. Through their networks of FM stations, they have better reach in rural Afghanistan and, as a result of their long history, a higher trust rating with the public. Despite increased competition from television, particularly in the cities, Radio Liberty (known as Azadi) retains an audience share of 14%, the BBC 7% and VOA (known as Ashna) 6%.<sup>55</sup> The BBC’s Afghan Education Project (AEP) also retains a strong following for its well-known daily radio drama, *New Home New Life*, and its feature programmes, which have been introducing new ideas in health, agriculture and governance to Afghan audiences in their own languages since 1994. Despite the opening up of the sector, there have been no major new initiatives in development broadcasting to the rural areas and AEP remains the only significant player in this critical field. As in many other parts of South Asia, commercial television has attracted far more investment than radio, despite radio’s flexibility, cost-effectiveness and potential reach in a country where electricity is still in short supply in rural areas.

The press has been equally restricted in its impact. There are only two Afghan newspapers with any sort of national footprint – *Mandegar* and *Hasht-e-Sobh* – and both have circulations of approximately 10,000.<sup>56</sup> The first is a political journal, which emerged during the 2009 Presidential elections to support the candidature of Abdullah Abdullah. The second is a newspaper set up in 2005 with support from donors and the Afghan Human Rights Commission

“There is still a shortage of competent Afghan journalists but the profession is making its mark.”

to be a progressive voice on human rights issues. *Hasht-e-Sobh* has a good reputation for its journalism but would find it difficult to survive on its own resources.

The demise of the English-language *Kabul Weekly* in early 2011 prompted a heart-felt commentary on the state of the press from its editor-in-chief, Faheem Dashty. The paper raised 60% of its costs from advertising and subscriptions and depended on donors for the remaining 40%. But its advertising revenues began to go down after 2009. "Revenues have declined in recent years," he wrote "and I believe strongly that the reason is our vocal opposition to the current administration... The businesses and their owners who funded Hamid Karzai's re-election campaign stopped advertising with us."

The *Kabul Weekly* faced uncomfortable choices and closed in a defiant mood. "I can confidently say that this paper is one of the few independent media outlets in the country... We have never accepted money with strings attached" wrote Dashty, "and we won't start now..." The final

editorial urged readers to remain vigilant. "It is no secret that many media organisations, not just print outlets, are funded by ... wealthy businessmen or politicians, an agency, a group, a foreign country and in many cases, foreign intelligence agencies. It's easy to spot when a paper supports the policies of its donors, whether it's Pakistan, Iran, the US or the UK... I question media-

support agencies and donor countries that have ignored us yet they claim to promote freedom of the press and freedom of speech in Afghanistan. The answer seems to be that no-one is prepared to lend support without something in return."<sup>57</sup>

The influence of external agendas has restricted the media's ability to play its role as the fourth estate. Despite the expansion of stations and titles, the number of independent journalistic outlets remains relatively small. In much of the media, proprietors call the tune and journalists must follow. There is a great deal of self-censorship and bias. Public figures are wary of being interviewed for fear that their views will be distorted. There are also worries that journalists are being infected by growing ethnic divisions.

With the media reflecting so many conflicting interests, there is both confusion about its role and some understandable

scepticism about its ability to hold government and other power-holders to account. "Most media... are from government authorities and MPs" said a female employee of Kabul University "and they don't want to bring any positive changes in the conditions of ordinary people. If they did, some of the problems would have been solved over the past ten years." Another said: "The Government does not respect decisions made by parliament... and it is clear that it does not care much about the media's activities"<sup>58</sup>

Donors are trying to equip the Government to be more responsive to enquiries from journalists and the public. With support from the US and UK, a Government Media Information Centre (GMIC) was created in 2007 to improve the communication capacity of government and the flow of information to the public. One concrete result has been the appointment of Presidential and other spokespersons on a US model who give regular briefings to the Kabul press corps. But the President and other leading politicians are still not questioned by Afghan journalists with any regularity. Afghan leaders are less likely to respond to the Afghan media than to international media, whether print or radio. President Karzai, now in his second term of office, has not granted a special interview to any Afghan television stations, though they all carry news of his activities and press conferences.

The idea of political accountability is relatively new and by no means universally accepted. Afghanistan has an elected president and parliament but power and influence are not always wielded democratically. "You have to give credit to Hamid Karzai for giving them freedom" said one high-ranking American official. "He doesn't like Tolo TV and they don't like him but he lets them criticise him". But the same rule does not apply to all senior politicians. "You can't write against powerful faces in parliament" said one leading journalist. "It is not possible to write about corruption and the warlords. We never write about Marshal Fahim, Khalili, Atta or Muhaqiq." And the same would be true of many other powerful people.

There are many instances of journalists being arrested and pressured by the security services, particularly in the provinces, where local warlords, powerful governors and armed opposition groups have more undiluted influence. "In the districts, if you are journalist, you can't afford to offend the governor or the Taliban; you are too vulnerable" said one journalist. The Taliban will call you to say "we have sent you so many news stories but they do not seem to have been carried."

Despite the growth of the Afghan media, the international broadcasters and press corps still play an important role in providing on the job training for Afghan journalists and in reinforcing the freedom of the Afghan press. "It can be a revelation to work where principles of sourcing, fairness, balance, integrity and no libelling are important", said one British journalist. International interest also provides a cover for Afghan reporting on the same events. "Dexter Filkins' reports [for the New York Times] on Iranian cash given to the President enabled Kabul journalists to cover the story" said one western reporter.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, Afghan journalists wishing to cover sensitive stories look for support from colleagues in the international media to strengthen their own position. "If ten of us cover the story, they can't kill all of us..." commented one Afghan journalist drily. Even Tolo, which is at the cutting edge of the new television journalism, is seen by some to be "pushing

“The influence of external agendas has restricted the media's ability to play its role as the fourth estate.”

**Below** The Afghan media is becoming a bridge between the public and the politicians but the idea of political accountability is not yet well established.



YURI CORTEZ/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



the envelope for the wrong reasons – knowing the US will protect them”.

Courageous journalists working in the public interest know the risks they face and have to make judgements about how far they can go without becoming targets themselves. Afghan journalists working for international companies or Afghan media companies supported by powerful foreign donors enjoy some greater protection. But extra-judicial threats to media freedom are very real for all journalists.

According to NAI, an Afghan NGO that monitors violence against journalists, 22 journalists were killed and 23 kidnapped between 2001 and 2011. The trend in violent incidents against local journalists rose significantly from 2006, though it has receded to some extent over the last two years. Of 266 recorded incidents, nearly two thirds took place in Kabul and nearby provinces, 24 in Herat and 32 in Helmand and Kandahar, where ISAF has been battling the Taliban.<sup>60</sup>

The effectiveness of the profession is also undermined by the same political and ethnic divisions that affect wider society, which has contributed to factionalism among journalists’ unions and a lack of impact in making the profession’s case to employers and to government. There

are three main journalists’ unions: The Afghan National Journalists Union (ANJU), which is largely Kabul-based and has a mostly Tajik or Dari-speaking membership; the Afghan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA), which has a mainly Pashto-speaking membership; and the Afghan National Journalists and Reporters Union (ANJRU). All three claim to have several thousand members, though these claims are difficult to verify and seen by many to be exaggerated. One critic said that “they are unfortunately behaving more like NGOs than unions”. AIJA has attracted more funding from donors and has more offices than ANJU and ANJRU. The building of these independent power bases has impeded efforts by organisations like NAI and the Media Law Working Group to bring the unions together. At the moment they are making little impact on the proprietors, though there are many issues relating to professional conduct and working conditions that need to be addressed.

“The International broadcasters and press corps still play an important role in providing on the job training for Afghan journalists and in reinforcing the freedom of the Afghan press.”

## The state and the journalist in Afghanistan

Only Afghans over the age of forty five – which is the average life expectancy – can recall the last period of democratic government during the rule of King Zahir Shah in the 1960s and early 1970s. That was also the last time that Afghanistan enjoyed any kind of free press, though the roots of an independent Afghan media go back much further.

The man hailed as the father of Afghan journalism is Mahmud Tarzi, who founded the journal *Seraj ul-Akhbar* in 1911 and edited it for most of that decade. The outstanding intellectual of his day, who gathered a number of ‘Young Afghans’ around him on his return from exile in Ottoman Syria, Tarzi’s aim was to foster a modern Afghan nationalism, compatible with the country’s history and culture. The paper encouraged its readers to be self-critical and question their own understanding of the world. Tarzi wrote: “If the mind is not the mother of progress, what else is?”.

*Seraj ul-Akhbar* covered a remarkably wide range of topics – ‘sometimes of science and technology, sometimes of industries and innovations, sometimes of agriculture and commerce, sometimes of philosophy and literature ... sometimes of home and sometimes of foreign events.’<sup>61</sup> Tarzi was an advocate of modern education and through the columns of the paper sought to educate his readers about a range of contemporary issues. He also campaigned for educational reform and supported secondary education for girls and boys and the introduction of secular subjects, such as science and geography.

Regional and tribal loyalties and religious conservatism have always been major obstacles to the realisation of a modern state in Afghanistan. *Seraj ul-Akhbar* identified these obstacles and tackled them head on. A convinced Muslim, Tarzi tried to bring Islam and science together, arguing that they were ‘compatible’.<sup>62</sup> He also addressed the country’s religious leaders or ulema, encouraging them to ‘belong to the modern age’.<sup>63</sup> The paper approached subjects from a cultural and educational, rather than political, perspective. It launched a parallel journal for children called *Seraj ul-Atfal* and covered sensitive issues such as women’s education and role in society by basing its arguments on Islamic teachings.

Amir Habibullah allowed Tarzi a high degree of freedom in his writings because they shared the same ambition to create a modern Afghan state. Tarzi wrote regular articles on notions of state-building and nation-building, focussing on four pillars – homeland, nation, state and religion – and featuring simple messages such as ‘the homeland is the container, the nation its content, the state provides order and religion is the glue which keeps it together’.<sup>64</sup> But Tarzi also articulated an independent, national role for the media that went beyond serving the state. “A nation that has no newspaper...” he wrote, “lacks the means to say anything about itself or others. Media is the translator of the feelings of the homeland, the tongue of the nation, the soul of civilisation, and the foundation of humanity.”<sup>65</sup> This emphasis on independence gave the paper credibility and authority – a crucial requirement for public trust.

Tarzi is also revered for his political role in the emergence of modern Afghanistan. In 1919, following Habibullah’s assassination, he became Foreign Minister under King Amanullah and negotiated the treaty of Rawalpindi in 1921, which brought British recognition of the independence of Afghanistan. He also inspired the new king in his efforts to create the institutions of a modern state, including the foundation of Radio Afghanistan.

Amanullah’s reign saw the appearance of several more newspapers: some of them government mouthpieces; others independent journals like the weekly *Anees*, which took its name from its editor, Mohayuddin Anees. But it was a short-lived flowering of new ideas. The King’s vigorous assertion of state authority provoked opposition from conservative forces and in 1929 the King and Tarzi fled the country.

After Amanullah’s death, Afghanistan had to wait another 30 years for a similar period of media freedom under King Zahir Shah in the 1960s. But that came to an abrupt end when the king was deposed in 1973. Afghanistan has never enjoyed a sustained period of freedom of expression and the print media has always been restricted in its appeal and circulation by the very low levels of literacy. But Mahmud Tarzi remains an icon for many Afghan journalists because of his vision of a modern, independent country in which the press has a critical unifying and informational role.

## PART 4

# Donors, donors, everywhere: external players and the mediatisation of politics

## Who funds what and why?

Support to media in developing countries is often a low priority on international donor agendas. This cannot be said of Afghanistan.

The remarkable transformation of Afghanistan's media has been funded substantially by international and regional donors. The USA has been by far the biggest player, funding major initiatives in television and radio. According to a recent report from the National Endowment for Democracy, it has spent 'hundreds of millions of dollars' over a ten year period.<sup>66</sup> Of the other ISAF countries, the British, the Danes, the Dutch, the French, the Germans and the Italians have all made smaller but significant strategic interventions. The European Union was a substantial player in the early years. The Governments of Japan and India have each invested substantially in rebuilding the infrastructure of the state broadcaster, RTA, while the Turkish Government has supported the Uzbek media.

Iran's role is second only to that of the USA but much less well charted. It is widely credited with funding the media and educational ambitions of Shia political leaders and, according to some reports, may have bankrolled up to seven national and regional TV stations. Iran sees support for the Shia media as a way to bolster its political, cultural and religious influence in the face of substantial investment by Saudi Arabia, which is encouraging the spread of Wahabism through its support for Sunni educational institutions and media.

Sheikh Asif Mohni's development of an impressive campus in west Kabul with a magnificent mosque and extensive university buildings, is the most obvious public monument to an Iranian investment that is believed to run into tens of millions of dollars. Pakistan has not bankrolled institutions on this scale but its influence is considered to be widespread and it is thought to provide active support to some Pashto media outlets in the south and east of the country.

The scale of western investment in the Afghan media has been unprecedented in any fragile state and some of it has had political aims. The biggest media investor, the

USA, has channelled funds through the Public Diplomacy department of the State Department, USAID or the Office of Transitional Initiatives (OTI), which specialises in media initiatives in fragile states. In its early years, Moby Capital benefited from seed money from OTI to start Arman Radio and Tolo TV and to provide a compelling modern narrative for the international presence in the country.

When it became clear, however, that Moby's success in the north of the country was not being replicated in the southern Pashto-speaking areas (the recruiting grounds for the Taliban), the USA began to invest in strengthening media coverage in those areas. Over the past few years, the USA has invested approximately one hundred million dollars in a number of radio and TV initiatives to this end.

In 2006, Voice of America was funded to start a special Pashto radio service for tribal areas along the Pakistan border. This is called Deewa (which translates as 'Lamp') and now broadcasts for nine hours each day. In 2010, Radio Liberty launched a similar daily service in Pashto called Mashaal (or 'Torch'), running for six hours each day in the same area, which was later increased to nine hours. The USA has also invested heavily in Shamshad, the Afghan Pashto TV channel, funding powerful transmitters in Helmand for southern Afghanistan and at Torkham and Spin Boldak to ensure the channel can also be seen in Pakistan.

On the radio side, USAID-funded Internews has been the major player shaping local media developments for nearly a decade. In 2010, USAID awarded the agency a one year contract to spend \$22 million on a variety of new media initiatives to reach out beyond the big towns.<sup>67</sup> The programme included the establishment of citizens' media centres in small towns and rural areas, new mobile telephone information services, and a number of rural TV stations. A good deal of this investment also seemed to be aimed at the Pashto-speaking rural areas in the south and east of the country.

The European Union was a major player in the early days, funding or co-funding initiatives from 2002 onwards to strengthen media freedom and improve access to information. Grants were made to IWPR for journalism training; to the Baltic Media Centre to support *Good Morning* and *Good Evening Afghanistan* (daily current affairs programmes produced independently for RTA); to Development Humanitarian Services for Afghanistan (DHSA) for the development of talk-radio services and a national print media distribution system; to the BBC World Service Trust (now BBC Media Action) for soap operas and development programmes broadcast on its Afghan radio services; and to the French organisation AINA to help fund seven regional media centres, train journalists, incubate a range of magazines and newspapers, stimulate film production and mobile cinema, set up a photo agency and encourage art exhibitions.

Some of these initiatives had a long term impact. IWPR's journalism training led to the creation of the Pajhwok news agency; Barry Salaam's *Good Morning* and *Good Evening Afghanistan* continue to attract good

“The scale of western investment in the Afghan media has been unprecedented in any fragile state and some of it has had political aims.”

**Below** ISAF and Afghan National Army advertising has been a major source of media funding across the country, with serious distorting effects.





audiences for RTA, though it has outgrown the Baltic connection; DHSA has become one of the country's few self-sufficient media ventures; and BBC Media Action's Afghan Educational Programmes (AEP) remains a unique source of development expertise in reaching the country's rural areas.

Others have not fared so well. The AINA initiative was the most ambitious and wide-ranging in its scope and the breadth of its donor support. In October 2003, its Kabul media centre was hosting 20 projects, of which seven were publications, including the weekly tabloid newspaper, *Kabul Weekly*, satirical and cultural monthlies, women's and children's magazines and a woman's radio station. Unfortunately, few have survived. The longest lived was the *Kabul Weekly* which closed in early 2011. Many of these ventures received generous funding but failed to survive as businesses because of a lack of local advertising once the funds ran out.

In addition to investments in commercial and state media, ISAF has developed its own media sector, which operates independently in pursuit of military objectives. Its expansion began in earnest in 2005 when General Sir David Richards, then ISAF commander, called for additional efforts to win over Afghan public opinion. Since then, ISAF has developed a media cell in Kabul, employing approximately 100 expatriate and Afghan staff, who are responsible for a national radio station, Sada-e-Azadi, which has a network of over 30 FM stations around the country and a fortnightly newspaper of the same name. There may also be as many as 100 small radio stations (sometimes known as 'radio in a box') broadcasting from ISAF military bases or Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), which are coordinated only loosely from Kabul.

Despite heavy investment, Sada-e-Azadi radio is not making much impact, attracting an audience of less than 1%, according to recent research.<sup>68</sup> The fortnightly newspaper of the same name faces less competition and has the highest distribution of any paper in the country, but its news impact is also limited. It carries information in English, Dari and Pashto (making it useful for those learning languages) and is distributed free in all the main urban centres. It provides some articles on national and international news, as well as information about the ISAF military presence and the development of the Afghan army and police. It is printed on very good quality paper (better than any other print media outlet can afford) which is put to many different uses. Afghan newspaper proprietors and editors, however, believe it distorts the market and undermines their own profitability.

The limited impact of these ISAF media initiatives raises questions about the effectiveness of military-run news and information operations. It seems unlikely that the *Sada-e-Azadi* newspaper will survive in its present form, as it is a costly venture with no prospect of becoming self-sustaining. Some of the many ISAF radio stations may have a more viable future, whether serving the Afghan army or as local or community stations. ISAF senior officers recognise the need to plan for the post-transition period. One possibility might be for some stations to be transferred to RTA or other media providers.

### Are donors distorting the Afghan media market?

The longer term vulnerability of many TV and radio stations is accentuated by the relative paucity of local advertising. Statistics on the size of the market vary considerably. In



BBC/AFGHAN EDUCATION PROJECTS

2010, Altai Consulting estimated the annual TV advertising spend at \$30 million, with radio at \$6 million and print media at less than \$1 million.<sup>69</sup>

However, according to one well-placed commentator, the entire local advertising market in Afghanistan may not be much more than \$20 million a year.<sup>70</sup> There are only a handful of major advertisers – mostly big banks and mobile telephone companies based in Kabul (and the collapse of the Kabul Bank removed the biggest of these).

According to Altai, six banks and four mobile phone companies account for 50% of all advertising.<sup>71</sup> These companies tend to favour the successful TV channels with a national footprint like Tolo, Yak TV and Ariana. Local advertising markets, on the other hand, are underdeveloped, which poses sustainability problems for local TV and for many local FM radio stations and newspapers.

Altai's estimate of total annual media revenues ranges between \$75 and \$95 million and purports to include 'neighbouring countries, the foreign military and other sources'.<sup>72</sup> But this may well be an underestimate, as there is little transparency in this field. What seems clear is that the actual advertising pot is probably no more than one-third of the total, which highlights the dependence of much of the sector on other sources.

The immaturity of the local advertising market is also reflected in the relative absence of local advertising expertise or research. No international advertising agency has set up a branch in Kabul, nor have any of the leading Indian or Pakistani companies. There is simply not enough business. Media monitoring is very limited, normal media placement techniques are not widely used, and the whole

**Above** This mud-built local radio station in Logar shows the medium's remote rural outreach. But there are sustainability challenges ahead.

“The limited impact of these ISAF media initiatives raises questions about the effectiveness of military-run news and information operations.”



“The immaturity of the local advertising market is also reflected in the relative absence of local advertising expertise or research.”

market is “particularly vulnerable to kickbacks and generally heavily politicised.”<sup>73</sup> The big telecom companies tend to outsource their advertising to international companies.

The work of local advertising agencies is “skewed towards informational campaigns conducted on behalf of government, military and international organisations.”<sup>74</sup> According to Eric Davin of the Altai agency, only one

Afghan company commissions sophisticated market research on a regular basis. The rest of the agency’s work tends to come from international donors or the military: a powerful illustration of the extent to which the whole industry is donor-driven.<sup>75</sup>

The economics of donor-funded programme making – some of it on key issues like health and education – may work to the temporary financial advantage of the

TV and radio stations but against their future sustainability. Donors often pay high prices for the production of such programmes, which are commissioned from international and national contractors, and high fees to the stations for their broadcast. One media production company director said: “It’s like taking someone to the Serena

hotel for a good meal and then paying them a hundred dollars to eat it”.<sup>76</sup>

It would be more cost-effective if donors funded broadcasters to commission and broadcast programmes. That, however, would put more power and responsibility into the hands of the broadcasters and reduce donor control. It is probably too late to modify the existing system, which brings substantial sums to commissioning agencies, contractors and media outlets, but this system will increase the vulnerability of the broadcasters when donor engagement comes to an end.

The role of the international community in paying for sponsored programmes has also had a distorting effect, particularly on radio. Some FM stations are reported to be highly dependent on such sponsorship, particularly for army and police recruitment, anti-narcotics campaigns or information on national and provincial elections. In some cases, advertorials on such subjects dominate the airwaves at peak hours and jeopardise the creation of an independent station identity. This has resulted in some Afghan stations being at best derivative or at worst simply playing music, and relying on airtime charges to keep afloat. In short, the system reduces the incentive for Afghan media

## The view from Herat

As one of the largest and more peaceful urban centres of Afghanistan, Herat has seen a lively expansion of local media over the past ten years. This city of nearly one million inhabitants close to the Iranian border now boasts eight TV stations and 13 local radio stations. However, there is not enough local advertising to support this many outlets. Most of them operate on the margins of sustainability and many small radio stations would be vulnerable without donor support. In mid-2011, Herat was one of the first parts of the country to experience transition to Afghan security control and the process is generating concerns about the future.

Pressures on the Herat media are more subtle than they once were but many local journalists experience pressure from the security services and all are aware of the political and security context in which they work. “There are three powers in Herat that have to be respected”, said one journalist. “Iran, the Governor and Mullah Khuda Dad”. The Iranian consulate is seen as having a pervasive influence in cultural and media matters in Western Afghanistan. The Governor is more sympathetic to press freedoms than his predecessor but there are fears this could change. Mullah Khuda Dad is the most senior cleric in Herat. He is close to President Karzai and can close media outlets if they offend against religious sentiments.

As in other parts of the country, national commercial TV channels command the largest audiences in Herat. Tolo is the market leader with an audience of 60%; Ariana has 17% and RTA 5%, according to an Altai survey.<sup>81</sup> The local TV sector includes conservative and religious channels as well as secular channels with a focus on entertainment and local issues. Saqi TV, a channel accused of having *Jihadi* inclinations was closed for a time by the authorities for trying to mobilise local people against an American pastor’s threat to burn the Quran. Taban has more Sufi leanings, while Mayhan carries a lot of Iranian programming. These broadly religious channels are doing less well than Herai TV and Asia TV, whose entertainment schedules attract whatever limited local advertising is available. Maqsood Ehrari of Asia TV told us that the station attracts some \$8,000 per month from advertising but needs to double this to produce competitive local programming. Films on CD bought locally and broadcast regardless of copyright win the station’s best audiences. It wants to originate more local programming but finds it too expensive to maintain a local news service. Local programmes

consist mostly of live phone-ins and discussions.<sup>82</sup>

Radio appears to be suffering a dramatic decline in Herat city. Only 18% of those surveyed in 2010 owned radios, compared to 83% who owned televisions.<sup>83</sup> As with TV, listenership is dominated by national and international players. Watandar, the local outlet of a national music and phone-in channel, is the market leader on 29%, RTA has 13%, Radio Liberty 13% and Arman 10%. Local spoken-word stations struggle to win audiences in this market place. Even relatively successful ones like Muzhda or Sahar register audiences of only 3% or 4%.<sup>84</sup>

The Chief Editor of Radio Muzhda said that most of the station’s funding comes from UN bodies and from international NGOs; local advertising is not significant. It is run by a team of 20 young production staff, many of them graduates of Herat University Journalism department, and offers news, discussions and phone-ins, as well as programmes on consumer problems, government activities and interpretation of the Quran. He is confident that Muzhda will grow, but estimates it needs an additional \$6000 per month to improve the capacity of the staff and the quality of the programming.<sup>85</sup>

Sahar, the local women’s radio station, was set up by Internews in 2003. It has since become independent but remains part of the Salam Watandar network. As well as carrying some entertainment, the station focuses mainly on women’s health and education and social issues like forced marriage and self-immolation. Most of its funding comes from ISAF, which funds three one-hour programmes per week, and other international donors. It has no marketing department and attracts no local advertising.

The liveliness of the radio sector in Herat owes a great deal to the university radio station, Sada-e-Jawan (Voice of Youth), which is staffed 12 hours a day by a rota of 90 students. The journalism department’s four year media training course has prepared many students for broadcasting careers, some at international level. Professor Hazin, the elected station manager, is proud of its achievements and recently secured agreement from the USA to fund a parallel TV station.<sup>86</sup>

The press in Herat is having much less impact. There are many local journals but only a few publish continuously and the print runs are very small. According to Hamid Momin of the

professionals to make programmes that cater to audience needs and thereby build up audience sizes that could attract advertising.

One result of these market practices is that TV and radio stations now look for payment to cover news or feature stories that should be part of their news brief. The Afghan Women's Network (AWN) believes that its efforts to promote awareness of a recent law on the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) have been "hamstrung by the cost of paid advertisements". On a mainstream commercial channel like Ariana, AWN would need to find \$2,500 for a five minute placing. If they put out a press release, they said that only BBC outlets would take an interest; all the other stations wanted money.<sup>77</sup>

Donors tend to focus on the creation of specific information messages and see TV or radio stations as vehicles for paid broadcasts. This is typical of the project orientation of much donor thinking, not just in media matters but in development generally. "Everything is a project not a process" said former MP, Mir Ahmad Joyenda, "No one is looking at media as a long term commitment".<sup>78</sup>

A 2010 report from the United States Institute for Peace is a good example. The report takes the view that in current conditions in Afghanistan "the media cannot be expected to develop into free and independent entities, regardless of the kinds or level of foreign support". It recommends that donors concentrate on "closed-ended interventions", which it defines as investment in "the media's production of contents that support specific social change objectives defined by Afghans".<sup>79</sup> The report is right to emphasise the importance of working to Afghan objectives but may be too pessimistic about what has been achieved so far, despite the distorting effects of so many closed-ended interventions.

Many observers argue that future support needs to focus on building sustainable institutions that are owned and run by Afghans and serve local or national communities. A former MP and keen naturalist, Haji Sultan Mahommed Awrang, put it in more traditional terms: "Things that spring up quickly will die out quickly; things are better nurtured slowly" he said. "The pistachio tree takes seven years to bloom and lasts for a hundred and twenty years. The international community will only suffer in reputation if these experiments prove short-lived."<sup>80</sup>



**Left** Herat, with its famous mosque and distinctive cultural history, was one of the first parts of the country to experience the transition to Afghan security control. Its local media are struggling to survive against national and international competition.

Herat Journalism Centre, the most influential is *Akhbar-e-Roz*, a free photocopied daily newspaper produced by the Herat Professionals' *shura* with a print run of 200.<sup>87</sup> The *shura* is an influential civil society body, with a dedicated membership among doctors and engineers, and has been an important vehicle for the airing of local issues with government. Nur Ahmad Karim, the editor of *Durbeen*, a local weekly, said "there is a low literacy rate and busy people are not reading ... Regrettably, the attention of the authorities is to the TV and radio, then to the press". He also blamed ISAF, for undermining the economics of the sector by distributing its own newspaper, *Sada-e-Azadi*, free of charge.<sup>88</sup>

Given the fragility of Herat's economy and the reliance of many media initiatives on donor funding, the transition process is being watched with some apprehension. "Our main concern is that civil society and the media should not be sacrificed as part of the transition process. They have had a positive role in raising awareness among the people", said Abdul Rahman Salahi, the present head of the professionals' *shura*.<sup>89</sup> The correspondent of Noor TV in Herat expressed his concern that "with the withdrawal of foreign forces, the media sector and journalism will become more vulnerable". He said media owners are already offering shorter contracts because they fear that many outlets will collapse with the departure of foreign forces.<sup>90</sup>

## PART 5

# Lack of national media and the future of Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA)

One recurrent commentary is the view that Afghanistan lacks media outlets that are genuinely national in their approach. There is no well-distributed national daily newspaper and no national radio station that performs an effective information role. In a country as fractured as Afghanistan, the absence of a clear domestic locus for

“In a country as fractured as Afghanistan, the absence of a clear domestic locus for national public debate and trusted news and information has particular consequences.”

national public debate and trusted news and information has particular consequences.

Even successful TV channels are seen as partial in their appeal or serving commercial or political agendas influenced by outside powers. Tolo, despite its very high audiences, is seen by many Pashtuns as a channel aimed at

the urban audiences of the Dari-speaking north, while its sister channel, Lemar, which broadcasts in the Pashto-speaking east, is seen as following the same political line in a different language. This does not mean, however, that Tolo is not watched in Pashto-speaking areas: recent research indicates that Tolo has larger audiences in Jalalabad than either Lemar or Shamshad.<sup>91</sup>

Ariana is less confrontational and has better penetration of rural areas, including Pashto-speaking provinces. However, it is commercially driven, entertainment-led, and weaker than Tolo in its news and current affairs. Its owner is known for his charitable work, which Ariana reports extensively, but the station does not display a very strong public service

ethos. Shamshad promotes itself as a Pashtun channel with a public service mission but has not yet delivered on these ambitions, even in its own target area. Part of the success of the more recently established Yak TV seems to be its commitment to “national unity, which transcends regional and ethnic divisions” and to “independent, balanced, objective and factual news programmes”.<sup>92</sup> It has certainly struck a more national chord, providing space for debate on national issues and reflecting regional and other opinion. It initially concentrated mainly on urban audiences but it broadcasts in both Dari and Pashto and is a significant response to a perceived gap in the market.

US policy makers, who have been prime movers in the creation of the new commercial media, are confident that market solutions are the only ones that are sustainable. “It’s a rough old wild west out there but I would rather have that a million times than what existed before” said one senior US official. However, some Afghan politicians, civil society activists and journalists interviewed for this paper expressed concern that the market is creating a media cacophony with some of the same characteristics as the very divided and factionalised political domain. “Stations have not been created on the basis of the needs of the people; they have been set up to serve the interests of foreign countries or powerful warlords” said one former independent MP. “We still don’t have a country wide media” commented one experienced journalist. “In Afghanistan today, we seem to lack confidence to build institutions”. “The biggest need in the media sector is

## Public perceptions of RTA

There is a surprising degree of residual public respect for RTA, even though it is a government agency, because it is seen as “a channel that defends the culture of Afghanistan”.

“National TV is the best” said a Hazara woman, “because it has broadcasts in all the languages like Hazara, Pashto, Tajik, even Uzbek, Balooch and Pashayee”. “It is a symbol of union and coalition” said one of her colleagues. A worker in Herat liked RTA programmes “because they are produced according to Afghan culture”. An illiterate woman in Kabul district said one of the benefits of RTA is that “all their programmes are suitable for elders, young people, kids and women.” Others liked “the good cultural programmes, especially Afghan films” and “the recordings of old singers”. “National TV is much better than other TV channels that broadcast foreign and western movies” said one educated woman. “If it pays attention to the quality of its programmes, maybe it will be the most popular.”

At the same time, there is a sense that it does not live up to its name. “It should not act partially” said one Herati middle class woman. “As its name is Meli (national), it should always tell the facts and realities to the people”. Another said: “Actually a national TV... should not have one-sided programmes; it has to convey people’s views, whether they are government or opposition. People expect more of the national channel. It has to be responsive to people’s needs.”

Many educated people are very critical of the quality of its programmes. “Compared to other TV and radio stations, their programmes are weak” said a businessman. “Their employees don’t work honestly and their programmes are the same they

were ten years ago.” According to one Hazara woman “RTA has only one shortcoming: it has less young people... If they hire young people as anchors or newscasters, it would attract a younger audience”.

Opinion is divided over the issue of ‘independence’ for RTA. “I think the programmes will become better ... if it becomes private” said a jobless man. A teacher agreed: “The Ministry of Information and Culture is not paying attention to any TV – whether national or private – so if national TV becomes independent, positive changes may occur.” Most of those interviewed were unfamiliar with the idea of public service broadcasting, but many saw the value of a national perspective. A cleric said: “Now people are watching it because it is a national, government channel... If it becomes independent, it will lose its viewers”. “If it becomes private, there might be only music, dance and songs like other private channels, nothing else” said an actor. Another interviewee argued that RTA is already relatively independent “because there is no other channel that is not having a foreign hand behind it”.

A clear majority of interviewees were in favour of the Government having its own channel “so that it can convey government messages to the people”. Some trust the Government because of its national role; most want to hear its views and tune into RTA news for that reason. “I trust RTA because it belongs to the Government and broadcasts what the Government authorities order,” said a businessman. “But I would like to see the service improved.” Others were more circumspect. “If we don’t trust the Government,” said one man “how do we trust the media that belongs to it?”



unity, consensus and national understanding” said another journalist. “Otherwise we will never pull ourselves out of this difficulty.”

Such perceptions have led some to argue that there is a vital national role for the state broadcaster RTA to play if it could be reformed and made more effective. The Media Law of 2009, passed by the previous parliament by a two thirds majority, was an attempt to equip RTA for that purpose. It allows RTA to play a more independent national role, with a governance structure in which government, parliament and civil society organisations are all represented. But it has not been fully implemented. President Karzai, who was a strong supporter of the idea initially, has proved reluctant to give up direct control of the state media. The emergence of a plural media landscape, in Afghanistan, as in other parts of South Asia, has also weakened the argument for autonomy.

Whether RTA is capable of fulfilling such a role is another question. It is already much weakened and would require visionary leadership to transcend an endemically fissiparous Afghan society. But RTA has some distinct advantages. Our research (see box on preceding page) suggests that despite widespread scepticism about its news, which concentrates too much on the comings and goings of ministers, RTA is still seen as a custodian of national culture and values, reaching out to all major ethnic groups in their own languages. It also has a decentralised structure, which provides scope for provincial radio and TV stations to offer a customised service to their local areas. Even in today’s straitened circumstances, some enterprising RTA station directors are holding their own against the commercial competition, showing what could be achieved with more independent direction and funding. It is also significant that parliamentarians adopted a vision for the future of RTA in the Media Law of 2009, which endorsed its potential to provide the sort of national broadcasting service that is currently lacking.

One problem is that RTA is losing audiences steadily to other media and the chances of it regaining authority and popularity are dwindling with every year of neglect. The infrastructure has been substantially rebuilt, with support from a variety of donors, including Japan, the USA, the UK, France and India. Japan has restored the TV studios; India has helped with microwave links between Kabul and provincial TV stations; the USA has rebuilt the national radio transmitters (and provided Radio Liberty with its own 400 kw transmitter at the same time); the UK has funded FM radio repeater stations in over 20 locations for the BBC World Service and for RTA. To that extent, the national broadcaster, with its huge campus in central Kabul and a staff of several thousand, is well equipped in technical terms to compete with its rivals.

However, it remains a prisoner of government control and has been losing staff to other broadcasters at an alarming rate. The average age of its radio staff is now over 50 and the retirement age has been extended to ensure that key staff can stay on to keep the operation running. The situation in many provincial RTA stations is even more precarious. In RTA Herat, for example, both the TV and radio services have lost qualified staff to the private sector and are dependent on volunteers to maintain their daily schedule of local programmes. The national television service may be attracting younger talent but there is little scope for creativity. Both TV and radio staff are government employees on civil service contracts that pay uncompetitive salaries. As a result, many staff moonlight with other organisations to increase

their incomes, morale is low, and programme standards are declining.

Efforts to reform RTA have foundered on a lack of both Presidential will and donor support. The USA, Afghanistan’s most influential donor, supports private sector media and would only consider supporting RTA reform as part of a wider consortium. The most obvious donor to take the lead is the European Union. In the early years, the EU commissioned at least two reports from foreign experts on how RTA might be re-equipped and reformed to play an autonomous role as a national broadcaster. When the 2009 Media Law promised greater independence and reform for RTA, optimism about its future grew. In the end, however, despite strong support for the case in Afghanistan, Brussels would not underwrite the considerable costs involved.

The present Minister of Information and Culture, Dr S. M. Raheen, who plans to take a new version of the Media Law back to parliament, says “if the EU renews its promise (of funding), that will be very helpful to advance the project”.<sup>93</sup> The Afghan Government has claimed that up to 70 million Euros was offered at one point to support the reform process. However the present EU country policy for Afghanistan makes no mention of the media sector, despite its importance for the development of accountable government and a strong civil society. This lack of EU focus on the Afghan media is a serious disadvantage for the sector at a particularly vulnerable time. The EU is one of the few donors that has the philosophical commitment and the resources to support the reform and revival of RTA, though it would require a significant rethink for the project to regain the level of importance it once had.

There are a number of other European countries, such as the UK, Germany and Denmark, which have strong public service broadcasting traditions but would not, individually, have the required resources to fund a reform programme. What is needed is either a revival of EU interest or a concerted approach by a number of European nations. A number of donors have supported RTA in different ways in the past, but moving RTA towards greater autonomy requires a coherent and well-funded plan.

So far, most western donors have concentrated on more limited projects, choosing areas of investment according to their national priorities. Many discrete projects work well but, where several donors work to different agendas within one institution, as in the piecemeal rehabilitation of RTA, the results can be disappointing. A project to improve RTA broadcasting for young people, for example, which involved the provision of higher salaries, a car and expensive computer equipment for specific programme staff, provoked envy elsewhere in RTA and resulted in most of the equipment being re-allocated to senior staff in other departments. While such behaviour concerns donors, there are real frustrations on the Government side as well.

Though donors have committed themselves under agreements such as the Paris, Accra and Busan Declarations on Aid Effectiveness to harmonise aid programmes and align them to the priorities of partner countries, progress on the ground remains limited. As one senior Afghan official put it: “Our key problem is that donors have their criteria and we have ours and a lot of the time they are not the same. We have choice-based projects and non-choice-based projects and choice-based are only 25%.”<sup>94</sup>

“RTA is losing audiences steadily to other media and the chances of it regaining authority and popularity are dwindling with every year of neglect.”

“Our key problem is that donors have their criteria and we have ours and a lot of the time they are not the same.”

One critical area is RTA's lack of financial autonomy. The Government picks up the bill for RTA, but any increase in advertising cannot be spent directly on much-needed improvements: a major disincentive for RTA management. This has also proved a hurdle for donors, who are reluctant to part with funds without assurances that they will not be put to other uses. The Government has responded to these criticisms by agreeing that RTA can keep half of its advertising and services income in the future – though the other half will still go to the Ministry of Finance. It has also agreed to treat RTA as an independent budgetary unit, which offers the prospect of greater financial autonomy in due course. These modest concessions aim to reassure the donors that RTA is moving in the right direction. “We have taken some practical steps” said the Director General “to turn the institution into the people's property. ... RTA has the Mother Media role in Afghanistan and I believe it should stay with the Afghan public... but if our international friends do not support us in the initial stages, we may not make it.”<sup>95</sup>

The other area of crucial importance is the status of staff and their terms and conditions. Unless RTA staff have terms and conditions comparable to those in the successful parts of the private sector it will be difficult for the institution to attract new blood. But revising staff salaries is difficult while they remain government servants and are paid at government rates. Experience from other countries going through similar reform processes, such as India, shows that the prospect of severing the link with government may not be welcomed by RTA staff, particularly the older ones, for fear that their pensions and other benefits may be jeopardised.

Changing staff terms and conditions need not necessarily involve complete autonomy or the privatisation of the institution. Another way forward would be to turn RTA into a corporation, which would maintain some links with government but have enough autonomy to make its own decisions in financial and personnel matters. Whether a corporation of this kind would guarantee the kind of editorial independence that is important to increase RTA's effectiveness is a critical question.

The Media Law of 2009 provides for RTA to be managed by a commission supervised by the High Media Council, which is broadly representative of government, parliament, the judiciary, civil society and the journalism profession. That may have been a step too far for the President and

“RTA has the Mother Media role in Afghanistan and I believe it should stay with the Afghan public... but if our international friends do not support us in the initial stages, we may not make it.”

the Supreme Court has since ruled against the requirement for parliamentary approval for the appointment of the Director General. A corporation, in which the Government retained some sense of ownership, might not be as free, but it would still be more independent than the present RTA and would have more scope to develop a unique role for itself.

Every media outlet in Afghanistan has to work within the constraints of power realities – some official, some unofficial – and it could be argued that even a nominally autonomous RTA would find it difficult to operate with real independence. The creation of a corporation might be one way to bridge the gap between the President and parliament and find an agreed basis for rescuing RTA from its present rapid decline.

Rapid decline is also the fate of the Government news agency Bakhtar. Until 2001, Bakhtar was the only news agency in Afghanistan, with offices in all the main provinces, providing bulletins for the state broadcasters and state-owned newspapers as well as other outlets. It has a long history, dating back to 1929, and its senior staff remain proud of it, though disappointed that they have been sidelined even by their own government. Like their counterparts in RTA, Bakhtar staff are government servants, working within the Ministry of Information and Culture, and paid at very low rates. The average pay is \$150 per month in Kabul and \$100 in the provinces. As a result, according to one informant, 70% of the staff are over 60 years of age. Resources are also very limited: in February 2011, the Kabul office had only two vehicles; there were some computers but most staff with keyboard skills had left; many of the 24 provincial offices did not even have telephones.

Bakhtar's 30 journalists and five photographers still provide news bulletins and photos for RTA outlets and for the government-run newspapers, the *Kabul Times*, *Anees*, *Hewad* and *Islah*. Their stories are made available without charge via their website and are being used, with and without acknowledgement, by other outlets. But the Government no longer invites Bakhtar journalists to cover some key events at home or presidential visits abroad. Much of this work now goes to staff working in the Government Media and Information Centre (GMIC), which has been funded by the international community (particularly the US and UK) to improve news flows from government to the media and the public. Senior Bakhtar staff are keen that the agency should become independent and the Government has accepted the logic of setting it free. But, as with RTA, this would require a considerable donor investment, which has not been forthcoming.

### Emerging regulatory and legal issues

The Government accepts that its handling of the media sector has had negative as well as positive ramifications. For example, the decision to issue licences on demand, which seemed a very open and positive move after all the earlier restrictions, ignored issues of spectrum management that have now become acute. The Ministry has had to turn away worthwhile applications because spectrum capacity is already exhausted. There are also reports of one channel shadowing another and of spectrum changing hands privately.<sup>96</sup>

The Deputy Minister of Information, Din Muhammad Mobariz Rashedi, accepts that the quality of the programming is very mixed. “We were trying to facilitate the emergence of many outlets, so there was choice” he said, “and we were successful in that. But we have now reached a time where we need to improve the quality of regulation and we have begun this work – to hold the hands of the weak and to help the strong ones to become stronger”.<sup>97</sup> The Deputy Minister said “in terms of information needs, we are not there yet”. He was also critical of the lack of programme diversity. “If you watch TV channels, you will see news, music and round table discussions. People are tired of these programmes. We need more children's programmes, more sports, more analytical programmes. We need to diversify the range of programmes”.

The Government recognises that the present minimal regulatory system is not working very effectively and that it needs help to develop mechanisms and procedures to tackle emerging issues like spectrum management. However, the tussle between the Government and parliament over the

## Public demand for improved regulation

Many of those interviewed look to the Government for firmer action in managing the media sector and controlling the quality of the programmes. The Government is also seen by some as having a responsibility “to watch the media and to stop the spread of enmity and ethnic conflicts.” “Rules and procedures should be laid down” said a woman from Kabul university, “so that individuals are not abused in TV discussions”. An opinion often expressed is that “the Government should not increase the number of channels.” “The number of channels should be decreased and the quality of programmes increased” said another woman, who also wanted TV presenters to adopt Islamic dress. “Political leaders should not be able to establish TV channels to serve their own interests” said a woman from Guldara district.

Others feel that the Government “has no authority to control the programmes of a TV channel”. “Since the creators of the media are high ranking authorities or commanders and many are being helped by foreign countries, therefore they broadcast whatever they want and the Government is not able to prevent them” said one illiterate woman in Herat. Another group of educated Herati women all agreed that “there is a grave need for the monitoring and control of the media”. They felt there should be “an impartial commission to inspect and control the stations, monitor TV and radio programmes and ban those that violate proper norms”. If such a commission is set up, “the result will be better programmes and children will not be led astray”.

implementation of the Media Law – which affects not only RTA but the regulatory institutions as well – has highlighted a damaging lack of consensus that is delaying progress on some key issues. The Afghan Government is some way from accepting the idea of either an autonomous RTA or independent regulation of the media, and may come under less pressure from the present parliament than the previous one. It also benefits from the divisions within the media industry and among journalists themselves. Some issues like spectrum management may seem susceptible to technical solutions but they also involve choices about the use of a limited resource. Broader questions like ‘who regulates and in whose interest?’ require agreement on the answers from a range of stakeholders if durable solutions are to be found in the public interest.

The Media Law of 2009 sets out worthy objectives relating to ‘freedom of thought and speech’, the promotion of a ‘free, independent and pluralistic mass media’ and the protection of the ‘rights of journalists’.<sup>98</sup> But it also contains a long list of ‘materials prohibited to be broadcast’ which the Government is widely seen to have misused to bear down on its critics, particularly during the last Presidential election. These include works and materials ‘contrary to the principles and provisions of the holy religion of Islam’ or ‘defamatory, insulting and offensive to real or legal persons’.

The Government has also been criticised for some of its appointments to regulatory bodies, particularly the High Media Council, which was set up under the new Media Law to plan and approve long-term media policy. The Council will also nominate members of the RTA Commission and the Mass Media Commission, which is tasked with the approval of licences, the monitoring of the media and the review of complaints. According to the Media Law, the Council must have ‘two experienced professionals in the field of journalism and two representatives of civil society, proposed by them.’ Journalists’ representatives believed this could solve their problems by giving them a voice at the highest level.<sup>99</sup> But they say, despite promises to their unions, the Government made its own appointments without election or consultation.

There are some notable lacunae in the present Afghan legal framework in relation to various media-related rights. Defamation and libel are mentioned in the Media Law’s list of prohibitions, but the laws relating to contempt, to incitement and hate speech are either inadequate, non-existent or not enforced by the Government or the courts. Copyright laws do not seem to operate at all. There are laws imposing draconian punishments for

behaviour offensive to the Muslim religion and these have sometimes been used against the media. But the legal system is taking its time to catch up with some of the more complex implications of the recent media revolution.

Media institutions in Afghanistan are not, to date, bound by a set of common rules and their behaviour and conduct tends to be governed by commercial, personal or political choices. The same applies to the behaviour of the Government in its role as regulator. Media violations are presently dealt with by state institutions, often acting on an ad hoc basis under pressure from the Ulema Council or other interest groups. The Ministry of Information and Culture, the leading government institution responsible for the media sector, is caught between two conflicting demands: the requirement to protect media freedom, as laid down in the Media Law, and pressures from powerful interest groups who wish to bring the sector under greater control. The Ministry is usually given the task of justifying the behaviour of other government institutions (such as the President’s office, courts or security institutions) who take matters into their own hands to deal with what they perceive as cases of violation.

What is lacking at the moment is an effective regulatory regime with clear and well-articulated lines of responsibility to govern the media sector and structure the relationship between the regulator, media institutions, religious groups and civil society.

**Below** A focus group discusses the present state of the Afghan media. Research indicates that the public would like to see more effective regulation and more varied programming.



BBC AFGHAN EDUCATION PROJECTS



## PART 6

## ‘Transition’ and the Afghan media’s uncertain future: some conclusions

The role of the donors is under scrutiny at the moment because of the forthcoming ‘transition’ and the fear that it may reduce levels of external support. After a presence of ten years in Afghanistan, many in the west are arguing that state-building hasn’t worked, that corruption is rife, and that Afghans should be left to work out their own solutions. Many Afghans see the changing terminology as

a thin veneer that masks the international community’s intention to cut its losses in Afghanistan – while saving as much face as possible.

With the USA and the UK focussing on a phased end to military engagement and the complete transfer of security responsibility to Afghan forces by 2014, everyone expects a reduction in aid and investment in Afghanistan, particularly in

military expenditure and associated contract work. Some countries, such as the UK, are committed to maintaining current levels of development aid, but others are not. Despite the assurances given at the Bonn conference in December 2011, the recent announcement of very deep cuts in USAID funding for Afghanistan, which have already resulted in hundreds of NGO aid workers being made redundant, are a worrying signal from the country’s largest donor.<sup>100</sup> Given the small size of the Afghan advertising market, there are obvious concerns that much of the media sector will be unsustainable if donor support is withdrawn precipitously.

One problem is that much international aid is short-term. Much aid from the USA is provided on a one-year basis, with no guarantee of funds for future development. Practitioners know that establishing new media initiatives takes time but that planning horizons are, unfortunately, limited.

A hard-headed analysis suggests that a decline in donor funding will be uncomfortable even for some of the big players. FM radio stations in small provincial towns with no real advertising market may well go to the wall. Many of these stations have benefited from donor-funded advertising – often at very generous levels – which will surely decline.

While Western funding may decline, the same may not be true for support from Iran or other regional powers for some of the ‘warlord’ TV stations. They will continue

to support their own protégées in their media ambitions. Peace talks with those that President Karzai has termed his “brothers” among the Taliban have not proved positive so far, but there is already a marked trend towards greater conservatism as the country speculates on what military transition and political reconciliation might mean. Some

of the freedoms that journalists have enjoyed to criticise President Karzai and his allies have been exercised under the protective umbrella of the ISAF presence. Will the same rights be enjoyed if ISAF withdraws and the Taliban are back in government? It is an uncomfortable question

for Afghanistan’s nascent civil society.

The Taliban have shown by their use of the new media that they have changed considerably since 2001, but they remain a very authoritarian movement. The leadership may have learnt some important lessons but the hunting and killing of the middle rank leaders has produced a radicalised young leadership at local level, which may not be willing to compromise.

The achievements of the past ten years have been patchy. Some investment has been wasted. Some Afghans have sung Western tunes for the wrong reasons. But, despite justifiable criticisms, the country has experienced a media revolution, in TV, Radio and mobile telephony, which has begun to transform the public domain. New energies have been released, new entrepreneurs created, new freedoms enjoyed. Warlords and Taliban still enforce their will by extra-judicial means, but the balance has shifted and it is critically important for the future of the country that this momentum is maintained.

Given the scale of international investment in recent years, some slimming down of the media sector may be inevitable. It is important, however, that the international community accepts a continuing responsibility for some of the media initiatives it has supported and encouraged. Otherwise, there is a danger, given the instability of the country and its fragile progress to date, that much that is valuable will be lost.

It is not the role of this study to recommend specific policy prescriptions for the future of the media in Afghanistan, but the interviews, perspectives and analysis gathered for this study point to a number of policy ideas that could command public support and merit further consideration:

- *Helping to build a plural media by supporting institutions and initiatives that have proved their worth for the Afghan public domain*

Despite the emergence of a strong commercial TV sector, the number of independent Afghan media institutions that add value to the public domain, improve the flow of information and contribute to the accountability of government and other power-holders remains limited. With military transition and the prospect of reduced western funding, strategic support for such institutions and programme initiatives will become more important if the public domain is not to become influenced disproportionately by ‘warlord’ and ethnic media.

Donors could review the present short-term project financing cycles and consider longer term institutional support for media initiatives with a critical role to play. They could re-examine existing systems of programme commissioning, sponsorship and placement, which often undermine station identity and development. More aid could be structured to incentivise Afghan broadcasters, production houses and media professionals to make programmes that cater to the needs of the local population. This would also result in the better stations attracting more viewers and listeners, more advertising and sponsorship and becoming, ultimately, more sustainable.

“A hard-headed analysis suggests that a decline in donor funding will be uncomfortable even for some of the big players.”

“The Taliban have shown by their use of the new media that they have changed considerably since 2001, but they remain a very authoritarian movement.”

- *Supporting local radio stations at a level that can be sustained*

There are currently more local radio stations than the market can support sustainably. Many local radio stations have become dependent on windfalls from ISAF, PRTs and internationally-supported advertising campaigns and will be vulnerable to any sudden reduction of support. If local radio is to survive and to serve as a voice of its communities, it needs to be re-oriented to local needs and run according to community priorities. Where possible, consolidation should be encouraged and training needs should be focussed on community participation, business management and sustainability.

- *Improving donor coordination and setting up an Afghan Media Trust Fund*

Despite a great deal of donor investment in the Afghan media sector, the results have often been piecemeal and short-term. There is a need to reduce duplication of effort – in training particularly – and to improve coordination. Donors with similar objectives could be encouraged to work together and to agree priorities with the Afghan Government. An Afghan Media Trust Fund – supported by donors but managed independently – could provide valuable support for specific areas of media development, such as programme innovation and Afghan content production.

- *Maintaining international media coverage of Afghanistan and providing more training opportunities for Afghan media personnel*

The role of international broadcasters like the BBC, Voice of America and Radio Liberty in providing coverage of Afghan news developments will be critical for the foreseeable future to maintain a well-informed public domain in Afghanistan. These services in Afghan languages – and the role of the international press corps – provide a benchmark for Afghan journalists and reinforce their own reporting activities. More opportunities for Afghan journalists to work with the international media will help to broaden the skill base of the profession.

- *Providing political support, funding and technical expertise to the Afghan Government to create a more effective regulatory system for the media*

The existing regulatory system is not working well. The unrestricted licensing of TV and radio stations, regardless of the size of the advertising market or the needs of the viewing and listening public, has resulted in some serious weaknesses. There is an urgent need for improved technical management of the TV spectrum and a more systematic approach to the allocation of licences. There is a lack of transparency about the ownership of TV and radio stations and a lack of clarity about their obligations to the public. There is no adequate mechanism to monitor the output of TV or radio stations or police abuse of the airwaves to inflame sectarian or ethnic divisions or to defame individuals. At the local level, too many TV and radio stations struggle to survive. There is a strong case for fewer stations with higher quality thresholds.

The Government has not, to date, implemented the Media Law in full, which involves the transfer of important regulatory responsibilities to the High Media Council, the Mass Media Commission and the RTA Commission. Whether the Government or the High Media Council is responsible, these issues need to be addressed urgently. The Ministry of Information and Culture is actively seeking support in these fields and would welcome technical help from the donor community.

- *Making RTA a public corporation, with greater autonomy in financial and personnel matters, so it can improve its effectiveness as a public service broadcaster*

RTA retains considerable residual public support because it is perceived as a national institution that speaks to the country as a whole. But it is losing staff and audiences to the new commercial competition because its salaries are uncompetitive and its management lacks the freedom to respond to the new environment. While President and parliament disagree about the future of RTA, there is a strong case for giving it greater institutional autonomy, even if the Government retains a degree of supervision and control. The establishment of a broadcasting corporation would be a first step to make RTA more effective in earning its own living and in providing a comprehensive service of education, information and entertainment through its national and regional outlets. The state news agency, Bakhtar, is increasingly uncompetitive. It already provides RTA with news bulletins and would have a more viable future as its news arm.

- *Working with the Afghan Government and parliament to improve their accountability to the public*

The creation of the Government Media Information Centre (GMIC) has established a system of spokespersons to provide regular briefings for the press. But its impact on the accountability of politicians has been limited. Many power-holders operate undemocratically and journalists have to be careful what they report. The Afghan media should be encouraged to play a greater role in making ministers and parliamentarians more accessible and accountable to the public. RTA should play a greater role in the broadcasting of parliament. Donors could support more programmes that bring politicians and the public together.

- *Encouraging greater unity and self-regulation of the journalism profession and of media proprietors*

Lack of unity and common purpose among both media proprietors and unions are serious impediments to the development of a healthy media sector, which sets its own standards for the employment of media personnel and codes of professional conduct. Donors could encourage moves towards unity and the development of agreed working practices and codes of conduct based on consultation among journalists and with other stakeholders. Unions should be incentivised to develop their membership on a voluntary, national and inclusive basis. Links with journalists' and proprietors' associations in other countries should be facilitated to build greater professionalism and effectiveness.

- *Reviewing the role and impact of ISAF-run media operations and transferring some of these to Afghan ownership as part of the transition process in a sensitive way*

ISAF runs a fortnightly national newspaper and approximately 100 small radio stations, many of them operating within PRTs, yet the impact of this large operation on Afghan public opinion has been very limited. We recommend that ISAF hold discussions with the Government of Afghanistan about the future of these media operations in the post-transition period. The *Sada-e-Azadi* newspaper seems unlikely to be sustainable in its present form, but some of the radio stations might have a future as part of RTA or if run by other media providers for local community use.

“Despite a great deal of donor investment in the Afghan media sector, the results have often been piecemeal and short-term.”

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> This paper was written over a period of nearly twelve months. After a period of desk research and interviews with Afghan specialists in the UK, the authors spent three weeks in Afghanistan in early 2011, carrying out a series of over 70 individual interviews with a range of stakeholders. These included government ministers and officials, parliamentarians, donors, television and radio managers, production houses, print journalists and news agencies, journalists' unions, human rights and media monitoring organisations, women's organisations, and other civil society representatives. The majority of interviews in Afghanistan were conducted in Kabul. A four day visit to Herat in early March provided an opportunity to tap into a range of opinions in that city. A planned visit to Jalalabad had to be abandoned because of security concerns. To investigate public perceptions of the Afghan media, a series of 16 Focus Group Discussions were conducted in Kabul and Herat districts between June and September. Though limited in scope, this qualitative research provided feedback from city and countryside, from men and women, educated and uneducated, and from both Dari-speaking and Pashto-speaking populations.
- <sup>2</sup> Ludwig W. Adamec, *Afghanistan, 1900-1923: a diplomatic history* (University of California Press 1967)
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>4</sup> James Lyons, *Buffer State* (1910), quoted by Vartan Gregorian in *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernisation 1880-1946* (Stanford University Press, 1969)
- <sup>5</sup> On 6 June 2002, a ministerial declaration set out the Interim Government's commitment to a free media and to the transformation of RTA and the Bakhtar news agency into 'national public service institutions'
- <sup>6</sup> Altai Consulting, *Afghan Media in 2010*, Synthesis Report, p 50
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., p 98
- <sup>8</sup> Asia Foundation Survey of 2011, pp 173-174.
- <sup>9</sup> Ibid., pp 169-170
- <sup>10</sup> Altai Synthesis Report, pp 102-103
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., p 10
- <sup>12</sup> Asia Foundation Survey of 2011, p 173
- <sup>13</sup> Altai Synthesis Report, p 113
- <sup>14</sup> The New Yorker, Profile of Saad Mohseni, by Ken Auletta, 5 July 2010
- <sup>15</sup> Auletta quotes this conversation with Richard Holbrooke in the same profile
- <sup>16</sup> Altai Synthesis Report, p 113
- <sup>17</sup> Interview, Haji Fazel Karim Fazel, Kabul, 28 February, 2011
- <sup>18</sup> Altai Synthesis Report, p 113
- <sup>19</sup> Quoted in Altai Kabul City report, p 9
- <sup>20</sup> Altai Synthesis Report, p 113
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid., p 119
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>23</sup> Interview, Shahir Zahine, Kabul, 24 February, 2011
- <sup>24</sup> Altai Synthesis Report, pp 116 and 122
- <sup>25</sup> Interview, Aria Raofian, Chief Editor of Radio Muzhda, Herat, 7 March 2011
- <sup>26</sup> Interview, Abdul Salam Rahimy, Kabul, 28 February 2011
- <sup>27</sup> Altai Synthesis Report, p 113
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid., p 119
- <sup>29</sup> Interview, Charmaine Anderson, Kabul, 6 March 2011
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Altai Synthesis Report, p 113
- <sup>32</sup> See Wall Street Journal, online edition, 10 August 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704875004575374984291866528.html>
- <sup>33</sup> The Government's action was criticised by both national and international media organisations. See, for example, <http://kabulpress.org/my/spip.php?article20856>
- <sup>34</sup> Interview, Horia Mosadiq, London, 16 September 2011
- <sup>35</sup> Interview, Daud Azami, Kabul, 23 February 2011
- <sup>36</sup> Interview, Abdul Hakim Mujahid, Kabul, 6 March 2011
- <sup>37</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>38</sup> Interview, Shuaib Sharifi, Kabul, 24 February 2011.
- <sup>39</sup> Interview, Haji Sultan Muhammad Awrang, Kabul, 27 February 2011
- <sup>40</sup> Interview, Qasim Akhgar, Kabul, 27 February 2011
- <sup>41</sup> Interview, Ahmad Nader Nadery, Kabul, 6 March 2011
- <sup>42</sup> Interview, Haji Muhammad Rafiq Shaheer, Kabul, 4 March 2011
- <sup>43</sup> Interview, Haji Muhammad Muhaqiq, Kabul, 2 March 2011
- <sup>44</sup> Interview, Faizullah Zaki, Kabul, 6 March 2011
- <sup>45</sup> Focus Discussion Groups, Kabul and Herat districts, June, July and September 2011
- <sup>46</sup> Interview, Leeda Yacgoubi and Zarin Hamid, Kabul, 2 March 2011
- <sup>47</sup> New Yorker profile, 5 July 2010.
- <sup>48</sup> Interview, Haji Muhammad Muhaqiq, Kabul, 2 March 2011



- <sup>49</sup> Interview, Mir Ahmad Joyenda, Kabul, 24 February 2011
- <sup>50</sup> Interview, Seddiqullah Tawhidi, Director of NAI, Kabul, 24 February 2011
- <sup>51</sup> Interview, Kate Clark, London, 8 February 2011
- <sup>52</sup> Interview, William Reeve, London, 28 January 2011
- <sup>53</sup> Interview, Danish Karokhel, Kabul, 27 February, 2011
- <sup>54</sup> Telephone interview, Gordon Adam, Media Support Solutions, 17 February 2011
- <sup>55</sup> Altai Synthesis Report, p 119
- <sup>56</sup> Ibid., pp 64-65
- <sup>57</sup> *Kabul weekly nearing its end*, Editorial, Sunday, 30 January 2011
- <sup>58</sup> Focus Discussion Group, Kabul University women staff, July 2011
- <sup>59</sup> Interview, Kate Clark, London, 8 February 2011
- <sup>60</sup> Interview, Seddiqullah Tawhidi, 24 February 2011. NAI has set up a special website which provides details of all such incidents. See <http://data.nai.org.af/>
- <sup>61</sup> Dr A. G. Ravan Farhadi, *Mahmud Tarzi, Editorials and Major Articles from Seraj ul-Akhbar* (Baihaqi, Kabul 1977)
- <sup>62</sup> May Schinasi, *Afghanistan at the beginning of the twentieth century: Nationalism and Journalism in Afghanistan: a study of Seraj ul-Akhbar* (1911-1918)
- <sup>63</sup> Farhadi, op. cit., p 68
- <sup>64</sup> Ibid., p 53
- <sup>65</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>66</sup> See Peter Cary, *An Explosion of News: the state of media in Afghanistan*, published by the National Endowment for Democracy, February 2012, pp 24-29. <http://cima.ned.org/publications/explosion-news-state-media-afghanistan?>
- <sup>67</sup> Request for Applications (RFA) No 306-10-0024 for the Implementation of the Afghanistan Media Development and Empowerment Project, 10 June 2010
- <sup>68</sup> Altai Synthesis Report, p 119
- <sup>69</sup> Ibid., pp 68-69
- <sup>70</sup> Interview, Abdul Salam Rahimy, Kabul, 28 February 2011
- <sup>71</sup> Altai Synthesis Report, p 69
- <sup>72</sup> Ibid., p 79
- <sup>73</sup> Ibid., p 73
- <sup>74</sup> Ibid., pp 71-72
- <sup>75</sup> Interview, Eric Davin, Kabul, 2 March 2011
- <sup>76</sup> Interview, Dr Muhammad Akbar, Media Support Solutions, Kabul, 25 February 2011
- <sup>77</sup> Interview, Leeda Yacquobi and Zareen Hamid, Aghan Women's Network, Kabul, 2 March 2011
- <sup>78</sup> Interview, Mir Ahmad Joyenda, Kabul, 24 February 2011
- <sup>79</sup> United States Institute of Peace, Afghanistan Media Assessment, December 2010: *Peaceworks*, by Eran Fraenkel, Emrys Shoemaker and Sheldon Himelfarb, p 38
- <sup>80</sup> Interview, Sultan Muhammed Awrang, Kabul, 27 February 2011
- <sup>81</sup> Altai survey, Herat city report, p 24
- <sup>82</sup> Interview, Maqsoud Ehrari, Asia TV, Herat, 8 March 2011
- <sup>83</sup> Altai survey, Herat city report, p 22
- <sup>84</sup> Ibid., p 25
- <sup>85</sup> Interview, Chief Editor, Radio Muzhda, Herat, 7 March 2011
- <sup>86</sup> Interview, Professor S. Y. Hazin, Herat University Radio Station, 7 March 2011
- <sup>87</sup> Interview, Hamid Momin, Herat Journalism Centre, 8 March 2011
- <sup>88</sup> Interview, Nur Ahmad Karim, Herat, 9 March 2011
- <sup>89</sup> Interview, Abdul Rahman Salahi, Herat, 8 March 2011
- <sup>90</sup> Interview, Humayun Nazeri, Herat, 9 March 2011
- <sup>91</sup> Altai survey, Jalalabad city report, p 15
- <sup>92</sup> See the Yak TV website and facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/ITVYak-Television/17949063542>
- <sup>93</sup> Interview, Dr S. M. Raheen, Minister of Information and Culture, Kabul, 26 February 2011
- <sup>94</sup> Interview, Din Muhammad Mobariz Rashedi, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Information and Culture, Kabul, 27 February 2011
- <sup>95</sup> Interview, Zarin Anzor, DG, RTA, Kabul, 10 March 2011
- <sup>96</sup> Interview, Abdul Salam Rahimy, Kabul, 28 February 2011
- <sup>97</sup> Interview, Din Muhammad Mobariz Rashedi, Kabul, 23 February 2011
- <sup>98</sup> Mass Media Law of 2009, General provisions, article 2
- <sup>99</sup> Interview, Rahimullah Samander, Kabul, 26 February 2011
- <sup>100</sup> New York Times, 5 December 2012, Aid agencies fear reversals after US exit. [http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/06/world/asia/us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-worries-aid-groups.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/06/world/asia/us-withdrawal-from-afghanistan-worries-aid-groups.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all)

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Authors: David Page and Shirazuddin Siddiqi  
Commissioning Editor: James Deane  
Editor: Angela Hawke  
Designer: Lance Bellers



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Registered office: Bush House, PO Box 76, Strand, London WC2B 4PH, UK.

**Tel** +44 (0) 20 7557 2462

**Fax** +44 (0) 20 7397 1622

**Email** [media.action@bbc.co.uk](mailto:media.action@bbc.co.uk)

**Web** [bbcmediaaction.org](http://bbcmediaaction.org)

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