

A NOTE FROM THE FIELD

# THE GROWING MEDIA LANDSCAPE IN AFGHANISTAN

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*UN public information officer Dominic Medley assesses the current state of the Afghan media sector. He argues that there has been much progress over the last nine years, but more needs to be done to support domestic efforts to communicate directly with the Afghan public.*



Photo courtesy of Fardin Waezi/UNAMA.

The growth of the media in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban in 2001 has been a remarkable success story. Under the Taliban regime, there were no broadcasters in Afghanistan aside from the state-controlled national output. Music and even kite flying were banned. In 2002 there was no mobile phone network at all; now over 8 million Afghans have handsets. Television, radio, newspapers, and magazines have boomed in recent years. The weekly press conferences at the United Nations in Kabul regularly attract twenty or more cameras from the new television stations. And with fibre optic cables currently being installed, access to the Internet has become cheaper and easier. Already, young people in the cities have e-mail accounts and surf at internet cafes.

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Telecommunications and mobile phone companies are leading the way. Roshan, with its experience in Kenya, has gained over 3.5 million subscribers since its inception in 2003,<sup>1</sup> and MTN Afghanistan was recently granted a \$65 million loan and \$10 million in equity by the International Finance Corporation.<sup>2</sup> Mobile phone banking is even being rolled out, and has been used for the transfer of money and salaries, presenting an opportunity to avoid the modern-day highway robbery that has proliferated under conditions of insecurity.

The success of the media sector seems to reflect growing optimism in Afghanistan. In January 2010 the BBC, ABC News and Germany's ARD ran an opinion poll that showed 70 per cent of Afghans believed Afghanistan was going in the right direction, a jump from 40 per cent a year ago.<sup>3</sup> NATO issued a statement saying it was encouraged by the poll.<sup>4</sup> However, there is much to be done to support the fledging indigenous media sector, and international efforts must go beyond appealing to foreign audiences through favoured 'Strategic Communications' mechanisms. The challenge ahead is to grow domestic capacity and ensure Afghan media can

communicate effectively with the Afghan public, in order to build a lasting legacy.

### **Increasing Confidence**

Appreciation for the media in Afghanistan is high. A 2009 opinion survey by the Asia Foundation showed 70 per cent of respondents had confidence in the broadcast media, with 62 per cent having confidence in print media.<sup>5</sup> Though the survey noted a fall in confidence levels since 2006, when the figure was 84 per cent, the results are nevertheless reassuring.

The success of the media is also notable in comparison with other institutions and groups in Afghanistan. An International Republican Institute (IRI) survey published before the August 2009 elections showed a higher level of confidence in the media than in the government, the police, the president, parliament, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force, opposition candidates, and the Taliban. Only the Afghan National Army did better than the media.<sup>6</sup> This is particularly interesting since Afghans are all too familiar with propaganda: three decades of chaos has conditioned them to dissect the news and balance information from multiple sources.

### **The Media Landscape**

According to the same 2009 Asia Foundation poll, 81 per cent of people surveyed owned a radio, 41 per cent owned a TV and 52 per cent owned a mobile phone – only 6 per cent, on the other hand, owned a computer. The rural and urban breakdown from the survey in 2008 shows high television ownership in urban areas and low (26 per cent) in rural areas, with radio, television and personal interaction the primary sources of information overall. Newspapers, however, scored very low.

The media scene is led by the Moby Media Group, set up by four Afghan-Australian siblings who returned from Melbourne in 2002. In 2003 they established the pop music station Radio Arman, which has proven hugely popular, and in 2004 they established Tolo TV, which now claims more than 50 per cent of the market share. Its sister Pashto station, Lemar TV, has a good reach in

the south and east. Moby also publishes a monthly magazine for the foreign community in Kabul, and owns a number of production and advertising companies. Most famously, the company has become known for Afghanistan's version of 'Pop Idol', *Afghan Star*, coverage of which was made into a worldwide award-winning documentary.

The national broadcaster, Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA), has been under pressure for years to reform into a public broadcaster model similar to that of the BBC. So far though, little progress has been made and the new minister of information and culture retains a firm grip on all RTA programming (though he is far more liberal than his predecessor). Indeed, reports by the Media Commission during the 2009 presidential elections showed a clear bias in favour of President Karzai on RTA, by as much as 70 per cent in favour compared to the other leading candidates.

Other indigenous channels offer a mix of entertainment and news, and are independent (such as the popular Toto TV) or biased, such as those funded by Afghan warlords or gemstone dealers (such as Ayna TV controlled by General Rashid Dostum, the northern strongman; Ariana TV owned by AWCC mobile phone boss Ehsan Bayatt; and Noor TV owned by former president and leader of the Jamiat-e-Islami party Burhanuddin Rabbani). Other regional stations in major cities are likely to be controlled by the local governor. These channels are independent from the national broadcaster and survive on their own funding or advertising. It is amazing to note the massive growth in the industry, the thirst of the audience for more choice, and the willingness of businessmen or politically linked businesses to invest in the expensive world of broadcasting. It will be interesting to see how many survive the next five years until the 2014 presidential election.

### *Afghans are all too familiar with propaganda*

Radio is still the principal medium for most people in Afghanistan. In many



Afghan journalists attend a Kabul press conference. Photo courtesy of Fardin Waezi/UNAMA.

areas of the country a battery-powered radio is the only available source of news. Nationwide stations lead on Afghanistan's radio coverage, but there are also many national network-linked local stations that receive centrally produced news and programming. Similarly, international broadcasters are also performing well in Afghanistan's domestic broadcasting boom. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Radio Azadi service (broadcast from Prague) has a strong news and information reputation, as does Voice of America (VOA) radio and the BBC Persian Pashto Service. VOA's TV service Ashna TV broadcasts nationally on RTA Afghanistan from 18:00-19:00 in Dari and Pashto.

Low newspaper readership in Afghanistan corresponds with Afghanistan's widespread illiteracy (some figures suggest rates as high as 70 per cent and higher still among women). However, the number of publications registered at the Ministry of Information and Culture runs

into the hundreds. Most daily or weekly papers have a print run of 5-10,000 copies with some using a distribution network to the major cities, but nowhere near the ISAF newspaper print run of 250,000. The 2009 IRI survey found that, whilst 40 per cent of respondents did not read newspapers, amongst those who do, the ISAF-run newspaper scored the highest with 15 per cent of respondents saying they had read it. However, this is probably more linked to its massive print run and

### *The Afghan newspaper sector is still undeveloped*

countrywide distribution, in comparison to other smaller and localised papers. Overall, the Afghan newspaper sector is still undeveloped: newspapers report top-level developments and appeal to ministers, bureaucrats and urban

dwellers, but they rarely engage with the wider potential Afghan readership by covering national interest issues or local concerns.

### **Under Attack**

Despite the boom, freedom of expression and the safety of journalists in Afghanistan is still poor. Reporters San Frontières has tracked the decline of press freedom in Afghanistan over the years: Afghanistan now ranks 149 out of 175 countries in the World Press Freedom Index, down from 104 in 2002.<sup>7</sup> During 2009, two journalists were killed, including *Calgary Herald* reporter Michelle Lang who had been embedded with the military. In early 2010 the *Sunday Mirror's* defence correspondent Rupert Hamer was killed and photographer Philip Coburn seriously wounded whilst embedded with US Marines in Helmand.

The deliberate targeting of foreign journalists also includes kidnapping and

hostage-taking. On 29 December 2009, a *France 3* crew consisting of a French reporter and cameraman and two Afghan assistants were kidnapped. 2008 and 2009 also saw the kidnapping of a number of international journalists who were held for long periods of time (including Channel 4 documentary-makers Sean Langan in March 2008, and David Rohde of the *New York Times* from November 2008 for eight months). Afghan journalists are regularly detained without charge by government authorities (for three nights in the case of two Afghan *Al Jazeera* producers in June 2009) and frequently receive threatening phone calls from all sides demanding they broadcast both pro-government and pro-insurgent propaganda. For example, TV stations regularly receive DVDs from insurgent groups insisting they are broadcast; and other discs come from government authorities (when I worked at Tolo TV in 2007 on a number of occasions the newsroom received DVDs from government sources showing teenagers, usually Pakistani, confessing a desire to be suicide bombers).

In its influential 2008 report on Afghanistan, Human Rights Watch noted:<sup>8</sup>

The blossoming of an independent media sector was once seen as a rare success of the post-Taliban government. But the increasingly authoritarian government has repressed critical journalism, leading to self-censorship. Dozens of journalists have been detained, some held without charge for days, weeks, or months.

The most dangerous areas for journalists are in the south and east of the country where the armed conflict and the resulting propaganda war are most fierce. Insurgent groups have used murder, arson, and intimidation to try to stop reporting they see as unsympathetic. The government also exerts undue pressure on reporters in conflict areas who have legitimate journalistic contacts with insurgent groups.

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights 2009 report also reported a worsening situation for freedom of expression during the previous year:<sup>9</sup>

Ongoing attacks on freedom of expression, particularly in relation to media and human rights activists, are intrinsically linked to abusive power structures and deeply entrenched impunity. The ability of media actors, civil society groups and other Afghan citizens to freely express their opinions and thoughts came under attack across Afghanistan throughout 2008.

### Election Coverage

However, the August 2009 elections generated widespread interest and media coverage, with frequent talk shows, lively debate, roundtables, and special programming, and proved a boon to the fledgling Afghan media sector. At a UN Security Council briefing in September 2009, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan Kai Eide, noted: 'The election campaign was characterized by a public engagement that Afghanistan has never seen before.'<sup>10</sup>

The spurt of election-generated media activity was captured in a report by the US-funded media development NGO Internews:<sup>11</sup>

Afghanistan's August 20, 2009 presidential and provincial council election represents a milestone in the development of Afghan media. The growth and increasing sophistication of Afghanistan's independent media is one of the clearest success stories of the last eight years of international aid. Given illiteracy rates [of] up to 70 per cent, broadcast media has been at the forefront, with FM radio stations now broadcasting in large and small towns around the country, and television becoming increasingly important in larger cities. Much of this expansion has occurred between the 2004 presidential election and today. Media serves many goals, but none more important than ensuring an informed electorate can vote for their leaders, hold them accountable, and have confidence in the future.

The election campaign was marked by two major US-style presidential debates which – although of questionable success – were nevertheless groundbreaking. Tolo TV left an empty podium centre stage when President Karzai failed to appear

with the key contenders, Dr Abdullah Abdullah and Dr Ashraf Ghani, who were left to debate alone. At a second debate hosted by the national broadcaster and RFE/RL, Dr Abdullah declined to participate, though President Karzai did attend. There were also debates for other candidates, and for provincial council candidates.

Most media outlets had special programmes running throughout the election campaign and extensive news bulletin coverage of candidates' press conferences and Independent Election Commission announcements. However, these were of varying utility, as candidates' reactions to their opponents' policy announcements were few and far between. Examination of the platforms and policies of candidates was done in the debates rather than in daily news bulletins, which suited election campaigns based more on personality than the issues at hand.

### *All of the international organisations in Afghanistan have media advisers*

#### Strategic Communications

Against this media backdrop, enter Strategic Communications, or 'StratCom'. All of the international organisations in Afghanistan have media advisers. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) expanded its media team across the country in 2009, and ISAF has journalists operating in the Provincial Reconstruction Teams. International community press officers meet weekly at UNAMA. USAID-sponsored media advisers work in government ministries and considerable resources have been invested in the new Government Media and Information Centre to make it the hub for media in Afghanistan, as well as a service provider to the ministries. The Afghan government receives massive investment from the international community to enhance its media relations, together with past support from large Western companies such as the Lincoln Group, Rendon Group and

Hill & Knowlton, who work directly with ministries and whose budgets and salaries added up to hundreds of thousands of dollars a year.

In response, the Afghan domestic media sector has a healthy objective attitude, perhaps suspecting that the government, and particularly ISAF, needs them more than they need the government. This creates tension, and efforts to streamline relations are an ongoing priority. But it is clear that since 2002 the indigenous media capability has progressed far quicker than corresponding government media or spokesperson units.

StratCom in Afghanistan seems to have developed along the following theme: 'We're losing the war, we're losing hearts and minds and our message is not getting across. Therefore we can do one of two things: shoot the messenger (which usually consists of complaining about embedded journalism or the lack of positive reporting on Afghanistan); or hire media advisers and numerous strategic communication consultants (myself and the UN included) to get the message out.' The interest in the Government Media and Information Centre also indicates the importance the Afghan government places on communicating to members of the international coalition, in particular the state of the counter-insurgency (COIN) campaign.

### *Most international journalists do want a better Afghanistan*

#### **The Other Battlefield**

But StratCom omits the basic principle of reaching out to people through existing structures – such as local media organisations – and good old-fashioned networking. More always needs to be done at the personal level in Afghanistan. Tea-drinking and building relationships may take time, but it is still essential despite e-mails with fancy signatures and well-designed press release templates (most of which are never in the key languages of Dari and Pashto).

The media are allies: especially the Afghan media. They did not exist under

the Taliban and have more than most to fear from a Taliban resurgence. Similarly, most experienced foreign correspondents have been coming to Afghanistan for longer than the nation-builders and capacity-builders. Despite their cynicism, most of these international journalists do want a better Afghanistan.

### *More media advisers will undoubtedly be sent into the mêlée*

Lord Paddy Ashdown, the former High Representative to Bosnia and Herzegovina who very nearly became the UN Special Representative for Afghanistan in early 2008, is frequently asked about the challenge of post-conflict reconstruction. In his book, *Swords and Ploughshares*, Lord Ashdown highlights the importance of the media in all operations – media and public information outlets are 'just as important in successful interventions as are armies and administrators.'<sup>12</sup> Lord Ashdown stressed that public opinion is fought on two battlegrounds – the international and domestic – with the former the 'less important of the two' since the battle for reconstruction cannot be won without the support of the public.<sup>13</sup>

Though the UN strives to connect with the Afghan audience – two Afghans speak to the indigenous media on behalf of the Mission on a daily basis – it often fails to communicate effectively at the international level. The opposite is true for ISAF-contributing nations, who all too often concentrate on embedded foreign journalists and domestic constituencies, rather than the Afghan audience. Hence neither appeals on both battlegrounds, and often it is the Afghan dimension that is neglected.

This failure to balance international and domestic audiences was highlighted in late 2008, when almost half of the UK force in Helmand was used to escort electric turbines under cover of night to the Kajaki hydroelectric dam. It was reported by compliant, well-briefed, embedded and specially invited British journalists as the biggest operation since Korea or even D-Day – men and machines accomplishing a major engineering feat

in the face of the Helmand-based enemy. And yet not a single Afghan journalist was on the trip, despite it playing a major role in the delivery of electricity to southern Afghanistan. Instead, Afghans heard the story twenty-four hours later via the BBC and *The Times*. Obviously, in terms of hearts and minds, it would have been far more effective to incorporate local Afghan journalists, who could then have experienced and reported upon a truly beneficial reconstruction and development project. Instead, more political energy was spent on the international audience than the domestic one. The prevailing media landscape in Afghanistan needs to be challenged to ensure that Afghan journalists are the ones embedded with international and ANA forces.

#### **COIN and the Media**

Much is being made of COIN in Afghanistan at the moment, and the media is an essential part of this strategy. For instance, the US counter-insurgency guide published in January 2009 puts it thus:<sup>14</sup>

Media is a key actor in a successful information strategy in any COIN campaign. The US Government is accustomed to interaction with western media groups, but there is often a weakness in the relationship with regional media in overseas insurgency situations. This can result in missed opportunities to influence key stakeholders.

Though the guide notes prevailing sub-par relationships with regional media, it recognises the importance of the local dimension: 'Messages are delivered partly through media operations, but more prolifically and often more credibly through the thousands of daily interactions between the population, the government and the security forces.' This appears to have been taken into account at the highest level. General Sir David Richards promoted a very active media strategy as commander of ISAF in 2006 – as *The Economist's* defence correspondent noted in his February 2007 online diary: 'General Richards believes that an active information strategy

– talking to the media – is as important as killing Taliban’. And the much-reported Initial Assessment on Afghanistan, written by Commander of ISAF General Stanley McCrystal and leaked just prior to President Obama’s new strategy for the country in August 2009, extensively noted the importance of StratCom. He said insurgents had ‘undermined the credibility of ISAF’ and its partners, and that the ‘information initiative’ had to be wrested away from the insurgents.<sup>15</sup>

### Looking Ahead

2010 will see ISAF states and international organisations make the country a top priority – once again. More media advisers will undoubtedly be sent into the mêlée to get the ‘message’ across and establish a ‘narrative’. At the same time, the Afghan media will continue to develop: a number

of new home-grown drama series, for example, are about to be launched. Yet the media will find it difficult to report all the activity in the country. Some will be fair, balanced and accurate; others will struggle due to lack of training or because of biased, controlled programming and self-censorship. Whatever more is done to develop the government’s media capacity, the efforts and energy of the new media in Afghanistan must not be ignored. Everything possible must be done to ensure they grow in strength and in partnership with other media and StratCom actors. Ignoring local media institutions in favour of large, internationally funded organisations will create unsustainable parallel structures, and crucially alienate a real ally in Afghanistan. The media in Afghanistan has grown because it filled a gap in

the market: the Afghan public wanted information, education and entertainment and they wanted it quickly, as millions of refugees returned home to Afghanistan. The world of StratCom must not suffocate the success of newfound media freedoms in Afghanistan, but encourage and support this flourishing industry that is, despite the difficulties, a welcome sign of successful reconstruction efforts. ■

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### NOTES

- 1 Roshan, <<http://www.roshan.af/web/>>, accessed 26 January 2010.
- 2 International Finance Corporation, <<http://www.ifc.org/ifcext/media.nsf/content/SelectedPressRelease?OpenDocument&UNID=9B9783B665EFF8AD852575DD0055ABC1>>, accessed 26 January 2010.
- 3 *BBC News*, ‘Afghans More Optimistic for Future, Survey Shows’, 11 January 2010.
- 4 NATO, ‘NATO Encouraged by Recent Afghan Poll’, 11 January 2010.
- 5 Asia Foundation, ‘Afghanistan in 2009: A Survey of the Afghan People’, 27 October 2009.
- 6 International Republican Institute, ‘IRI Releases Survey of Afghanistan Public Opinion’, 14 August 2009.
- 7 Reporters Sans Frontières publishes the World Press Freedom Index annually. A total of twelve foreign journalists and eight Afghan journalists have been killed in Afghanistan since 11 September 2001. This has been reflected in the decline in Afghanistan’s ranking, for example: 134 (2003), 125 (2004), 125 (2005), 130 (2006), 142 (2006) and 156 (2008).
- 8 Human Rights Watch, ‘Afghanistan: Events of 2008’, *World Report 2009*.
- 9 OHCHR, ‘OHCHR in Afghanistan (2008-2009)’, <<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/AsiaRegion/Pages/AFSummary0809.aspx>>, accessed 27 January 2010. The report also noted: ‘National and provincial government officials, anti-Government elements and different power-brokers all sought to restrict freedom of expression. Police and prosecutors generally proved ineffective at protecting freedom of expression given their apparent collusion with those in positions of power. The judiciary has not consistently provided protection, and, at times, has also been a factor in restricting the right to express opinions. Freedom of expression is often presented as threatening existing power structures, national security interests or Islamic values. Afghanistan’s increasingly repressive and closed society has triggered self-censorship throughout the country and stifled criticism and debate.’
- 10 ‘Letter from Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan Kai Eide to UN Security Council’, 29 September 2009, <<http://unama.unmissions.org/Portals/UNAMA/>
- 11 *Internews*, ‘Afghanistan’s Media Milestone: Local Coverage of the Afghan Elections’, 20 August 2009.
- 12 Paddy Ashdown, *Swords and Ploughshares: Bringing Peace to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2007).
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 US Government Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative, ‘U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide’, January 2009, <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/119629.pdf>>, accessed 28 January 2010.
- 15 Commander, NATO ISAF, ‘Commander’s Initial Assessment’, 30 August 2009, <[http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment\\_Redacted\\_092109.pdf](http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf)>, accessed 27 January 2010.