



Afghanistan's media battleground

Eight years ago television was banned in Afghanistan and its single national radio station was Taliban-run.

William Reeve was a BBC Afghanistan correspondent for two years in the early 1990s during the time of the warlords and for two years in 1998-1999 during the Taliban regime.

He remembers the days when the main sources of reliable information for Afghans, before and during the time of the Taliban, were the daily BBC broadcasts in Dari and Pashto. In a country that has suffered through decades of war, reliable news was needed to ensure safety.

“Surveys have shown that when big stories were being played out in Afghanistan, as many as 70 per cent of the Afghan population would hear what was happening in their country from BBC broadcasts in their own languages. Their lives would often depend on this. So they tended to glue themselves to the evening BBC broadcasts all around the country,” Reeve recalls.

Today the country’s independent media are considered to be a major success story – but like most developments in this war-battered nation it finds itself increasingly under threat.

While the establishment of an independent media has played a pivotal role in uniting an ethnically-divided country, the re-emergence of warlords and

a reluctant government puts such gains in jeopardy.

Since 2002, hundreds of media outlets opened with the help of an international donor community that recognised a free press as a necessary ingredient of nation-building in a country where 90 per cent of its people live in rural areas.

“There were so many media trainers here in 2002 that I wondered who was going to feed the people,” says Dominic Medley who served as country director for Internews in 2002, an organisation that has helped to set up 35 regional radio stations.

And despite a promising start, sustaining independent media stations has become a challenge in Afghanistan. Obstacles include the rise of warlord-backed media outlets; a growing lack of security for journalists; and the reluctance of Afghan officials to embrace an independent media.

With so many actors involved from international military forces, foreign governments, as well as Afghan political leaders and warlords, the media have evolved at a fast pace that far exceeds what the actual market size of 22 million dollars could support.

For example with the 2009 presidential elections

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looming, the number of television stations has nearly doubled in the space of six months to 20 from 12, with a number of political parties creating their own outlets.

There is a growing concern that, as in Iraq, many broadcasters will fold when international funds disappear from Afghanistan as they rely on that funding.

And while over the past six years a number of agencies have continued to provide training to journalists, the country still lacks a proper journalism institute.

Critics feel that the international community's involvement in Afghanistan's media should focus more on the sector's sustainability. For example, millions of dollars in foreign funds are being poured into producing public information campaigns many feel are ineffective and poorly made. However, several Afghan outlets say that they must air them because it brings in vital advertising revenue.

The United States government for instance will not fund Radio Television Afghanistan (RTA) because it is state-controlled. However they have been willing to provide funds to independent stations and, as a result, many of the best RTA journalists have left to work for other outlets that pay five to six times more.

A debate still lingers in Afghanistan, similar to Rupert Murdoch's criticism of networks that do not rely entirely on commercial funds, such as the BBC. Its founder, Lord John Reith, believed that broadcasting was too important to be a commercial enterprise and that its priorities were to inform, educate and entertain. In Afghanistan, where very limited commercial funds exist, relying purely on the private market to sustain the media industry has become a huge concern.

The battle for a public service broadcaster

In 2002, Hamid Karzai, the country's then interim president, pledged to turn state-controlled RTA into a public-service broadcaster that would receive government funding, but be run by an independent commission.

In the Afghan context, a public broadcaster would be able to not only help support smaller media outlets in the provinces, but also offer educational programming and investigative journalism; areas that are not seen as being profitable activities for commercial outlets.

According to Medley, "a public broadcaster has a guaranteed income and can afford to produce programming for the good of the nation and in minority languages. In the UK, for instance, ITV

cannot afford to make documentaries only a million people will watch like the BBC can."



However, since the formation of Afghanistan's parliament in 2005, political leaders have often been opposed to giving up control of RTA.

"There is still an old communist mentality that the government must have its own voice through a state broadcaster," says Adrian Edwards, Director of Communications for the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

As a result of political meddling, RTA failed to attract international donors as they were not prepared to fund something still under government influence.

Then in 2007, President Karzai vetoed a media law to establish an independent commission to oversee RTA. The failure to establish a public broadcasting service has been a concern for many, as the number of politically-biased media outlets in the country has increased dramatically.

"There has been a rapid growth in television and electronic media at a rate that exceeds the market. Even in terms of newspapers, a number will say they are independent but open up the paper and you see there are barely any adverts. Look at the advertising market, look at the size of it, look at how much it costs to fund a station, do the math, it's not rocket science," explains Edwards.

According to Syed Anwer, a producer for the BBC Persian Service, politically-reliant media outlets are causing problems among Afghan intellectuals and university students.

"Independent media do not have the resources to distribute all over the country, but political media do. Warlords from Ismail Khan to Burhanuddin Rabbani are able to distribute their publications to every district in the country," he says.

In addition to creating their own media, local warlords have also threatened many independent journalists.

"What most concerns me today about the Afghan context is not whether there are some political media (outlets), but if journalists are allowed to operate without threat from the government,

warlords, the Taliban or other members of their community. In that regard, the threat comes as much from the government recently as from anywhere else,” says Ivan Sigal, who was formerly a regional director for Internews and now heads Global Voices, a non-profit citizen media project.

With increased threats and the rise of political media, many Afghan journalists worry about the loss of credibility and trust that the industry has gained over the past six years.

“Afghanistan has a good media law, but if we look at these problems that someone cannot express their own ideas or say something about someone because of influential warlords in power this creates problems for us,” says Danish Karokhel, a journalist for the Afghan newswire Pajhwak.

Sustainability

Most of Afghanistan’s advertising revenue comes from the country’s mobile phone companies, banks, and construction firms.

Supporting smaller regional stations remains one of the key challenges in Afghanistan as very little of the country’s advertising revenue spreads outside of the major cities.

“Sustaining the small provincial independent stations is critical. There is not a big debate in Kabul over whether or not we want insurgents here. While out in the provinces, they have been given no choice but to trust what is in front of them and many have not heard any counter arguments,” explains Mina Sharif, a director for the Cetenagroup, an Afghan-based media company.

According to Medley, one way to support such smaller provincial stations is to bring all of them under the umbrella of a national broadcaster.

“This is the job for RTA, it is not profitable for private media to put a transmitter in areas where they will not generate enough revenue,” he says.



The former trainer adds that Afghanistan could learn from the Balkans where more than 300 radio and television stations grouped together under the same network. In return from funding from Coca-Cola, the soft drink manufacturer was given country-wide airtime.

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“Just as in Britain, in Afghanistan local media are always more listened to than national media,” Medley says.

Internews plays the same schedule of programmes across its 35 stations covering health, environment and current affairs, leaving only the need for one or two staff journalists to cover local news. It is an approach that could be adapted by RTA.

“They can install the transmitters and have a non-governmental organisation help produce most of the programming,” says Medley.

As well as political interference, Afghanistan’s media are also under greater influence from large external organisations who now fund messaging and even their own media outlets. The result is that advertising costs have been rising accordingly, often pricing the local community out of the market.

Critics say the money would be better spent in building more sustainable local media outlets.

According to Reeve, despite many Afghan-run stations being set up, while on a recent trip to northern Afghanistan, the former BBC journalist found that for serious news most Afghans still turn to the BBC, Radio Azadi (Radio Free Europe) and Voice of America programming aired on RTA.

“I think it’s the wrong thing, I’d much prefer that just as with the Voice of America funds, Radio Free Afghanistan (both funded by the US government) concentrate on helping Afghans build their own sustainable locally-owned and operated media,” Sigal says.

It was the goal of Internews to train people to make media outlets entirely Afghan-run. But not all larger external organisations have the same mission and when their funding dries up, the media outlets will disappear.



For example, in Afghanistan, NATO’s annual budget for media buying and production and distribution costs is 15 million euros.

“In terms of European advertising budgets this is not very much (the total UK advertising spend is around US\$20 billion per annum) but in the Afghan market this is a huge amount (total TV, radio and print advertising spent in Afghanistan is now around

US\$20 million a year),” says Nicholas Lunt, a former spokesperson for the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, even though the number of broadcast outlets is growing in Afghanistan, the country cannot maintain a daily newspaper.

The largest circulation newspaper in Afghanistan is Sada-e Azadi (the Voice of Freedom), a freesheet that is produced and distributed by the NATO-led mission.

“The paper has a limited view of the misery of everyday people in Afghanistan. It would be better received if it changed its line of action and wrote about people’s problems and ways they could be solved,” says Anwer.

Ehsan Bayat, an Afghan businessman, who owns Ariana Television Network as well as the country’s largest mobile phone provider AWCC, says licensing remains an issue.

“You could buy a licence to show the TV-series 24 but another channel will air the same show without a licence. There need to be regulations and copyright protection laws enforced; it is a must if you want the media to survive,” he says.

In some provinces there are multiple licensing fees for the same frequency. On top of taxes on revenue, property, and start-up fees, it gets expensive to expand.

Better journalism training

Afghanistan’s media have advanced incredibly in the last six years but still have a way to go. There are few investigative journalism pieces as they require resources, skills and access to data. Even in the US, most newspapers find it difficult to justify dedicating resources to investigative journalism on a regular basis as cost-cutting continues to take its toll on the industry.



“It’s hard to find professional journalism in Afghanistan because it’s such a new thing in this country. Most of the reporting you see on TV is very bad – they just copy from each other. It’s not news, there’s no story telling,” says Khaleeq Ahmad, former spokesman on

international affairs for President Karzai’s administration.

While Internews, the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, the BBC World Trust Service and a number of others have held training workshops over the past six years, the country still lacks institutes for journalists where they could receive training for a longer span of time.

Ahmad adds: “With media now being privatised, donors cannot move in on certain networks for instance and say let us train your journalists.”

“There are problems with the lack of training and education. Socialist-style opinion journalism is hot here, there isn’t a great emphasis on hard facts,” says Edwards.

As in many developing countries, access to government data is limited.

However unlike most developing countries, Afghanistan receives millions of dollars to support its media industry. The challenge lies in whether this funding can be properly channelled to create a sustainable and independent media sector.

Footnote: the Pakistan profile

Over the past few years, Pakistan has seen an explosion of independent media outlets under former President Pervez Musharaff who lifted the ban on a free press.

The country’s advertising revenue totals nearly 300 million dollars a year that supports more than 60 television stations with over 75 million viewers and a number of prominent regional and national newspapers catering to 10 million readers.

But just as in Afghanistan, critics say Pakistan is in desperate need of better journalism institutions and long-term training opportunities.

And like Afghanistan, the government still insists on having full control over the state-run television station Pakistan Television (PTV).

According to Azhar Abbas, managing director of GEO News, Pakistan’s largest independent television network, of the country’s 22 news networks, there are not enough quality journalists trained to run five of them. He argues that while the number of networks has increased in Pakistan, the quality of journalism has not.

“Quite often, ambassadors, heads of think-tanks and other senior western officials will pass through my newsroom and I always tell them if you want to actually see Pakistan become a progressive, liberal,

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democratic society, you have to invest in top quality media institutes and trainers,” he says.

However, unlike Afghanistan, the country has seen a surge in fibre-optic connectivity combined with the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority’s decision to cut bandwidth tariffs which has allowed for wide-spread and affordable internet access. But with an estimated 70 per cent of Pakistan’s population of 170 million living in rural areas with high rates of illiteracy, internet usage in the country is estimated to be a mere 12 million.

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