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# SPECIAL REPORT

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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This information and conclusions drawn in this report are based on presentations by a panel of media experts that gathered for a session of the United States Institute of Peace's Working Group on Media and Conflict, organized in June 2007. John Langlois, of the U.S. Agency for International Development's Office of Transition Initiatives, chairs the group. Panel speakers included Thomas Dine, former director of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; Adam Kaplan, U.S. Agency for International Development; Linda Flour of the Rendon Group; and John West of Internews. The Institute's Center of Innovation for Media and Conflict is under the direction of Vice President Daniel Serwer. This report is one of a series analyzing media in conflict situations.

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**The views expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Institute of Peace, which does not advocate specific policy positions.**

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## Media and Conflict

### Afghanistan as a Relative Success Story

#### Summary

The development of media in post-Taliban Afghanistan has been relatively successful (compared with both the Taliban regime and other countries subject to international intervention) in establishing free and responsible expression despite the lack of electricity, harsh terrain, absence of viable media outlets during the Taliban regime, and a conservative religious society that subordinates women. However, Afghanistan's media development remains incomplete. Since it still faces many challenges, the international community must continue to assist and support it.

Three main processes contributed to Afghanistan's initial media success: the proliferation of local media, especially radio; the government's increased capacity to communicate; and international media that filled gaps that otherwise might have become problematic. This three-pronged approach in Afghanistan may provide useful lessons for other societies emerging from conflict.

#### Introduction

Today Afghanistan's media are lauded as a development success story in light of the obstacles and challenges the country faced after the Taliban regime was defeated in 2001. Although remnants of the Taliban still threatened security, development, and stabilization, Afghanistan looked as if it had managed to establish a relatively free flow of information and a number of solid media outlets capable of informing its citizenry. In the years immediately following the end of Taliban rule, Afghanistan demonstrated that despite a history of protracted conflict and restricted information, progress in media building was possible and success attainable.

These early successes were most prominent in three areas of media development: local media outlets, especially radio; the national government's communication with its citizens; and international broadcasters' presence in Afghanistan.

Each area of the Afghan media developed independently, yet local, national, and international actors planted the seeds of strong media by reaching high levels of communica-

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tion and coordination in the early days of reconstruction. Through further examination of the current media situation, however, it becomes apparent that cultivating the seeds of free media requires continuous effort. Afghanistan, therefore, offers a positive example of media development yet also shows the inherent fragility of media in a post-conflict society and the rapidity with which early successes can deteriorate.

Useful lessons can be learned from this example of media development immediately after a society's transition to democracy. Media development also has important implications in the medium and long term for both the host government and the international actors involved in the reconstruction mission.

## Radio Delivering Information to the Afghan People

During the Taliban regime, media outlets were banned almost entirely. Only one radio station operated under strict control of the Taliban in Kabul. This station did not provide informational or educational programming but rather operated solely as a channel for conveying religious messages. A small number of Afghans had access to international broadcasts from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Voice of America (VOA), but they listened in utmost secrecy and only in areas where the Taliban had failed to seize household radios. Television and the Internet were banned altogether. Left with few alternative sources of information, the Afghan people grew accustomed to tuning in for news and information to the adhoc radio stations operating clandestinely within Afghanistan or those they could pick up from abroad. Through necessity Afghanistan developed a strong radio culture over the years.

The fall of the Taliban initiated a new era. Years of oppression and civil war had devastated Afghanistan both economically and socially. The reconstruction mission undertaken in Afghanistan faced daunting challenges, including harsh terrain, little to no infrastructure, and high levels of illiteracy. The mission also had to contend with the legacy of a draconian attitude toward media. Afghanistan's conservative religious society did not initially regard as a priority the creation of diverse, independent media outlets that would inform citizens, cover elections, and hold government officials accountable.

Several socioeconomic factors have contributed to the persistence of radio culture in Afghanistan. Electricity is generally available only in larger cities and even there only in the afternoon. In addition the majority of households cannot afford a television in a country where the annual gross domestic product is \$8.8 billion (\$800 per capita). Despite the emergence of broadcast and cable television in Afghan cities today—and some limited access to satellite television more remotely—television has made relatively little headway. Newspaper and magazine industries are also profoundly challenged because of difficult terrain and devastated infrastructure that effectively limit print media distribution and make consistent delivery nearly impossible. Literacy rates in Afghanistan, in the range of 29 percent for men and below 12.6 percent for women, further challenge the capacity of print media.<sup>1</sup>

Given this situation the majority of the early media development efforts in Afghanistan wisely focused on radio stations. Radio reached the most remote parts of Afghanistan, while television and newspapers did not. Consequently radio was able to serve the people's needs much better than print or television. Increased international broadcasting to post-conflict Afghanistan also nurtured the radio culture. Radio emerged the clear winner, requiring lower costs and simpler maintenance.

Local radio could play a role in bonding the citizens of Afghanistan and building social networks of trust and reciprocity in ways that the central government could not. Faced with a new reality, government lacked communication capabilities; thus it was up to radio outlets to lead citizens in this new environment. In such a socially and ethnically divided country, local media were one of the few civil-society actors that could bring together different languages, ease regional tensions, and educate without bias.

International organizations rushed to help create local media outlets in Afghanistan. Local media development accelerated under the aegis of Internews, which provided support from 2002 to 2004. The radio network that Internews helped create included twenty-nine separate local stations linked to a countrywide syndication network with programming available twenty-four hours a day, resulting in a dramatic increase in the variety of information available to the local stations.

Official radio stations operated by the Taliban were tools of propaganda and indoctrination. The Internews project challenged the notion of radio as a tool to control the content and timing of information made available to the people. Since the fall of the Taliban, Internews has established thirty-two radio stations with an estimated reach of about 11 million listeners (approximately 37 percent of the population).<sup>2</sup> These stations were diverse in their programming and content. This diversity reinforced the idea that the consumers are the citizens and they, rather than the producers of information, control what information they receive and when they receive it.

Not only did these stations exponentially increase the variety of information available to local communities, but the increased flow of information also offered a wide range of differing opinions and views. The stations mixed languages within the same programs and offered interviews and popular-culture pieces. It became common, for instance, for the local stations to air an interview in which questions were posed in Dari and responses were given in Pashtu. The practice of mixing languages underscored the need for ethnic acceptance and reconciliation in the country. Radio's ability to further the goals of a multilingual society speaks to the media's ability to bridge ethnic divides within and across communities. Instead of fragmenting the country along ethnic and religious lines as in some other interventions (e.g. Bosnia and Iraq), Afghan media played a more integrative role.

The radio network also supported leadership development among young journalists living in local communities. Local stations brought individuals who might have lacked journalistic experience but showed interest in community involvement together with those who had previously practiced professional journalism. A vast literature on civil society and development theory suggests that there is potential to develop a new generation of leaders through training and mentoring programs that assist youth to realize their interest in media and journalistic outlets.<sup>3</sup>

In many communities these local radio stations were the first local media. Citizens were intrigued by their novelty and became eager to play active roles in organizing and managing the stations. As a result of such participation, each local news and programming segment developed its own personality, reflecting the interests of a particular community. This dynamism produced an amazing pluralism among the twenty-nine different stations operating across the country. The variety of programs that arose throughout Afghanistan in response to local demands was unprecedented: quiz shows, drama series, poetry, geography, and special reports on a range of development topics such as women's health and agriculture. The array of homegrown programs produced by each station provided material for a network-wide syndicated program that drew upon hundreds of locally produced shows. Through syndication communities could hear popular shows from other communities, creating shared interests and knowledge across the country.

An example of the success of local media development is Radio Arman a station launched in Kabul by three Afghans who returned from the diaspora to build Afghanistan's first private radio station. In late 2002 the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) provided financial support matched by the founders of Radio Arman to jump-start Kabul's first private radio station.<sup>4</sup> By May 2003, Radio Arman was airing twenty-four hours a day throughout Kabul province. The majority of shows were hosted by women disc jockeys, a significant step for Afghanistan. Under Taliban rule, women were not allowed to work, go to school, speak on the radio, or show their faces in public.

The success of Afghanistan's local media development results partly from its people's enthusiasm to embrace change. At the local level the Afghan population, with the help

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of international organizations, was genuinely enthusiastic about the prospect of creating media outlets in their various forms. Radio enjoyed enormous support among community leaders because of its outreach capacity and ability to sidestep restraints imposed by illiteracy. The radio stations not only served to inform the citizens about the latest news developments but also played an increasing role in community building by launching talk shows that helped people confront taboo social issues as a community.

However, issues such as Islam, ethnic tension, the role of the warlords in crime, are all subjects that journalists must approach with utmost caution. The government in Kabul, under increasing pressure from the resurrected Taliban in some parts of the country, does not hesitate to intervene and prevent media outlets from broadcasting stories. Because the media explosion is fuelling social change and a spirit of accountability, the government believes that the media sometimes play into the Taliban's hand and thus undermine progress. Journalists have been detained and intimidated by the authorities because of stories they have covered and challenges they have made to the authorities in Kabul.<sup>5</sup>

## **Enhancing Government Capacity to Communicate**

Governments that come to power in extraordinary circumstances—as is generally the case in post-conflict societies—are often unprepared to handle local press immediately and effectively, let alone the twenty-four hour hubbub of international media. This was particularly true of the new Afghan government, which needed to communicate clearly and forthrightly to a population undergoing rapid political, economic, and social change and simultaneously to the information-hungry international media. With thirty-four provinces, some still under the de facto control of warlords, the central government needed a strong voice that could be heard by its people in the capital, throughout the provinces, and all the way to the United States.

Selected in December 2001 to chair the Afghan Transitional Administration (and later as interim president and president), Hamid Karzai initially lacked the capacity to reach out to the public, which gained him the reputation of acting as the “mayor of Kabul” rather than the president of the country. Increasing the Afghan government's capability to communicate with its people and their capacity to communicate with the government was clearly a crucial component of media development within the overall stabilization and reconstruction mission. An international strategic communications consulting firm, the Rendon Group, was contracted to work on developing this capacity. The Rendon Group worked with the presidential palace staff to improve its communications and press capacity. Some critics view their work with mixed feelings because of the high cost of the contract.<sup>6</sup>

In terms of its communication capabilities with citizens, the situation in which the government found itself was grave. Years of Taliban rule left communication infrastructure almost at the level of the monarchy that had ended thirty years earlier. The government in Kabul needed to transform this antiquated approach to the press into a modernized capacity to speak to Afghan citizens and international audiences. Typically two press releases were released each day to relay the basic facts of the president's actions. If, for example, the ambassador of the United States visited, the visit would be reported, but its substance—the reasons that prompted it, the policy matters discussed, diplomatic messages conveyed—was absent from this press release. Often those responsible for writing the release were not present at the official event and could not provide a reliable account of what had transpired.

In addition, there was organizational disarray in the presidential palace press team, which operated separately from the Ministry of Information. Although news broadcasts were burgeoning, the president and his press staff were uninformed of their content. No effective system was in place to allow the presidential palace staff to communicate with the provinces. Local journalists were required to undergo intensive security checks to enter

the palace to speak to officials. Dialogue between citizens and the central government was virtually nonexistent.

In addition to information barriers between Kabul and the provinces, another organizational problem stemmed from the presidential palace's inexperience in handling the international media. For months Afghanistan was the focal point of international observers. International journalists stationed in Kabul were eager to report each and every post-Taliban development. The Karzai government's inability to communicate with the international audience and to satiate its curiosity with reliable information created yet another problem for the fledgling government in Kabul.

One of the first things required was to work with the presidential palace press staff to establish a way to improve the president's awareness of news and news reporting. This effort consisted of assembling daily news clippings from the BBC, VOA, and Radio Free Afghanistan in a comprehensive press briefing. This simple daily procedure was the first step in helping the president become better informed of world and domestic news and eventually in transforming the previously isolated palace into a more-informed, communicative voice of official Afghanistan. In addition, the Rendon Group undertook to professionalize the presidential palace press office staff. Scheduling practices, incentive systems, and established hierarchy had not existed. A structured daily routine bred a professional ethos and yielded increased efficiency in the new press office.

Another important step was to assist the presidential palace in hosting press conferences on a level that could accommodate major actors in the international media such as Cable News Network (CNN) and the BBC. The ability to organize and smoothly run international press conferences is a key component in developing a government's communication capacity. As one former consultant who worked in Afghanistan said, "The international media is a monster that needs to be fed. If the new government cannot feed this monster, someone else will." A government cannot appear to be running a country if it is silent. With so many countries invested and interested in Afghanistan, the voice of official Kabul was of crucial importance to the success of the post-conflict reconstruction mission.

Although a good deal remains to be done, the main accomplishments in helping the Kabul government build its communication capacity were increasing the flow of information into and out of the government and increasing the quantity and quality of the government's messages to international audiences.

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## **International Actors Step In as Needed**

International broadcasters play three important roles in Afghanistan: They provide coverage when major news merits international attention, coverage that holds the government accountable, and professional training for local journalists.

International broadcasting in Afghanistan began with Radio Liberty during the Soviet occupation (1985–1993 and thereafter). Using stringers from Pakistan and five of the Central Asian republics, this service effectively reached pockets of Afghanistan. After the events of September 11, Thomas Dine, president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, became convinced that a separate Radio Free Afghanistan (RFA) service was necessary. RFA was created in January 2002 as an integrated Dari and Pashtu service rather than two separate services, breaking with the standard practice of the VOA.

As a new international broadcasting service, RFA initially provided two hours of original broadcasts to Afghanistan daily, plus one hour of repeat programming. The first thirty minutes of each broadcast were in Pashtu, followed by thirty minutes in Dari. In early 2002, RFA doubled transmission hours from three to six hours per day.

RFA's coverage of the June 2002 *loya jirga*, Afghanistan's grand assembly, established its reputation for comprehensive, accurate, timely, and balanced reporting. The *loya jirga* is a centuries-old Afghan institution that leaders in the country convene to choose new kings, adopt constitutions, and decide important political matters and disputes. The pro-

cess covered by RFA was set in motion by the Bonn agreement of December 5, 2001, to select the next government.<sup>7</sup>

The national government at the time had no means of disseminating reliable information about the loya jirga, and the local stations were far too amateur to provide quality coverage of such an elaborate political event. RFA filled the gap with objectivity and reliability. Specifically RFA journalists reported on the preparation, elections, and implementation of the loya jirga. The service appointed a bilingual speaker as coverage coordinator. In accordance with its commitment to accuracy, RFA's reporters entered the tent and broadcast live via satellite telephone. Given that the loya jirga is critical to Afghan sociopolitical change, RFA's ability to reliably cover it showed its ability to report breaking news relevant to Afghan society.

In addition to professionally covering the loya jirga, RFA reporters played a role in holding the government accountable. They had instructions to cover the national government's actions in general and to provide not just facts but also criticism. By pinpointing the areas in which the government did not adequately meet civic needs—such as roads and health care—the service played a muckraking role. Citizens saw that media are not only a way to gain factual information, but also a means to demand their citizenship rights.

Generally speaking RFA's commitment to maximizing broadcast reliability and availability solidified the service as a trusted source of information and has also improved Afghan opinion of the United States. Today nearly two-thirds of Afghan radio listeners listen to RFA, according to the results of a survey conducted for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. The same 2004 survey, carried out by the InterMedia Survey Institute from August 17 to October 2, 2004, also showed that when asked about reliability of the news and information broadcast, strong majorities considered RFA and VOA trustworthy.

The United States was not the only Western broadcaster to enter the scene during Afghanistan's media development phase. In addition to RFA the BBC has provided news to the Afghan people. Today 58 percent of listeners tune to RFA and 57.3 percent to the BBC. Not only does the BBC World Service provide news coverage in Afghanistan, it also supported media development immediately after the transition to the Karzai government. In February 2002 the World Service began to assist Afghanistan media activities. With a 1-million-pound grant from the UK government's Department for International Development, the BBC provided equipment and training to two radio studios and some 150 journalists in Kabul and the region.<sup>8</sup>

The work by RFA and the BBC shows the way international broadcasters complement Afghanistan's ongoing efforts to develop the government's communication capacity as well as the local media. These international services provided information when the Afghan media could not.

In many parts of the country international media also provided education and training. Several broadcasters created programming for farmers seeking new agriculture methods, teachers designing new lesson plans, and those who wanted language training. For example, "New Home, New Life," a daily BBC program, is credited with blending drama with educational programs and social content in a clear, socially acceptable way, in accordance with traditional values and religion.<sup>9</sup>

Both RFA and the BBC helped reconstruction by providing information to every corner of Afghanistan. Thus there was little danger that these international broadcasters would incite violence or derail the reconstruction process. But despite the success of international broadcasters in Afghanistan, it is important to recognize that the relationship between reconstruction missions and international broadcasters may not always be so beneficial, or even benign.

## Cause for Concern

The Afghan media were virtually nonexistent less than six years ago, yet it developed into a promising new force for social and political change. Strategically the initial media devel-

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opment efforts were successful and paved the way for a future of vibrant local media, professional national communication capacity, and responsible international media coverage. Notwithstanding, the outlook since initial intervention in 2002 is troubling. Recently the fledgling media sector has come under attack from several institutions of Afghan society, including the government, police, militias, and Islamic clerical councils.

The advocacy organization Media Watch compiled a list of threats to media freedom in Afghanistan from January 2006 through February 2007. According to its report harassment of media outlets and professionals included beatings, insults, fines, intimidation, detention of journalists, and lawsuits against media outlets.<sup>10</sup>

One of the more troubling trends of the Afghan government has been its increasing tendency to restrict information and journalism. On June 12 and 19, 2006, the Afghan Intelligence Agency issued a directive to accomplish this aim. The agency distributed a list of restrictions on Afghan journalists to limit reports of the country's deteriorating security situation. According to Sam Zarifi, a research director at Human Rights Watch, "The intelligence service's restrictions are a blatant intrusion on the freedom of Afghanistan's fledgling media."<sup>11</sup> Among the types of information that were banned were "negative propaganda, interviews, and reports which are provocative or slanderous and which are against the presence (in Afghanistan) of the international coalition forces and ISAF."<sup>12</sup> Overtly pro-Western feelings had paved the way for cooperation by various actors in the reconstruction mission and facilitated coordination between burgeoning sectors of media. Now, however, there is evidence that the government seeks to prohibit public expression that contradicts or criticizes it.

The directive also restricts "those materials that deteriorate people's morale and cause disappointment to them, and publication of gossip and rumors which are against the security and welfare of society." It considers critical media to be deleterious to social morale, when in reality critical media are a force for social cohesion in consolidating democracies. Moreover, the directive states, "News of terrorist activities must not come as the lead story of the news."

Previous success attributed to the government vis-à-vis media development seems diminished in light of these current attempts to stifle free flows of information.<sup>13</sup> Uncertain of how to handle negative information, the government seems to prefer to stifle rather than address these claims. The media, and especially local media, which initially developed as a diverse community capable of providing free information, may now be less able to fulfill this crucial role.

It may be too soon to tell why the media situation in Afghanistan retrogressed for certain, but several implications may be drawn. The government was inexperienced in dealing with the international press. This weakness was addressed in the initial development phase. What was neglected was the government's inexperience in dealing with local media outlets and indigenous television, print, and radio outlets. Thus the relationship between local media and the government was still weak as the security situation began deteriorating over the past eighteen months. As a result of inexperience the government felt threatened by local media's exposure of its loosening grip on security and acted to suppress such reports. Now the government has taken actions seen as counterproductive to a truly free press, and journalists who oppose the government on this issue are revered as heroes.

## Conclusions

The initial success of media development in Afghanistan depended on some unusual circumstances. Coordination among the international donors and organizations was good, and the international support for the intervention in Afghanistan was strong. The presidential palace staff, local communities, and international broadcasters were all open to the principles of free and independent media. The national government, local media, and

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international broadcasters developed a synergistic relationship so that information barriers were chipped away and Afghan citizens could benefit from diverse, objective, and constant streams of news and information. Where one part of the foundation was weak, another part could compensate.

#### ***Lessons learned in Afghanistan include***

- International interveners should move quickly to increase the availability, variety, reliability, and objectivity of information available.
- It is crucial that the new government's voice be heard, and this may require substantial assistance.
- Local media can help restore trust and reciprocity when developed in tandem with the government's capacity to support a free press.
- The international press can fill important gaps, improving coverage and enhancing government accountability. It can also reach parts of the country not covered by other outlets because of technical and infrastructural problems.

#### ***Policy implications from Afghanistan include***

- Reconstruction missions must remain engaged with the government several years after the initial capacity to communicate is developed. Legal experts working alongside media experts should assist the host government to create legislation to protect freedom of the press and integrity of reporting.
- Legislation on the books is not enough. Requisite institutions, as well as oversight mechanisms, must be in place to ensure that the national government cannot rescind these freedoms as easily as it grants them.
- The international press corps that reports in post-conflict environments has an ongoing responsibility to collaborate with the reconstruction mission. The press can play a watchdog role in these societies and provide assistance to local media in investigating the sources and severity of attacks on media freedom.

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