

Afghanistan - Media Landscape

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Overview

Afghanistan media has a history of 145 years. In 1873 the first ever paper, *Shamsunahar*, was established. The first radio transmitter was installed in 1920. The first TV broadcast happened in Kabul in 1978. The Internet was linked and used in Afghanistan during the Taliban period after 1996, although it was not public and was used only by Taliban leaders. According to Nai Supporting Open Media, the leading Media Advocacy NGO in Afghanistan, there are 483 operational media in the country, which has the best media law in the region and one of the top “Access to Information” bills in the world. But, since 2001, almost 100 journalists and media workers have been killed; more than 1280 violence cases against media have been registered and, except for a few of them, no prosecution processes have been launched for the cases.

In practice access to information, despite having a good law, is one of the biggest challenges regarding freedom of expression, along with security and financial sustainability. The Taliban pose a great threat to media. Out of 96 journalists that have been killed since 2001, over 40 have been killed by the Taliban. On the other side, the Government of Afghanistan is yet to start addressing the violence cases against journalists allegedly perpetrated by governmental staff, particularly security forces. The government is not as supportive as it is stated to be by law and poses pressures which are among the challenges to freedom of expression. It has been known to set barriers to a free flow of information and to find various ways to prevent broadcasting stories about its failures. Financial challenges caused almost 200 media outlets to stop their activities in the country since 2014. Tens of radio stations and almost 5 TV stations are among the media outlets that have stopped their activities mainly because of financial problems. Although there are no specific studies that analyse public trust in media, the article “Media and government in the era of democracy” published on *The Daily Afghanistan* magazine shows the existence of a strong public trust in the media. When people are disappointed or have their rights infringed by a governmental entity, they turn to various media to make the problem known. That explains the popularity of media programmes that review cases and court hearings.

The country is still characterised by an immature market when it comes to media, whose development is unrelated to the current state of the Afghanistan market. Media outlets have bloomed thanks to the injection of international funds after 2001. Almost all media established since that time depend on international funds, either directly or indirectly. When international funds to Afghanistan have been cut, the media market has started to fail. Since 2014, almost 200 media outlets stopped their operations mainly because of lack of funding or market for their products.

In urban areas of the country TV has the biggest share of the market, while radio dominates the rural areas. Print has the lowest share. Social media are growing and covering almost all the younger generations. According to the Ministry of Communication and IT Technology, out of a population of 32 million people, more than 9 million, almost 28 percent of Afghanistan citizens have direct access to Internet, mainly but not only in urban areas. Radio covers 73 percent of the

population and TV covers almost 40 percent.

With less than half a million readers of newspapers, print media audiences are almost 1 percent of the Afghanistan population. The literacy rate is low (the actual percentage is between 39 percent claimed by the government and 36 percent according to 2017 data by UNESCO) and print outlets are not accessible outside of cities. This paves the ground for reduced access to print media. Furthermore, 4 decades of war in the country brought forward a culture of not reading, despite the increasing literacy rates which the World Bank had registered at 18 percent in 1979 versus the current figure. Thus, print media receives the smallest share of the media market.

The independence of media is still a big issue in Afghanistan, as there are political parties and politicians that own media outlets and call their media independent. But media offer nonetheless a view of the reality of political parties and political elites and give people the opportunity to have options when they are going to cast their votes, for example.

A new media movement started in Afghanistan in 2001, but an alignment between political and media organisations still exists. This new movement made it its mission to improve the public's awareness and systematically helps people to become aware of a variety of subjects such as their rights, their empowerment and their role in a democratic society.

These media reveal the faces of the elites, of the political elites and narrate the stories of the specific engagements of each political elite. People are informed of how much elites are wealthy and how influential their wealth is.

Overall media deliver a picture of political divisions of the society to the public. Today, if people are going to cast their votes, although ethnicity, language and geography are important, so too are eventual links of individuals to the parties. This means that overall media give an account of each vision and its values, allowing the public to move towards the preferred values.

The media outlets that are purely independent have succeeded in highlighting the differences between a political party and an armed group that calls itself a party and in enlightening the public opinion on the reality of the country by explaining the nature and number of social players. A very obvious example is the marginalisation of armed groups from national political processes, as demonstrated by the result of Ramadan Bashar, who notoriously doesn't carry a gun and who outvoted several armed warlords at the latest parliamentary elections.

Independent professional journalism is growing fast, although it is still very young in Afghanistan. There are different opportunities for journalists to grow their professionalism. Public universities and journalism schools are present in most of the 34 provinces. Private educational institutes are available at least in the 5 main cities. Short term courses are being provided to journalists almost everywhere. But this doesn't mean there is no need for professional development. People are changing their careers as soon as there is a new opportunity to do it. This is experienced in the media sector very often, due to different elements including economic challenges. The turnout of newcomers to the sector is great, thus there is an ongoing need for professional development.

After 17 years of existence the media sector is entering a mature phase. By looking at the media performance during different rounds of elections since 2004, one can obviously see how the approach has changed toward election reporting. This means that the Afghan media sector has progressed for almost 2 decades, but more needs to be done.

As much as media are professional, they are still being targeted and constrained, especially by the government which is instead supposed to protect them. The Afghanistan government, supposedly one of the most corrupt governments in the world, will not tolerate professional media that reveal their actions and how much they are corrupt. For example it is common practice to recruit people for governmental work through Facebook accounts, which also allows finding out who is criticising the government the most. Although according to Afghanistan's laws, there is no way for the government to bring limitations or

to interfere with the media sector, in reality this happens very often, such as when the government makes barriers on access to information to pressurise the media.

Undefined relationships with media news rooms, media managers and media owners, give an opportunity to the government to interfere on media programmes, especially in news rooms. Providing governmental advertisements and funds to media is another way to interfere in the media sector. Furthermore, through its power, the government interferes with the media sector by force, especially in rural areas. Through recruiting from media elites, the government can influence the media by those former elite members that now are government staff.

Media

Print

Print is the first media that was established in Afghanistan, almost one and half centuries ago. There are 183 newspapers across the country, including 24 dailies. But, as previously stated, print media cover only 1 percent of the population, around 300,000 people. Most of the literate people are based in the cities, thus the circulation of print media is mainly urban. Out of 183 operational papers around 100 are based in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. The main audiences demand a deep focus on the current situation. Youths are rarely using papers. City dwellers, mainly but not only men who are aged 50+, are literate and have time to read, are the most common members of the audience of papers. By taking a look at the structures of print outlets, the main pattern that emerges is a focus on analysis. The papers are mainly covering current affairs including politics. Sports and literature are also present in most newspapers, along with news reporting.

There are two types of print publications in Afghanistan from a geographical coverage point of view. One type is published in the cities but distributed also to other places. The other type consists of papers that are published and distributed only in a specific city and not elsewhere. It is worth mentioning that there is no paper in Afghanistan with national coverage. Although there are some papers that claim to be national, in practice no paper is distributed all over the country. Dailies are generally printed in a city and distributed to the nearby cities. The only daily that is published simultaneously into more than 3 cities, is *Hasht e Subh* (8 AM), which is a private paper that is printed 5 days a week in Kabul, Mazar E Sharif and Herat at the same time. It prints mainly in Persian/Dari language and occasionally features content in Pashto. The main audience is comprised of city-based Persian/Dari speakers.

According to the media law of the country, individuals, the government and private and public entities can be the publisher of a paper. Thus, firms, factories, individuals, companies, the government and political parties are publishing papers in Afghanistan. The government owns 3 dailies in Kabul and almost 35 more papers across the country.

Religion is a part of the content featured in print media, as in all others. There are around ten papers, including one daily, that are owned by religious leaders or entities which are fully focusing on religion. These papers are published mainly, but not only, in Kabul and in Herat and focusing on either Sunni or Shia branches of Islam. But, in the occasion of *Eids* and other religious celebrations, all papers focus on religion.

There are two languages used in publishing newspapers, Persian (Dari) and Pashto. This means that there are papers that are purely in Persian or in Pashto and there are papers that are in both languages in bilingual cities. A few papers are available in English language for international audiences including embassies and international organisations. Tribal and

ethnic councils also own papers, which are mainly used to introduce general issues to their ethnicity or tribes, mainly in the case of small ethnicities and tribes. But for the two larger ethnicities, Pashtoons and Tajiks, papers at times indirectly address specific tribal issues, even though a paper is not specifically printed for this topic.

It is important to know that most of the major papers are used by specific ethnicities. *Hasht e Subh* daily is read by Persian/Dari speakers while *Weesa* daily is read by Pashto speakers, same as *Hewad* and *Anis* dailies.

Radio

Radio is still the top tool for information among Afghans. According to the media directory of Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, there are almost 200 operational radio stations across the country. Community radios are based in rural areas and cover the people who live in a specific district or a small group of districts. Thus, these local radios broadcast in community languages and about local cultures. But there are radios that cover more than 20 provinces through links and re-transmitting systems. For example *Arman FM* is listened to mainly in Persian/Dari-speaking areas, while Arakozia is the same for Pashoon-based areas.

Radio is covering almost two-thirds of the population. People are tuned to radio especially in rural areas, but there are also urban audiences composed mainly of people tuned to the radio stations while driving their cars. The radio industry in Afghanistan is quite developed but still facing challenges. Afghanistan is a mountainous country, thus FM radio is used but it covers small areas. AM and Shortwave are not so well known in Afghanistan, although the state-owned radio station is broadcasting in all 3 frequencies. Sustainability is still a challenge for radio stations, although there are few stations that are self-sustainable.

Radios are broadcasting mainly music, but news, current affairs, sports, religion, social and political awareness programmes are also part of the content. It is worth mentioning that there are unique radios in Afghanistan that only broadcast voice of people, the so called Vox Pops. People are calling and their messages and sayings are automatically recorded. Then after some hours these recorded pieces are broadcast. Youths are calling the most, criticising the government at both local and national level, sending various messages and even expressing their feelings to their beloved ones. Groups are made and transferring their messages through that radio stations. It is important to mention that in cities such as Kabul or Herat, both girls and boys contact shows by calling the radio stations on the phone, while in rural areas it is mostly boys. In the South and East of the country where security is a challenge, calls are less frequent than in the areas to the North and West, where security conditions are somehow better.

From a coverage perspective, radio covers almost all of Afghanistan, excluding some high mountainous areas or places that are very far from the control of the government. Thus, there are national, regional and local radios. Local radios could be defined as community radio in the country.

Radio Afghanistan, is one of the few national radio stations owned by the government. There are also private radio stations that cover almost all of the country. Some of the companies own a network of radio stations where the central radio is based in one of the big cities and the other stations are transmitting the programmes elsewhere in the country, sometimes alongside with local programmes.

In rural areas there are radio stations only focusing on religion. But almost all radio stations allocate a time for religion. *Resalat Radio* is one of the examples; it is based in the Kohistan district of the Kapisa province, 100 km North of Kabul. All contents are Islamic but with a temperate approach through the affiliation of university lecturers and religious scholars.

Radios mainly broadcast in the two common Persian/Dari and Pashto languages, but there are local/community radios that

also broadcast in local languages. The state-owned radio has programmes in all languages that exist across the country, but its main languages are the two common ones.

Although accessing work based on ethnicity is not accepted by society, there are radio stations that are established on an ethnicity basis which is legal through the current laws of the country.

The Taliban occasionally run a mobile radio station by the name of *Shariat Ghag* (Voice of Sharia), mainly to recruit youths for their fighting lines. It was used for the first time in 2007 in the bordering areas of Afghanistan and Pakistan. After being off for some time, in 2018 it was used in the Ghazni province in central Afghanistan. The station was bombed recently by international forces.

ISIS also operated a radio station called *Khelafat* (Caliphate) in the Nangarhar provinces, in eastern Afghanistan at the border with Pakistan. The radio was also bombed by international forces in 2017. It is worth mentioning that both radios were broadcasting illegally.

Television

TV was established in 1978, at the same time of the Communist coup and the resulting 14-years regime. Thus, TV was state run and a propaganda tool for the government. After the Communists, the Mujahedeen took power in 1992 and civil war started. One of civil war consequences was the cutting of electricity. Thus TV had no longer any reach. During the Taliban rule TV was banned. After the end of the Taliban regime, Afghanistan experienced the birth of private TV stations. The first one was *Aiina*, a North-based TV station that belonged to a local power but not to the government. According to Altai, a French organisation working on consultancies and surveys, *Tolo TV* is the most watched station in Afghanistan for the Persian/Dari language that is watched mainly in the cities. *Tolo* has a Pashto version that is called *Lemar TV* for Pashto speakers. As of 2018, there are 96 TV channels across the country, including governmental and private ones. Although running a TV station is difficult in Afghanistan because of the extreme costs, it is an influential tool and various parties, including the government, have a strong interest in trying to control it. TV is also a soft but main target for terrorist groups. In January 2016 a bus of *Tolo TV* was targeted by the Taliban through a suicide attack resulting in 7 deaths and more than 15 injuries. In November 2017 the *Shamshad TV* offices in Kabul were attacked, allegedly by ISIS forces. In April 2018, 9 journalists were killed in a double suicide blast where when the alleged bomber pretended to be a cameraman. This attack was also claimed by ISIS. Yet TV is a developing industry. The 96 TV stations employ a large portion of media industry staff. There are almost 12,000 people employed in the media sector across the country, with more than 7,000 people employed in TVs.

According to Altai's data, TV is covering almost 40 percent of Afghanistan's population.

TV content ranges from news, current affairs, discussions and soap operas to music and religious programmes. Turkish and Indian soap operas are very famous, while Iranian, Pakistani and Western soap operas are at lower stages of popularity. Indian, Afghan and Iranian music are the top three music styles aired through Afghan TVs.

Except news and current affairs, most of Afghanistan's TV content is produced outside of the country. This means TVs are mainly relying on foreign produced programmes and content.

The lack of an Intellectual Property law is a big challenge toward copyrights. The consequence of this paves the ground for the illegal use of others' production. This is one of the main reasons of the wide use of foreign-produced programmes that seem to be cheap or sometime free.

Although TV is not covering the most of the population comparing with radio, yet it is a popular and influential tool of information.

Another unique performance of TV is that it empowers women and paves the ground for them to reclaim power and make an effective use of their rights as much as it is possible and stated by laws, by giving them much-needed space to appear in the Afghan society and public. TV encourages women to raise their voices and gives them self-confidence. It is also the main tool for anti-corruption processes: Revealing facts through investigative reports has been most influential on TV compared to the other media outlets.

Digital Media

Digital/online media is a new phenomenon in Afghanistan, even newer than in other parts of the world. It is a new market, and according to the Ministry of Communication and IT, almost 9 million people have access to Internet. This access is possible either through direct connection to Internet or through mobile phones.

Culturally Afghans are used to having a physical medium for their connections, but the culture of Internet usage is increasing day by day. First hand news are available online. News agencies are using online tools for their news dissemination system. Even if those who use Internet potentially would be able to afford online news subscription fees, this is not happening except in small percentages. Free news websites are the most used. BBC Persian and Pashto websites are the most popular ones and almost everyone who is connected to the Internet uses either one of them. Almost all mainstream media have their websites, which are a tool for free news. International and national mainstream media that broadcast in the main two languages, Persian (Dari) and Pashto, also own the most viewed web pages in the country.

Multimedia content is highlighted in the digital media world, giving audiences the possibility to consume text, audio, video and digital data at the same time. Thus, this has promoted the online media market to a very big extent.

Afghanistan has experienced a revolution in digital and online media. Looking back to 15 years ago, there were no more than 100 Internet connections in the entire country, a number which nowadays has raised to 9 million.

Social Networks

Social media are becoming even more popular than mainstream media in some instances now. Facebook is the top and most famous network. According to the Facebook website, almost 2 million Afghans are using Facebook. Twitter is the second network with a number of users which is less than half a million. According to the book "*Ethic in social media*" Facebook is used for news, events, literature, texts and entertainment. Almost everyone who can afford a smartphone connected to Internet is using Facebook and this is bringing a revolution in news dissemination throughout the country. Regardless of gender or being based in rural or urban areas, those who own a device use Facebook. Even those who are illiterate, in some instances use it just for uploading pictures and videos and liking pictures and videos from others. But indeed most users are literates. Although legitimacy is a big concern, Facebook has replaced mainstream media such as TV, radio and print in providing breaking news. Due to its importance and the speed of information sharing, almost all mainstream media have Facebook accounts, which are used mainly for receiving raw data from audiences.

Fake news, on the other hand, is a big challenge for social media. As many as 94 percent of the participants to a survey done by Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan said they have been affected by fake news through social media.

Despite all this, social media is becoming the main tool for changing or making public opinion. Campaigns are being performed through social media, mainly through Facebook. Even during elections, social media is becoming an important tool

to campaign through. There are users of social media in rural area but no systematic studies have been performed in this regard. It is worth mentioning that mobile phone companies provide 3G Internet facilities both to cities and rural areas. This provides residents of rural areas the opportunity to also use social networks.

Social media is also used by various armed groups. The Taliban use Facebook and Twitter for their propaganda and news.

Opinion Makers

Weblogs were briefly famous in Afghanistan and a few of them are still well known, but social networks have taken the domination over blogs. Razaq Mamoon, an Afghan writer based in Australia, is one of the most famous bloggers remaining. He also has a famous website (Razaqmamoon.com) featuring contents that are shared to social networks regularly and discussed immediately among groups and networks.

There are so called “movements for change” with thousands of followers on their social media networks, which are also used to organise demonstrations and other kinds of protests. The most famous one is The Enlightenment Movement, which starts to advocate for the connection of rural areas to power networks. Some personal Facebook profiles are also discussed among people, especially those of people that comment on politics.

Insurgent groups are also using social networks for recruiting youths to fight against the government. Their websites as well as Facebook pages are regularly followed, especially in the South and East of the country. Insurgents, especially the Taliban are intermittently using different pages in different languages. However their website in English is always the same (Alemarah-english.org). Some influential social media accounts are also important. People are using them especially to get political information and thoughts. The Facebook page of the (former) governor of the northern Balkh province or the Facebook page of General Raziq, who was Police Chief of the southern Qandahar province and a powerful man there, are two important examples. The latter was killed in October 18, 2018 along with a local intelligence commander when a bodyguard opened fire after a meeting in the governor's compound in Kandahar. Youth group pages are also widespread, and the most famous ones focus on popular sports such as football or cricket. For example, the page of Barcelona Football Club Supporters in Afghanistan is followed by thousands of people

Sources

Newspapers

- [Anis](#)
- [Etilaatroz](#)
- [Hasht e Subh](#)
- [Hewad](#)
- [Mandegar](#)
- [Maseer](#)
- [Rah e Madaniat](#)
- [Tolo e Afghan](#)
- [Weesa](#)

Radio

- [Arman FM](#)
- [Aryana](#)

- [Bayan](#)
- [BBC local broadcast](#)
- [Khorshid](#)
- [Killid](#)
- [Maiwand](#)
- [Radio Liberty local broadcast](#) (Radio Azadi)
- [Salam Watandar](#)
- [VoA local broadcast](#)

Television

- [Aryana news](#)
- [Kabul news](#)
- [Khorshid](#)
- [Lemar](#)
- [1TV](#)
- [Radio Television of Afghanistan](#) (RTA)
- [Shamshad](#)
- [Tolo](#)
- [Tolo news](#)
- [Zhwandoon](#)

Digital Media

- [Arg](#) (Office of the President)
- [BBC Afghanistan](#)
- [Payk Investigative News](#)
- [Pajhwok Afghan News](#)
- [Tolo news](#)

Opinion Makers

- [Ahmad Saeedi](#)
- [Barcelona Fans in Afghanistan](#)
- [Razaq Mamoon](#)
- [General Abdul Raziq](#)
- [General Ata Mohammad Noor](#)
- [Enlightenment Movement](#)

Organisations

Trade Unions

Unions are recognised by Afghan laws. The mass media law paves the ground for the media sector to have its unions. Journalists and media have their unions based on the law. The Federation of Afghanistan's Media Organisations and Journalists (FAMOJ) is a network of 16 entities including unions.

The Afghanistan National Journalists Union (ANJU) is the first ever union with almost 4 decades of activities. The Afghanistan National Journalists and Writers Union is an affiliate to the first one. Women have their own unions too. The Afghanistan Women Journalist Union (AWJU) is the most famous one.

But the problem is that unions are not powerful enough to perform in the way unions should by definition. Unions are either busy with their internal issues including financial challenges or have become an organisation to implement projects and consequently act as project-driven entities. There is no system of fees or intersectorial contributions, thus, unions are facing financial problems for their sustainability. This forces them to apply for projects, with the consequence that at the end of the day unions are becoming project-driven entities. A membership fee system is rarely applied into the unions.

Trust in the unions is weak in the media sector. Large percentages of journalists are not members of a union. In some instances also the government interferes with the unions' performances.

Journalist Associations

In Afghanistan, there is no effective national association for journalists and media, although there are associations that call themselves national. The first ever association is the Afghanistan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA), which was established in 2004. According to their website, AIJA has the largest number of members among other associations.

The Afghanistan Independent Radio Association (AIRA) is another association which is a network of more than 70 radio stations. AIRA members are located almost all over Afghanistan. AIRA is an umbrella organisation whose members are not united and do not air the same content. These radio stations are located both in cities as well as in rural areas, where most of them are based. According to the AIRA itself, their members are present almost in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan. Considering that there are 196 radio stations across the country, the coverage portion of AIRA members could be less than 50% of all the population.

A group of women journalists also started the process of creating an association, which is currently just an entity registered on paper, with no activity yet. There are also regional associations which are more active. The South Asia Free Media Association - Afghanistan is working in the country since 2008.

According to Afghan laws, the media sector can have associations and unions. But there is no clear line for distinguishing between an association and a union. Thus no association is performing the way it should perform. Furthermore, due to sustainability challenges, associations are competing with each other to receive funds.

Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, functions as an association as well as a union and an advocacy and training organisation.

News Agencies

There are 14 operational news agencies in Afghanistan. Among these 14, one is the governmental and largest agency, Bakhtar News Agency, which operates under the Ministry of Information and Culture. The agency has offices in all 33 provinces with its headquarters in Kabul. According to the Ministry of Information and Culture the agency has 175 staff including 90 journalists. The source adds that 200 news reports and interviews are produced by the agency every 24 hours.

Bakhtar News Agency is providing news and related information to all governmental media outlets.

Pajhwok Afghan News (PAN) is an independent news agency that feeds all national and international media outlets through its subscription system. PAN has almost 50 journalists and is the biggest private news agency in Afghanistan. According to Altai, a French-based consultancy that researches media in Afghanistan, PAN has the biggest share of news dissemination market for media outlets.

Afghan Women's News Agency (AWNA) is a Kabul-based news agency that covers only news that relate directly to women or issues that influence women's lives.

Yet Afghan media still receive part of their information from international news agencies such as Reuters, AFP and AP, which have permanent correspondents in Afghanistan.

Audience measurement organisations

Although Afghanistan's independent media had a great contribution in the process of democratisation since 2001, the sector as such is still very new and very young, in need of new establishments especially in infrastructure. One of the most needed systems is actually the establishment of audience measurement organisations, which are still lacking in Afghanistan.

Although some international project-based organisation measure media audiences in Afghanistan, this does not imply a regular ongoing measurement system. Altai is one of those organisations. Media outlets sometimes also release data on audience measurement, but with standards that are not acceptable for the media and neither for the audiences.

Due to the lack of a regular measurement system, people guess which media are at the top. This even influences companies who are providing advertisements to media. The dominant discourse is based on sporadic measures and public guesses. Even though the public seems to have clear which media has the biggest audience and which the less, for professionals it is clear that this dominant discourse is not accurate and even correct.

Sources

Trade Unions

- [Afghanistan's National Journalists Union](#) (ANJU)
- [Afghanistan Women Journalist Union](#) (AWJU)

Journalist Associations

- [Afghan Independent Journalists Association](#) (AIJA)
- [Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan](#) (Nai SOMA)
- [South Asia Free Media Association](#) (SAFMA)

News Agencies

- [Bakhtar News Agency](#) (BNA)
- [Pajhwok Afghan News](#) (PAN)

Audience measurement organisations

- [Altai Consulting](#)

Policies

Media legislation

The Afghanistan constitution, Article 34, guarantees freedom of expression and clearly states: “Freedom of expression shall be inviolable. Every Afghan shall have the right to express thoughts through speech, writing, illustrations as well as other means in accordance with provisions of this constitution. Every Afghan shall have the right, according to provisions of law, to print and publish on subjects without prior submission to state authorities. Directives related to the press, radio, and television as well as publications and other mass media shall be regulated by law.”

The constitution recognises the right of access to information for all Afghan citizens through its Article 50 and states: “The citizens of Afghanistan shall have the right of access to information from state departments in accordance with the provisions of the law. This right shall have no limit except when harming rights of others as well as public security.”

According to the Freedom House 2017 report, Afghanistan is in a better position regarding freedom of expression than all its neighbouring countries. An indicator for comparing countries is the mass media law, and the Afghan one clearly gives all the information and procedures regarding the establishing and maintenance of the media sector and its affiliations. The law gives the government no ways to control independent media and for these reasons it can be considered one of the best in the region.

The access to information law was recently amended and subsequently rated as the best law in the world by a Canadian-based freedom of expression organisation, the Center for Law and Democracy.

The private mass media regulation is another legal document, amended in 2018, that states journalists' rights, performances and responsibilities.

The media and journalists' safety and security regulation is also an apt document to the situation of Afghanistan and states the responsibilities of the government and media organisations toward journalists and media staff. It also recognises the right to a safe working environment for journalists and states government-specific organisational responsibilities.

All media-relevant laws are drafted, processed and approved in close cooperation with media advocacy organisations.

The legislation process according to the Afghanistan constitution starts with the submission of a draft proposal from the sector to the Media High Council at the Ministry of Information and Culture. It is then sent to the Ministry of Justice, which sends it to its cabinet and then to the parliament. If a law passes the parliament, it is sent to the president for signing.

This is a long process with difficulties. The current parliament of Afghanistan is considered to be a conservative one, thus, it should be less keen to amend media and freedom of speech laws. Media advocacy organisations try their best to convince members of parliament, ministers and even the president to vote for the improvement of said laws. But the main problem is enforcing and implementing these laws. Media-related laws are not implemented in lots of instances. According to the constitution of Afghanistan, freedom of expression is guaranteed but journalists are still being killed. The number of killings

has raised annually. According to Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, in the 14 years between 2001 and 2014, 42 journalists have been killed, while the number is 53 between 2015 and October 2018. Access to information is recognised as a right to every citizen by the constitution, but remains one of the biggest challenges of Afghan media. According to the Freedom House 2017 report, the government remains the largest perpetrator of violence against journalists in Afghanistan, especially through its security forces. The Taliban take the second position.

Accountability systems

In general, accountability is weak in Afghanistan in every aspect of society. In the media sector one of the main issues is actually how the sector is accountable or whether the sector is accountable at all.

Almost all media outlets have their own code of conduct which is designed based on their own interests. It is not possible to apply one for the other. In 2016, after almost a decade of efforts, the Afghan media sector finalised its first ever code of ethics. The representatives of media outlets including TVs, radios, papers, news agencies and some media-supporting organisations, have agreed and signed the final version, but still the code is not being applied.

The government uses different approaches to maintain various points of contact at the media outlets. No political party dares to bring forward the issue of the government breaking the law. The Federation of Afghanistan's Media Organisations and Journalists (FAMOJ) is also not in the position to make the sector accountable, as it lacks the power even to ask for media accountability.

In theory, both the Afghanistan media code of conducts and the federation should be responsible to keep the media sector accountable, but neither can, at least at this stage. For example, during counter terrorism operations in Afghanistan, in the case of Afghan soldiers being killed, the Federation and even the public requires the media to refer to those who have been killed as "Martyrs", but except for the governmental media, none of the private media calls them Martyrs. They use the word "killed", as they also do for insurgencies that are killed during the operations. Access to Information and Journalist Safety regulations are also not usually enforced and violations against journalists are not being brought to prosecution.

Regulatory authorities

Under Afghanistan's mass media law, number 986 of July 2009, there are two regulatory bodies to oversee all media sectors. Article 41 of the law states the creation and performance standards of the Media High Council. The Media High Council develops all the media sector policies and oversees the Radio Television of Afghanistan (RTA). RTA is the only governmental radio and TV station across the country. Its board composed of 13 members from the Information Ministry and the Deputy Minister of Communication. It also has representatives of parliament, senates, Supreme Court, media and civil societies.

Article 42 of the mass media law recognises the creation and performance of media complaints and of an offences-review commission to be active under the Ministry of Information and Culture. This commission oversees all private media sectors across the country. It has nine members that include the Information Minister, the Communication Deputy Minister, and representatives of parliament's both houses, of the Supreme Court, of civil society and the media sector. The commission meets each Sunday and reviews all complaints. It has no committee to review the content of media outlets, although it should. It is headed by the Minister of Information and Culture. The critics are claiming that if the government complains against any media outlet, the ministry will be not impartial while reviewing the complaint.

The procedure of the commission is to review the complaints and the offenses and consider if they need to be sent to the Attorney's office or not. If so, it refers the complaints or offenses to the Attorney's office. If not, it just notifies the media outlet and those who complained.

Technically there is also a regulatory body. The Afghanistan Telecommunication Regulatory Body (ATRA) oversees all technical performances of electronic media outlets, radio, TV and Internet. It is an independent body assigned by the president to examine any technical offences of media outlets, for example using different bandwidth, not the proper frequency, excessive power output, etc.

Sources

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- [Ministry of Justice of Afghanistan](#) (MoJ)
- [Ministry of Information and Culture](#) (MoIC)
- [Oversight Commission on Access to Information](#) (OCAI)

Education

Universities and schools

More than 30 journalism schools are operational across Afghanistan. About 20 of them are public entities, under governmental universities, and almost 10 of them are private universities that run journalism schools too. Private journalism schools are providing studies for journalists of bachelor degree, as do all governmental journalism schools that are located outside of Kabul. The only university that provides a master degree in journalism is Kabul University, which is the oldest university in Afghanistan and was established in 1931. All governmental and non-governmental journalism schools are certified by the Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education. Based on information provided via phone interview by a spokesperson of the ministry, around 1800 students are graduated annually from media schools across the country and more than 15 percent are female graduates.

There are two vocational institutes that provide a two-year diploma in media. One is the Kabul Journalism Institute, a governmental entity based in east of Kabul city. Established in 2016, it receives students through national entrance exams. The second one is Nai Media Institute, established in 2012 and is a private institute owned by Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan. Both institutes are also certified by the Afghan Ministry of Education.

Journalism schools within universities mainly focus on theoretical lessons. The Kabul Journalism Institute, the governmental institute, also provides only theoretical lessons. All universities' journalism schools' curricula belong to the 1970s and 1980s. The private schools are new but they use similar curricula as Kabul University, the old curricula. The only updated curriculum is that of Nai Media Institute, which was bought in 2012 from an Australian training company, Ahern Media and Training Pty Ltd.

Recently, some American universities started to affiliate with Afghanistan universities' Journalism schools. The San José State University is affiliating with Kabul University to update their curricula and train their faculties. The same has started with

some other universities through the main universities of Afghanistan, Herat University in the West, Nangarhar University in the East, Balkh University in the North and Qandahar University in the South.

It is worth mentioning that all universities have two departments of print media and electronic (TV and Radio) media. None of them has online media studies or sections.

Professional development

Free media are new to Afghanistan and need more development in each and every aspect. Generally speaking professionalism, intending the quality and methods of journalism, is still weak in the media sector, but improving day by day. There are different opportunities for prospective journalist to develop their professionalism. Organisations such as Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan provide short term courses, as well as internship programs. There are also media outlets, including TVs, radios and prints that provide internship programs. Also, media-supporting organisations and media outlets are affiliated with universities' journalism schools to receive senior students for a period of 3-5 months for internship programs.

Despite this, professionalism is a big challenge for Afghan media and one of the main critical points for the whole media sector. Challenges in this regard range from basic requirements of professionalism, to impartiality to balancing, to ignorance of privacy and ethical points.

Media Development Organisations

Afghanistan laws officially recognize institution in both governmental and non-governmental sectors. According to the media law of Afghanistan, any individual could establish a media development entity unless he/she is prevented by law.

There are more than 20 Kabul-based media development organisations. Also almost the same number of organisations are working in provinces on the media sector development. The leading organisation in this regard is Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, which is working in two areas: capacity building and advocacy. Nai identified some of these organizations and listed them on their website. The Afghan Journalists Safety Committee is another organisation that works in the safety and capacity building areas.

The existence of media development organisations is a sign of development in itself, but one of the biggest problems is the sustainability of these organisations. None of these 40 organisations are sustainable. Efforts and struggles to receive funds or sponsorships sometimes cause unnecessary competition among them.

Furthermore, the lack of professionalism is an issue for media development organisations as it is for media. Some of the organisations are established to be a financial tool for the management and never follow the values of the sector. This undermines the trust-building process towards the sectorial media development organisations.

Sources

- [Balkh University](#)
- [Herat University](#)
- [Kabul University](#)
- [Kardan University](#)
- [Nai Media Institute](#)
- [Shaikh Zayed University](#)

Telecommunications

Mobile network ecosystem

Mobile telephones were introduced in Afghanistan publically in 2002. According to the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, as of 2018, 19 million people are using mobile phones out of a population of approximately 32 million. There are six telecommunication companies, five of which are private and one with mixed private and government shares. Although telecommunication companies claim that the number of active account/SIM cards is over 21 million, but this is because half of the users own more than one SIM card.

The price of communication is expensive compared to neighbouring countries. It is eight times more expensive than Pakistan and India and ten times more expensive than Iran. The quality, comparing with the above mentioned countries is the same. In some instances it could be bad, but in general it is the same. Internet 3G system is available through mobiles, although some companies claim they have launched 4G, but no proof of it has been yet presented.

Afghanistan is a mountainous country, but almost all residential areas are covered by mobile phone networks. The only issue in coverage is in the areas not controlled by the government, such as large portions of the Kunduz province and some parts of the Baghlan province in the North and parts of the provinces of Zabul, Helmand and Urozgan in the South. There are also other places where the government does not control all of the territory. In most of these areas mobile networks are working from 8am to 8pm while during the night and early morning they are off.

Company profiles

The Afghan Wireless Communication Company (AWCC) is the first ever private telecommunication company in the country and was established in 2002. According to the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MoCIT), AWCC has 4.5 million subscribers and its investment is more than US\$650m.

The second company is Roshan Communication Company. It has the most subscribers in the country according to the MoCIT the investment of the company is US\$700m and it has 6.5 million subscribers. Roshan was established in 2003.

Afghan Telecom is a mixed private and governmental company that was established in 2005. It has landlines and mobile phones reaching 3.1 million subscribers with a US\$250m investment.

Etisalat was established in 2006 with a US\$300m investment. It has 4 million subscribers across the country, in accordance with MoCIT.

MTN was also established in 2006. It has 3 million subscribers with a US\$250m investment. The most recent is Salam

Communication Company. It was established in 2013 with a US\$250m investment. Salam has 1 million subscribers, according to the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology.

It is worth mentioning that none of above mentioned companies specified to work for a part of the country or for a specific segment of the population. All are working throughout the country, with more and less the same coverage. According to UN statistics, more than 62 percent of Afghanistan citizens are under the age of 25; it is therefore safe to assume that most users are youths.

Main trends

Telecommunications are developing successfully for the last two decades in Afghanistan. In 2000, if a person wanted to call abroad, he/she needed to travel to the neighbouring country of Pakistan to do so. Now it is possible to call wherever you want from almost everywhere in the country. Nevertheless, this achievement was not easy to reach. Almost US\$2bn were invested in this sector. For almost a decade there were only four companies competing with each other and according to the MoCIT no more companies would be allowed to join the sector for a while. Thus, this brings a kind of monopoly situation in the sector. A normal call inside Afghanistan is almost US\$0.05-0.065 per minute, while it is US\$0.01-0.015 in Pakistan. A normal SMS with 160 characters costs almost US\$0.04 while in Pakistan in most cases it is free. Packages are not very useful and compared with the cost of normal calls it is almost the same. Most companies offer prepaid plans. Taxes to the government amount to 10 percent of the payments. But there is no transparent system to report to the public how these taxes are used. AWCC and Roshan have a program allocating part of their income to public benefit projects, although in very small percentages. But no other company has similar measures. AWCC supports some women dormitories while Roshan is supporting some sports development processes.

There is no confirmed data to differentiate mobile users by age, gender or geography. But most experts in this regard agree that youths are the most numerous users. Users in urban areas are more than those in rural areas. And, in a male-dominated country such as Afghanistan, very obviously male users are more than female users.

Mobile coverage

Roshan Telecommunication Company claims to have the largest coverage with 6.4 million subscribers. Roshan covers all 34 provinces of Afghanistan. It provides 2G and 3G Internet services too. The Afghan Wireless Communication Company is the oldest telecommunication company in Afghanistan. It covers all 34 provinces and claims to provide 4G Internet services too. AWCC has more than 15 years of service in the country.

MTN is covering 27 provinces out of 34. It provides mobile services to 75 percent of the country. MTN claims to provide 2G and 3G Internet services for almost 50 percent of the country's residential areas.

Etisalat is a multinational company that covers 29 provinces, home to 18 million people. Etisalat is providing global roaming services and 3G Internet for all its subscribers.

Afghan Telecom covers 24 provinces through its landline and mobile services. It focuses more on urban areas. According to its website, the company intends to expand its coverage.

Salam is the youngest telecommunication company in Afghanistan with five years of experience. It covers urban and central areas of 21 provinces.

Mobile ownership

According to the procedures introduced by the government, anyone who can present a national identification card and an amount of money (nowadays Afs50-100 equalling US\$0.7 to 1.3) is able to receive a SIM card, which is easy to get. There is also another way to receive a SIM card. There are unregistered SIM cards that can be bought through the black market at half the price of the legal SIM cards. The government has no control on the issue. There is a debate nowadays in Afghanistan regarding possible cases of corruption related to how the government is using the taxes from mobile users which amount to 10 percent of all expenses. There is no accountability from the government in this regard and no one publically knows the amount of these taxes per month, since non-registered SIM cards are a potential source of unaccounted money, as deducted taxes from these cards are not calculated through the process.

SIM cards are activated within 24 hours of purchase. The paying system is pre-paid. Internet connection is provided through packages.

SMS texts are rarely used in rural areas because of illiteracy, while a small percentage use the technology in the cities. Calls are mainly used, at a one-way charge, unless it is on roaming and outside of the country. The person who calls pays 100 percent of the charges.

There are cultural and traditional barriers in Afghanistan on mobile usage for women. But usage from women is rising day by day and in the main cities men and women are using phones equally. The only difference is that men are using more than one SIM card and telephone, while women are normally using just one.

Sources

- [Afghan Wireless Communication Company](#) (AWCC)
- [Etisalat Telecommunication Company](#) (Etisalat)
- [M T N Telecommunication Company](#) (MTN)
- [Roshan Telecommunication Company](#) (Roshan)
- [Salaam Telecommunication Company](#) (Salaam)

Innovation

Landscape analysis

Innovation initiatives started back in 2012 with the impulse of the international community, which encouraged the tech companies and civil society organisations to work together and make applications that could bring changes in the society, fostering the role of technology in bringing social change. Based on those initiatives, the Innovation Hub, which actually consists of technology experts, came together and started bi-weekly and monthly meetings about technology development and its applicability in society. One specific result is the establishment of a software that, against a fixed fee, allows customers to download on their mobile phones the exercises to prepare for the university admission exam. From 2013 onwards another initiative supported by Internews consisted in conducting several workshops and labs for civil society, media activists and technologists in order to address various social challenges with the help of technology in Kabul, Nangarhar and Herat. The challenges, although not necessarily related to technology, included women related social barriers, blood donation, election monitoring and so on. Technology was used to tackle these challenges. Many working groups started to work on different applications like Easy Haj. Some of these ideas were developed but it is questionable that they have been

fully implemented.

The all-female robotic team from Herat is another initiative which has started and hopes to continue working. There are women coders in Herat, who run the Code Weekend, Tech Women and Tech TV, Deewa which are all initiatives working on new technologies. It is worth mentioning that at this stage, all initiatives in this regard are based in the cities.

Profiles of main tech parks, accelerators, hackathons

Despite all efforts, technology use and software applications usage have not been rolled out with the same effectiveness as in other countries. The main reasons might include: Unstable economy in the country, low literacy levels. The e-governance is not implemented in Afghanistan as everything with applications is connected with one's email ID. And as every application is connected with email, in Afghanistan people tend not to have active emails or don't use them regularly. People and the civil society organisations are still not aware of the impact of applications on their advocacy and campaign works.

But this does not mean nothing is happening. The global needs for technology and innovation are factors that speed up the learning and usage processes. Furthermore, with the help of international organisations, there are innovation labs happening annually and attracting eager-to-attend public, especially among youths. Afghan women computer programmers are also famous globally. This means things are going on. Moreover, since the enhancement of innovation labs and forums, groups are formed to meet regularly and discuss different topics and stories related to the subject.

Sources

- [Afghanistan Innovation Policy Platform](#) (AIPP)
- [Internews](#)
- [On Farm Water Management](#) (OFWM)

Traditional forms of communication

Summary

Afghanistan is a traditional country, where even development processes show signs of tradition. Telecommunication technology is present and under development, but people are still using traditional communication tools. Wedding and engagement parties, black ceremonies, funerals, talking inside public transportations, prayer time in mosques, Islamic prayer time, and some other official and unofficial meetings are common ways of communication among the public in Afghanistan.

The Friday prayer is a much known tool of traditional communication. Through this event, people from an area are gathered and listen to the speech of a preacher who talks about important questions. These speeches include political, social and/or religious topics. It is worth mentioning that according to Islam, Friday prayers are very important and need to be performed in mosques and in gatherings. During funerals the preachers always talk about social issues and this is a time for other speakers to share their ideas and thoughts too. Besides preachers, also other local personalities have the opportunity to talk in public. According to the perception of Islam in Afghanistan, hundreds of people gather during a funeral and listen to speeches. It is an obligation for everyone to be present to funerals of family members, friends and relatives.

Parks and sports clubs are very suitable places to talk to others. Information is disseminated through these places mainly

among youths. Sports matches are opportunities for people to talk to each other and share information and communicate.

The above mentioned forms and grounds for communications are almost all men-dominated tools. Although in some parties, women are separately communicating with each other, mainly in wedding and engagement parties or in black ceremonies or during funerals.

Furthermore, women communicate to each other mainly in women bakeries where mostly old women are gathered. Nowadays, mainly in the capital city of Kabul, women start to gather in sports events, in parks or on the streets to walk and this is becoming a form of communication.

In rural areas, there are different traditional communication forms compared to the cities. Almost in all rural areas over the country and in almost all tribes and ethnicities the elder villagers are the main channel for communication. The government is using these channels and established Community Development Councils (CDCs). There are more than 300 CDCs which are mainly used to facilitate construction and reconstruction projects all over the country.

Islamic eves (Eids) are opportunities for villagers to get together and discuss social, political and economic topics. Youths and old people gather in a house or in a garden to talk and council about the above mentioned topics.

Sending postal letters is still used among governmental organisations as the main tool for internal communication. The system is theoretically covering a range of urban and rural areas, but most of the time it takes more time than is needed and/or expected. Furthermore, most of the governmental offices in the cities are using computers and Internet, but they are not using emails and the facilities are not used for official communications in most of the times.

Sources

- [A women bakery in Kabul](#)
- [A story of CDCs](#)
- [Eid celebration in Afghanistan](#)

Conclusions

Conclusion

Afghanistan, a third-world country with high rates of poverty, is witnessing an ongoing development process of free media and freedom of speech. It has the top Access to Information Bill and the best Media Law in the region. The media market, although declining, still has opportunities to self-sustain. Media have a pivotal role to raise awareness in people on their rights and on their usage. During national political events such as elections, media play a critical role.

Although media have a history of 145 years, the new movement of free media is very young, with less than two decades. Thus, it has professional issues, although there are professional development processes going on. As much as the media are professional, the government is trying to control them and pressure them by bringing barriers and limitations. But still there are free media advocacy organisations to counter this process.

There are a several print media in Afghanistan, more than 180, but they cover only 1 percent of the population. Radio is the

main tool for receiving information, especially in rural areas. More than 200 radios are operational in Afghanistan. TV is the main media through the cities. It covers almost 40 percent of the population. Digital media are expanding gradually and the expansion of Internet users is bringing forward digital media.

Social media have much power in the country. Facebook is the top while Twitter is the second. Youths are using social media the most. Blogs and Facebook could be counted as important opinion makers. But media as a whole have a big role in this regard.

Media face lots of issues including safety and security. Media associations and unions are active consequently in the country to advocate and to defend media rights.

Afghanistan lacks a systematic way of audience surveying, but the available data in this regard show how important media are in the country.

Accountability is also not an organised process, although there are ways of accountability of media. But these ways are weak and not sustainable. According to the law, technically and contently, media are regulated and there are regulatory bodies.

Universities and institutes are providing academic and vocational education facilities. Yet the academic system of education is old and outdated.

Communication is a success story in Afghanistan. According to the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology, 19 million people out of a population of almost 30 million are using mobile phones. There are six companies that are operational in Afghanistan and provide telecommunication services.

Innovation is under way in Afghanistan. 2012 was the first time the discourse on the topic formed. There are events and innovation labs that engage people to use technology for their benefits and creativeness.

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