

Nov 04, 2016 by *Joshua Frey*

The Afghanistan Effect ^[1]

In his book, *The Al Jazeera Effect*, Philip Seib states that “Al Jazeera is a paradigm of new media’s influence,” similar to the way CNN had been the first to influence foreign policy throughout the world. Al Jazeera, Seib writes, goes further by using new media as a tool that ranges from democratization to terrorism, in addition to creating ‘virtual states’. The growth of new media, particularly in the Middle East, has been explosive, according to Seib, going from a handful of stations to 450 satellite channels that are privately owned, bringing an end to the dominance of state media in the region. Afghanistan is no exception to this phenomenon and perhaps growing at an even faster rate, with some 150 television stations that have been created since the fall of the Taliban. While the media still face many problems, as does the country itself, the creation of the media landscapes can be a powerful tool to counter forces of instability from dominating the country. Thus, if protected and utilized properly, the “Afghanistan Effect” can be one of the most powerful counterweights to a pre-2001 Taliban and Al Qaeda once again taking hold.

Since April of 2011, I have been leading a group for the Deputy Chief of Staff of Communications (DCOS COMM) for Headquarters International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) that does outreach to Afghan government spokespersons. We have recently expanded our mission to include outreach to Afghan media – a standard function for Public Affairs in any mission. Nevertheless, in Afghanistan not every public affairs practitioner is able to perform this role due to security and insufficient knowledge of the language and culture. The Afghanistan Pakistan Hands Program (AFPAK HANDS) has enabled me to go out into the populace to help provide better insight into the media landscape, but also to build relationships with the media and receive feedback on how ISAF is performing its communications role. With the unique force protection and grooming standards allowances, such as wearing local civilian clothes and growing beards, AFPAK Hands can move more freely in the populace and blend in easier. We can travel with a low profile in civilian vehicles, rather than up-armored convoys that are easy to pick out of a crowd. Thus, we’re able to move quickly and efficiently to achieve DCOS COMM’s objectives. Combined with the ability to build quick relationships with Afghans because of our language ability, we are able to open doors where others cannot. We then enable access for others, such as our leadership in DCOS COMM, to meet with Afghan media opinion leaders and key government spokesmen.

With the feedback my group gains through our interface with the media and the Afghan spokesmen, we help DCOS COMM, as well as the Afghan government spokespersons, understand what is working and how to improve our communications efforts. We also gain valuable insight into the media’s ability to report certain issues and try to facilitate better access for journalists not just to ISAF forces, but also the Afghan government. Overall these efforts are aimed at helping to empower Afghan journalists and create a free press in Afghanistan.

“I’m quite impressed with the Afghan media,” said Brigadier General Carsten Jacobson, Spokesman for ISAF, “They’re young and energetic. But they do face a lot of challenges by

actors who try to influence or control them. Having a free press in this part of the world is something people are not used to.”

At the official commemoration of World Press Freedom Day in 2011, the country’s Minister for Information, Sayed Makhdoon Raheen, remarked upon the growth of Afghanistan’s media as one of the signal achievement of the years since the dismantling of the Taliban regime in November 2001. Within a month of the Taliban collapse, according to Raheen, Afghanistan had sprouted no less than 200 independent media outlets. Ten years later, the figure, as quoted by the Minister in his public address on 3 May 2011, stood at 1,000.


Building relationships with such a rapidly expanding media landscape is a daunting task. Therefore, the only way this can truly be done effectively is by working with other entities within ISAF, as well as the International Community’s embassies. Some of these partners include Task Force Shafafiyat, the NATO Senior Civilian Representative Spokesman’s (SCR) office and the U.S. Embassy. By meeting regularly to share information, we are helping DCOS COMM build a shared picture and understanding of the Afghan media. Task Force Shafafiyat has other AFPAK Hands conducting outreach not just to media, but civil society groups, such as Afghan Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that advocate for the rights of journalists.

“They need guidance, support, mentoring, and ideas,” said Gen. Jacobson, “What they ultimately need to support that process is more interaction with the international media. However, right now there is a language challenge. But that will improve over time.”

Jacobson also explained the reason language is a challenge right now is that when ISAF holds press conferences, the international media heavy-hitters usually dominate the question and answer section. It is difficult for many of the Afghans whose English is not as good as their international, mostly western media counterparts.

An important part of ISAF’s insight into the local media comes from the office of the SCR. The NATO SCR was established in 2004 and the current spokesman has worked in Afghanistan for the last ten years on various projects, providing extremely valuable and helpful insight into the state of the media and who’s who in Afghan media circles.

“Recently the ISAF Spokesman and myself spent two hours at each media outlet in a series of visits we conducted,” said Dominic Medley, the SCR’s Spokesman. “We need to go to them as much as possible. Afghanistan is a society of tea and relationships. The Afghan media are no different.”

Even though Afghanistan has seen such an unprecedented expansion of the media, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights , “The ability of media actors, civil society groups and other Afghan citizens to freely express their opinions and thoughts came under attack across Afghanistan throughout 2008. National and provincial government officials, anti-government elements and different power-brokers all sought to restrict freedom of expression. Police and prosecutors generally proved ineffective at protecting freedom of expression given their apparent collusion with those in positions of power.”

My outreach group is currently working in this area to help improve the ability of media to report about ISAF operations and the Afghan government. By conducting regular outreach activities with media, government spokespersons and civil society groups, we have been able to start identifying problems and working to correct them. My next CPD Blog post will offer

some examples of Afghan media operations and assess their reach and credibility among various ethnic communities and political parties.
