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The Afghanistan Effect: Understanding Afghanistan's Media Landscape ^[1]

Through the International Security Assistance Forces AFPAK Hands program, detailed in my previous post, we have learned that much of the efforts towards Afghan media, on the part of ISAF and the international community, are directed towards the Afghan media who have the largest audience. Much of this feedback was received from media outlets themselves. However, there are many other media outlets who communicate to specific audiences.

For instance, Aina television, according to a USAID survey , garners only 4% of television ratings. However, Aina has a large Uzbek following in Northern areas such as Balkh and Jowzjan provinces. Another station, Tamadon, communicates specifically to Afghan Shiite audiences that are mostly Hazara. Tamadon, according to the USAID report brings in 7% of television ratings. Because of their funding connection to Iran, however, their reporting often contains pro-Iranian and anti-western undertones. There are other news outlets with Iranian funding that target the Afghan Shia and Hazara communities, such as Negah TV and Noorin TV. Both have relatively low ratings, compared to Tolo, Ariana and Shamshod TV.

To these ethnic groups, which are also part of political parties that represent them, Tamadon and Aina hold credibility that the stations with the largest ratings (Tolo and Arianna) do not have. Tamadon is owned by Shiite cleric Sheikh Mohammad Asif Mohseni. Because of the connection to Mohseni, a respected figure among Afghan Shiites who are mostly Hazara, the station holds credibility among this particular religious, ethnic and political demographic. As Seib suggests, "Many governments dismiss these types of media, especially Al Jazeera, because they are not objective providers of information and therefore presumably have little clout with their audiences."


Zafar Shah Rouyee, news editor for *Hasht-e Sohb* newspaper in Kabul, says that Tamadon had sent his staff for a one-month training to Tehran, since many of its television programs are similar in style to their counterparts from across the border. National holidays in Iran, for instance, are extensively covered. When the Iranian-Afghan joint cultural heritage was celebrated in Tehran in the summer, Tamadon TV reported it live. The speaker of the Iranian Parliament Ali Larijani used this opportunity to criticize the presence of Western troops in Afghanistan.

There are several other news outlets that receive Iranian funding, such as Noorin, Rai-e-Fardo, Negah that receive less viewership than Tamadon who also target the Afghan Shia Hazara.

However, as Seib writes, this is largely a viewpoint indicative of Western standards of journalistic objectivity. But in Afghanistan as in the Middle-East, these types of media can be influential because, "they are credible; that's what matters."


Aina television is also owned by the son of the former Northern alliance General, Abdul Rashid Dostum, a figure that also holds credibility among the Uzbek ethnic/political party Jumbish-e-Mili. Thus, much of the programming of both stations can often reflect the political platforms of these two demographics and they freely admit it. These are two examples of a specific category of media that can be referred to as the political or ethnic media.

Zafar Shah Rouyee goes on to state that Turkey is also involved in the television market and has supported the establishment of Aina TV and Rah-e Farda TV. Like Dostum, Mohammad Muhaqiq was also a former commander during the Afghan civil war. Both are considered long time allies of Turkey.

Other media outlets, Tolo and Ariana, are largely western funded. Both broadcast about 100 minutes daily of Indian serials, which reach very high viewer levels. Tolo TV has 68% of the ratings, with Arianna in second with 47%. Much of the population that makes up the viewership are in the growing youth demographic. Both stations receive a majority of their funding from the United States. Both stations are seen as  liberal in their programming, promoting western values, a reflection of their funding sources.

One can also add Shamshad television to this category, which is believed to receive funding from Pakistan. Nonetheless, Shamshad is an important means to reach Pashtun audiences throughout Afghanistan, many of whom are part of a tribal network that straddles both sides of the Pakistan border. Thus, Shamshad's programming with a Pakistan flavor resonates with those audiences. Of note, the President of Shamshad, Fazil Karim, is also a member of the High Peace Council, so the station also provides important messages to its audiences about the reintegration programs of former or reintegrating Taliban and insurgent fighters.

The vast permeation of new media outlets within Afghanistan can be a force to counter radicalism or inspire it. As Seib suggests, "The media are no longer just the media. They have a larger popular base than ever before and, as a result, have unprecedented impact on international politics. The media can be tools of conflict and instruments of peace; they can make traditional borders irrelevant and unify peoples scattered across the globe. This phenomenon -the Al Jazeera effect- is reshaping the world."

Right now Afghanistan serves as a prime example of this phenomenon. According to a USAID report on Afghanistan's media landscape, the media sector has averaged 20% growth each of the past five years, which corresponds to about 50 new TV stations and over 100 new radio stations since January 2006. Most of these media outlets are Afghan , with minimal international assistance.

"Freedom of the media is one of the best defenses against the Taliban," said SCR's Spokesman Dominic Medley, "The media is a defense against extremism and has opened people's minds in areas of Afghanistan that had little to no access to information 10 years ago."

One way to help ensure that media in Afghanistan is utilized to support a healthy democracy is through the development of independent voices free from coercion and able to conduct investigative reporting into issues such as corruption and extremism to prevent and counter its spread. The Afghan media, according to Medley, understand the alternative very clearly.

"The media know exactly what the Taliban is about," said Medley, "Afghan media know

because they wouldn't exist if the Taliban was in power again."

A free press was also one of Thomas Jefferson's foundations of a healthy democracy, where the media functions as a watchdog to hold its government and society accountable.

"The only security of all is in a free press," wrote Thomas Jefferson in a letter to General Marquis de Lafayette in 1823, "The force of public opinion cannot be resisted when permitted freely to be expressed. The agitation it produces must be submitted to. It is necessary, to keep the waters pure."

ISAF and the international community can help nurture the development of a free press through a strategic partnering concept. Each Afghan government ministry has a Flag or General officer assigned as a strategic partner for mentoring, information exchange and unity of effort coordination. ISAF Public Affairs, Task Force Shafafiyat, the NATO SCR's office and international community could utilize a similar approach with the media. Because the Afghan media environment is so large and growing, it is also young. Just as ISAF mentors government officials, a similar approach could be taken with the media to provide timely and accurate information. This is a standard public affairs function, but needs partners to achieve it. Afghanistan, because of its complex language and cultural environment, in addition to security presents a challenge to this. However, AFGPAK Hands personnel within these organizations can act as pathfinders to open doors into the Afghan media and set up partnerships with public affairs personnel of all ranks. These public affairs personnel would be responsible for maintaining relationships with their designated media outlets, meeting with them regularly and listening to their feedback to improve ISAF and the international community's communications efforts. It could be a step to gain trust through transparency, the backbone of any democracy. This concept focuses on building a network that could serve to protect vulnerabilities within the media environment to forces of instability, such as terrorist and insurgent groups. If a repressive regime attempts to take hold, there is less of a chance of them being able to control the media.

"In the past, governments could control much of the information flow and therefore keep a tight rein on political change," writes Seib, "That is no longer the case. Governments can jail some bloggers and knock some satellite stations off the air, but the flood of information, and the intellectual freedom it fosters, is relentless."

The Afghanistan Effect is still in its infancy. Soon the country will be connected to a fiber optic ring connecting every province with 3G internet. Afghanistan's media growth has already entered its next chapter with the emergence of social media. Efforts such as those taken by the Afghan government to censor Indian soap operas will simply not be able to keep up with the freedom and speed of the internet. Coupled with conventional media, the internet and social media can thus empower young Afghan voices, which are now over 50% of the population, capable of defending their country from extremism with an "Afghan Spring."
