

**SHELDON HIMELFARB**E-mail: shimelfarb@usip.org

Phone: 202.429.4773

Media and Peacebuilding in Afghanistan

Summary

- Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001, the Afghan media sector has experienced dramatic growth in all areas: television, radio, print, internet, mobile phones. As such, the sector holds tremendous potential for making significant contributions to peacebuilding in the country.
- However, the media sector also confronts numerous challenges that impede its ability to realize this potential – which can only be addressed through the combined efforts and attention of international and domestic stakeholders alike.
- Among the most pressing challenges is resolving the tension between information operations and counterinsurgency, on the one hand, and developing a viable, credible media sector on the other. All too often efforts to counter extremist messages through expanded military and government access to the airwaves (via purchased air time and proliferating “radio in a box” broadcasts from military outposts) have had a negative impact on both media market economics and media credibility.
- Sustainability is also a significant issue. A glut of media outlets has arisen that are privately licensed yet sustained by international donor funds and strategic communications money. This has had a deleterious effect on the perception of media, and its effectiveness as a guardian of public interests. The shortcomings of state-owned RTA as a public broadcaster further contribute to this, leading many experts to call for greater investment in long-term training and mentoring as well as regulatory reform to limit government manipulation of the airwaves.
- Other significant areas for improvement: greater emphasis on quality and diversity of programming (including a need for more Pashto language programs), enhanced efforts to provide security for media practitioners, more professional communications training for Afghan government officials, and more extensive research and understanding of Afghan media consumers themselves.

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Introduction

Development of the media sector in Afghanistan is widely recognized as a post-Taliban success story. Whereas once television was banned and only the Taliban government’s Radio Sharia broadcasted legally in country, today the media landscape consists of dozens of television stations, about 100 radio stations, and many hundreds of print outlets. An estimated six million mobile phone users were counted in 2008, with an increase of 300,000 users per month.¹ Internet access, including wireless broadband through Wi-Max, is growing as costs fall. In short, much has changed since 2001 when it comes to the number of information sources available to the Afghan people.

At the same time, it is also widely acknowledged that Afghan media have significant deficits in many areas. The quality of programming, sustainability of the media outlets, security for media practitioners, and trustworthiness of the information itself are just a few areas frequently cited as needing improvement. In this sense the media in Afghanistan remain a vein of still greater potential for contributing to peacebuilding in the country, and a sector of both great opportunity and great challenge.

In order to help realize this potential, the United States Institute of Peace brought together a wide array of media and Afghanistan experts on February 23, 2010. This group of 50-plus policy-makers, producers, government officials, military officers, and scholars drew from a considerable body of cumulative experience.

As USIP's Ambassador William Taylor noted in his welcome remarks to the group at the start of the day:

"What makes today's gathering unique is the amount of experience and expertise in the room on media in conflict: Many of those attending have worked on peacebuilding media from its earliest days, when the international community was trying to figure out how to respond to the use of hate radio in the Rwandan genocide and hate media in Bosnia. Others worked in Kosovo, in Liberia, in Macedonia, in Iraq. The fact that you are all here today bodes well for the potential of today's meeting to produce valuable recommendations regarding media in Afghanistan—which we all know plays a critical role in the future of the Afghan people."

What follows is a distillation of this meeting in terms of key opportunities and challenges discussed by the experts for using media more extensively and effectively to contribute to peacebuilding in Afghanistan. The meeting was held under the "Chatham House Rules" of nonattribution to ensure maximum candor throughout the deliberations.

Major Themes Discussed

- *Countering extremist messages.* There was extensive and candid discussion about this along several vectors: 1) the demands of the daily event-driven news and the demonstrated ability of extremists to respond quickly with information and misinformation, unhindered by standards for responsible reporting that are being encouraged among the rest of Afghan media. 2) efforts to counter these extremist messages through expanded military and government access to the airwaves (via purchased air time and proliferating "radio in a box" broadcasts from military outposts) and the consequential impact on both media market economics and media credibility.

There was general acknowledgement that extremist propaganda cannot be effectively dealt with through counter-propaganda. Instead, the provision of a robust and credible media environment that encourages an exchange of ideas around needs and solutions is vital in mitigating extremist messages. To this end, the experts group indicated that further work was needed on innovations in both new programming content and airtime buying practices (consolidated buying was mentioned, for example). In doing so, a balance must be struck that will meet carefully defined, essential operational needs without compromising the credibility or authenticity of information designed to meet the needs of the Afghan people.

- *Programming content.* Several speakers pointed out the need for greater programming in the Pashto language and others highlighted initiatives underway through both local Internews stations as well as foreign broadcasters like Voice of America. Additionally, there was considerable enthusiasm for expanded use of call-in programming that takes advantage of the expanded availability of mobile phones and gives voice to local communities

and concerns. However there was also general acknowledgement of the disappointing track record of these programs with respect to producing improved accountability and governance for a variety of important factors that need to be addressed going forward. These factors included: legal mechanisms that expose stations to government sanctions if callers make unsubstantiated claims that reflect negatively on an official's honor; poor training for on-air hosts and facilitators; and inadequate follow-up mechanisms off-air.

Regarding this last factor—follow-up mechanisms—there was general consensus on the importance of combining programming with community-based outreach in order to effectively support the messages and affect audience behavior. One speaker observed that the “media are very effective at informing people and even changing their attitudes, but actually getting them to modify their actions and behaviors, requires reinforcement at the family, tribal and community levels.”

- *Coordination of effort.* The experts working group discussed the importance of greater coordination and information sharing around media plans and projects, noting the range of organizations represented as evidence of the many different international media stakeholders. It was noted how the U.S. government (State, USAID and Defense Department) has made great strides in its own right with a unified civilian-military communications strategy. This has not only fostered greater coherence in message but it has also helped to produce an unprecedented willingness to engage Afghan media directly by making spokespersons readily available for questions by local and national press.

Less successful, however, has been coordination across the government, nongovernmental organizations, and private media groups. This has in part created the credibility concerns already noted and significant sustainability challenges across the media sector.

In the absence of a viable advertising market, a glut of media outlets has arisen that are privately licensed yet sustained almost exclusively by international donor funds and strategic communication money. This has had a deleterious effect on the perception of media, and its effectiveness as a guardian of public interests. In this regard, the shortcomings of state-owned RTA as a public broadcaster were discussed, and speakers cited the need for more investment in training and regulatory reform to hinder government manipulation of the airwaves for political purposes.

- *Protection of journalists and other media practitioners.* Reform of the media laws in Afghanistan to provide greater protection for journalists, broadcasters and media professionals was strongly recommended. The challenges faced by the news media were widely acknowledged and included the threat of physical and mental violence and intimidation at the hands of both the Taliban and the Afghan government. Legal mechanisms that might provide these individuals with a means to seek recourse remain underdeveloped while, conversely, calling into question a government official's honor is a criminal offense under current media law, and dealt with harshly. It was also noted that journalists in Afghanistan do not have a professional association with sufficient power to voice grievances on their behalf and guarantee collective protection.
- *Training and capacity-building.* Although a great deal of donor funding has been aimed at training of media professionals in Afghanistan, there was a clear consensus that professionalism and sector capabilities were still well short of where they could be given levels of investment. A number of factors were cited for this, including huge differentials between what Afghan media pay staff versus what international organizations and media are paying, causing a brain drain within the Afghan media. Compensation offered by Afghan media is not commensurate with the dangers they face and the most competent journalists/producers are swift to leave Afghan media for more lucrative positions with international agencies

and media outlets that offer somewhat better protection. Those who remain often struggle to earn sufficient income to support their families, making them prone to renting out their pen to the highest bidders. Additionally, there has been a proliferation of short-term training courses, with inadequate follow-up and mentoring on the job. Finally, the group discussed the importance of integrating media training earlier in the education stream, preferably into secondary school curricula as well as expanded training opportunities at university.

- *New technologies.* The integration of new technology and applications into media efforts has created numerous possibilities and new initiatives that experts highlighted. Google Maps and geospatial information systems are being used to better plan broadcast station locations and local information needs. Radio Over Internet Protocol (ROIP) allows users to create bidirectional intranets, cutting down on mobile phone costs and providing new, more stable means of communication. However, the technology that garnered the most attention from the experts group was mobile phones, increasingly ubiquitous and with greater smart phone functionality all the time. Attendees highlighted their immense potential, allowing SMS text-enabled users real-time engagement with media programs and larger open-source projects. At the same time, it was acknowledged that the weak infrastructure, such as inconsistent power generation, continues to be a significant limiting factor in leveraging both existing and new technologies.

It was also observed that when presented with the opportunity, Afghan youth have proven quite adept at integrating technology into their daily lives, and some recommended incorporating more technology training into the educational system, in conjunction with public approval from respected elders. However, Afghan government officials have shown reluctance to work with newer technological advancements in their respective ministries and could stymie efforts by other media stakeholders to make progress in this regard.

Additional Challenges and Areas for Improvement

- Media training must extend beyond the press and into the area of professional communication, where the next-generation spokesperson will play a pivotal role in determining how effective the Afghan government communicates and interacts with the public.
- Provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) and forward operating bases (FOBs) frequently do not have a trained communications specialist on site. Less than the ideal situation, this complicates efforts to present a clear and consistent message to the public.
- Moving forward, international media stakeholders must engage as much as possible with both their Afghan counterparts and the larger Afghan public, who are eager for a greater say in the type of media and programming directed at them.
- Additional efforts are needed to better understand the nature of Afghan media consumption. Measuring and evaluating these preferences continue to prove difficult in the volatile political and security situations of Afghanistan—yet it is vital. The diversity of Afghanistan requires media development experts, policymakers, and the military to seek local solutions for local problems.

Next Steps

Throughout this daylong meeting, experts in the field of media and conflict identified key challenges and opportunities associated with improving the role of media in building peace in Afghanistan. The next step will be to bring these ideas to the attention of the most relevant and

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This report is based on a February 23, 2010 meeting of experts on media and conflict convened by the U.S. Institute of Peace's Center of Innovation for Media, Conflict and Peacebuilding to consider opportunities and challenges for peacebuilding media in Afghanistan. The session featured presentations by distinguished experts representing the full range of media activities in country, including strategic communications, public diplomacy, radio/television/Internet/cell phone programming, training and regulation. More than 50 policymakers, producers, government officials, military officers and scholars attended the daylong meeting. Sheldon Himelfarb, executive director of USIP's Center of Innovation for Media, moderated the session and prepared this report with the assistance of Colin Durkin.

trustworthy peer reviewers possible—the policymakers, media-makers and citizens of Afghanistan themselves—and then to work in concert for their implementation.

Across the last eight years, we've seen first-hand the dramatic expansion of media outlets in Afghanistan, the hopes it raised for a new era of transparency and good governance, and the disappointment that followed when these hopes were not fulfilled.

Changing course will not be easy, but it will become impossible without the continuing development and professionalization of the media sector, and better coordination among the international community seeking to achieve this.

Endnote

1. "Communications for Stabilisation in Southern Afghanistan" Media Support Solutions, for DFID, 2008.



United States Institute of Peace

1200 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036
202.457.1700

www.usip.org

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