Between A Rock and A Cave: The Uneven Development of the Afghan Public Sphere
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With more suicide bombs, attacks, and killings of civilians by official forces and unofficial groups of Afghans and foreigners, cases of rampant corruption and blatant disregard of the law by Afghans and foreigners, and a litany of other disasters associated with failed war-torn countries, everyone agrees that the situation in Afghanistan is becoming more dire. Yet the media is often extolled as the one “candle that burns in the darkness”\(^1\). Of course, the media generally and television more specifically have also been described as “addictive like opium” and “uncontrollable like Satan” by their opponents.

\(^1\) Ramazon Bashar Dost, former presidential candidate and current parliamentarian, first coined the phrase. He is one of the few member of parliament who has not been involved or implicated in the numerous corruption scandals that has plagued other MPs.
After nearly a decade of the Taliban’s strict ban on media, post 9/11 Afghanistan is experiencing a surge in new media outlets – with almost three dozen new television stations, hundreds of publications, a fledging internet infrastructure, mobile telephone companies, and radio stations. A new configuration of resources from a combination of foreign, domestic, private, and public sources has enabled this unprecedented proliferation of media. Debates about women’s rights, expressions of gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity/tribe, democracy, modernity, and religion are part of the fabric of local and international development efforts to “nation-build”.

In a country where the vast majority of the population is illiterate and access to computers and the internet is limited, the broadcast technologies of television and radio have become especially powerful mediums. The tele-visual representations of women and women’s rights along with other national and cultural signifiers have instigated a series of escalating battles among Islamists, moderates, and others. No wonder then that hopes and fears about the future of Afghanistan from transnational corporate executives to government officials, religious leaders, and international governmental and non-governmental consultants are being funneled into the medium of television.

It was within this context that I went back to Afghanistan and its surrounding countries in 2009/2010 to conduct yearlong fieldwork for my dissertation, “Thinking Outside the Box: Television and the Afghan Culture Wars”.

Due to space constraints in this article I will not provide readers with a comprehensive summary of my data and subsequent array of conclusions from my dissertation. I will provide a brief overview of some of the key issues in order to address the larger question of the article I have been asked to write, namely the formation of a public sphere in Afghanistan. In this article I examine the impact and effects of the various political economies that sustain this media proliferation and emergence of a public sphere, albeit, a precarious one.

The development of a robust and free media as the key feature of a public sphere is important in all countries but specially in dystopic ones like Afghanistan. As a counter-balance to the government, warlords, and foreign interests in Afghanistan, the formation of a vibrant public sphere has the potential to underwrite conversations regarding democracy, national integration, and peace. But first, it is important to consider a series of issues which are particular to Afghanistan and which can prevent Afghan media from living up to its full potential. These issues are (1) gender/ethnicity/religion/class and other identity signifiers, (2) the pervasiveness of violence, and (3) international involvement.
Here I also address the potential pitfalls of commercial and capitalist development of media, the bleak side of the Habermasian ideal. I analyze the debasement of the public sphere by mass culture, political and economic manipulation, and its reduction by the public relations industry. In this context I will also elaborate on the impact of foreign funding: when or under what conditions does it promote development of an Afghan public sphere, when or under what conditions does it distort or undermine its development? Finally I reflect on the imminent departure of the transnational and international aid sectors and what it will mean for the future of free media and expression in Afghanistan. What will happen to the lively though often times volatile state of debates that the media are currently fostering? Will the public service and developmental programs disappear entirely? What new models of media will emerge?

While I go back and forth frequently under the auspices of volunteering for NGOs, as a filmmaker, and to maintain my cultural ties, this was my longest consecutive stay in Afghanistan since leaving my family home in Kabul as a child. It was a year that was as much rewarding, as it was difficult. Unlike the international aid workers/subcontractors and the Afghan elites who enjoy their patronage, I did not have access to fancy gated guesthouses or luxury armored vehicles. As an independent researcher, on a meager student budget, in a for-profit city, like the local Afghans I instead had front row seats to, and first hand experiences of, the other side of development and “nation building”. Besides the compelling draw of a homeland to a refugee, looking back I keep thinking about what propelled me there. I knew that fieldwork, by virtue of leaving everything and everyone that is familiar and being inculcated in a new environment for an extended period of time, was no easy feat but I had not fully considered the enormity of the task of conducting research in a militarized conflict area. I could have worked with the diasporic Afghan population in my adopted homeland, the US. I could have continued my focus on and criticism of Western discourses of Afghan women, which I began as early as the mid nineties when the Taliban first rose to power in Afghanistan.

However, since the broader question of the representation and visual culture of Afghan women has and continues to play such a fundamental role in the mediation of Afghanistan to the world, I will briefly address this concern in the following section as critical background knowledge before proceeding to my recent research and thesis for this article.
Since the events of 9/11 and the start of the "War on Terror", Afghan women have come under the Western spotlight in popular culture and academy, evident in the proliferation of media such as fiction films, television programs, documentaries, books, and news reports that focus on their plight under repressive Islamic regimes. These media have been embraced by some and critiqued by other scholars (Abu-Lughod 2002; Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002; Maley 1996) from a variety of disciplines concerned with the overwhelming portrayal of women as victims, without accounting for their actual or potential agency. Building on the work of these scholars, I have argued that by a complex process of spectacling, Afghan women have become “Afghan Women”; a singular passive entity that conforms to stereotypes of women under Islam that have gained new currency since 9/11 (Osman 2005).
Calling on an old but powerful lexicon of imagery from the era of Colonialism, the saving of Afghan women was used as a justification to start a military assault on the Taliban specifically and Afghanistan more generally. In line with the rhetoric of masculinist protection (Young 2003), to attack the Taliban and Osama bin Laden without the pretext of saving Afghan women from their brethren would have been even less popular than it was, especially within intellectual and anti-war groups. It is important to note that around 9/11, the iconography of Osama and/or Al Qaeda with its accompanying “smoke them out of their caves” rhetoric was virtually non-existent. In fact if you had asked most Americans and even most Afghans, they would not have heard of the evil Al Qaeda prior to this point.

The plight of the Afghan Women, with its solid foundations harking back to earlier iconographies, was the most efficient route to first launching “Operation Anaconda”, then “Operation Enduring Freedom”, and enabling all the subsequent bombings of an already war ravaged country. Instead of giving Afghan women the podium from which to speak, as one would presume, this double-crossing discourse actually took what was left of Afghan women’s agency in order to aggrandize the power of so called expert individuals and organizations, both governmental and non-governmental. So while “Afghan Women” as a body of imagery proliferated and circulated widely, they made their subject matter a hollowed out empty signifier at best. Their silent over exposure actually made “Afghan Women” a joke, a caricature that was mocked and ridiculed in satirical exposes in magazines and videos, in genres ranging from comedy to pornography (Mendrinos and Santopadre 2004).

While such discourses pertaining to gender in Islamic countries has been reverberating globally on an unprecedented volume and scale, little attention has been given to the cultural productions that constitute gender subjectivities in the daily lives of Muslims.

Beyond Critique: Constituting Subjectivity and Locating Agency

In the vein of my academic heroes, I knew that I had reached the limits of criticism as an effective tool to challenge problematic and inaccurate representations. Instead of continuing to privilege a disconnected discourse, it was time to do feminist/postcolonial/subaltern intervention by going to the source and deferring to local wisdom. After all, in order to understand how local agents and actors within diverse groups use the media to assert their political claims we have to observe the on ground cultural contestations that open up a space for collective action, social movements, and/or self representation.
Thus my methods are largely ethnographic, drawing on studies that have inspired my own including the work of Lila Abu-Lughod (2004) and Faye Ginsburg (1998, 1999, 2002) among others. In general, Afghanistan has been neglected as a serious site of ethnographic research with a few notable exceptions (Canfield and Shahrani 1984; Dupree 1973, Mills 1991, Tapper and Tapper 1983, 1991). The media in particular have had almost no scholarly attention with the exception of a few influential scholars (Edwards 1993, 2005; Skuse 2002; Skuse et al. 2011). Additionally, while other postcolonial countries such as Egypt and India have been the subjects of extensive scholarship, Afghanistan has been relatively neglected as a serious site of revisionist research for the exception of some notable historians (Adamec 1974, 2005; Gregorian 1969, forthcoming 2013; Nawid 2000; and Poullada 1972).

I went in with many questions: How are charged issues such as gender/sexuality, human rights, democracy, and religion contested, framed, and negotiated by local cultural producers? How do local Afghans institutions “talk back” to the global circulation of images of Afghan women and other discourses about them? Why is television particularly catalytic in fueling public debates and dissent? In terms of gender, why is the tele-presence of women as compared to their circulation in other mediums particularly problematic to the religious sector?
While my research is primarily a production study of Afghan producers to assess their own meaning making processes, in order to fully understand the contemporary mediascape, I also had to engage with audience reception. I carried out over 100 formal interviews with high and low level media employees and owners as well as a cross section of people ranging from those living in slums to presidential candidates and religious leaders. In the absence of technologies that assess viewership, these interviews have become crucial for gauging the popularity of programming; specifically what audiences across different demographics value about television programs and if they see a reflection of the issues that are important to their daily lives.

New Media, Old Media?

Often, at conferences and other venues, I am asked: Why study television? Why not study the Afghan film industry, the internet, or print based media? They all seem valuable media to study. I am also frequently reminded that in the Iranian Green Movement and the Arab Spring, social media and the internet played a determining role in energizing and uniting the public into massive social movements (Elyachar 2012; Fahmy 2012; Sreberny and Khiabany 2010). So in response to these questions my project aims to destabilize the categories of and divide between new media and old media and challenge our assumptions of them by demonstrating a) the interconnectivity of various media platforms and b) how the transformative/repressive potential of different mediums changes dramatically across different sites of research and depends heavily on the socio-political realities of the region of study. Using recent case studies from Afghanistan, Pakistan, China, Iran, as well as the former Soviet republics, I show how the narrative of the progressive or liberatory tendencies of the internet and social media, as well as the epistemological baggage about the hegemonic tendencies of broadcast technologies, cannot be applied unilaterally to the popular uprisings and social movements of the region. In complex, repressive, and/or rapidly shifting environments, the utility of media for reform and activism reflects media users/producers ingenuity to evolve and merge traditional and new media.

For example, when Afghan government officials and television owners refused to investigate or publicize the honor killings of numerous female television personalities, college students across the country demanded justice via Facebook fan pages as well as internet blogs which offer the safety of anonymity by using false identities and pseudonyms. However in Afghanistan, the vast majority of people are illiterate, making the broadcast mediums of television and radio more powerful. Therefore, rather than turning to social media, when the government frequently bans popular television programs, most people publicly protest for days or even weeks. Between the massive outpouring of people at
these protests and the subsequent broadcasting of the protests on television and radio news programs, in the majority of cases the programs are reinstated to appease the public. In the case of Afghanistan, television, which has long been conceived of as a hegemonic medium has proven to be counter-hegemonic in many ways. Likewise, social media in Iran which has been praised as a counter-hegemonic force, has come under increasingly effective regimes of censorship, making people turn to mobile telephone technologies, which in turn have also come under surveillance, thereby leading people back to older media or smaller media such as graffiti, video CDs, DVDs, and CDs (Sreberny and Mohammadi 1994). When repressive governments and/or conservative groups seek to stifle public debate by blocking media signals and infrastructure, media producers and activists are turning to cross platform and alternative media practices means to stay ahead of the learning curve.

A media deterministic approach or argument occludes a holistic understanding of the socio-political and cultural developments in any site of study. Therefore, while my dissertation primarily explores the catalytic function of television in fueling debates and dissent, it includes in its purview the role of other media as well. In fact many of the “television” employees that I interviewed work across media platforms; when they produce a segment for a television program, they often repackage it for multiple other mediums such as radio, print, and the internet.

At the same time, there is no denying that in Afghanistan, given high illiteracy rates and the relatively slow development of broadband and cable infrastructure, the promise of the digital age is slow to arrive and the broadcast media of television and radio have grown exponentially. And since one of my main goals was to redirect the global dialogue about Afghanistan to local Afghans themselves, terrestrial television became a compelling object of study to observe the spaces for popular movements, collective action, self-representation, and how people’s agency are engendered. What do contemporary Afghans think and believe about issues that were reverberating globally about them, namely gender/sexuality and other signifiers of cultural progress and/or regression? What do terms like “conservative” or “progressive” mean in contemporary Afghanistan and how do they shape the local mediascape? How are diverse belief systems, sensibilities, and understandings of themselves constituted, and expressed on a daily basis?

Television has become the medium that is both a mirror and amplifier of Afghanistan, enabling Afghans to see themselves and speak to their own images and projections. Additionally, the technology’s electro-visual mass appeal, sensory integration, simultaneity of exposure, and broadcasting potential, which imbue it with an illusory sense of communal live-ness has always made television a source of social power, and cultural imaginings, both dystopic and utopic. As
television scholars have theorized, television has the eerie ability of conjuring face to face community gatherings but with the power of reaching large scale audiences (McCarthy 2010; McLuhan, 1962, 1967; Ong, 1982; Parks, 2005; Parks and Kumar 2003; Williams, 2003).

For all these reasons, including the fact that television is broadcast nationally and simultaneously, viewed together within large household structures, and relatively accessible and popular, television has become a particularly important nation-wide institution in Afghanistan – perhaps the medium that best provides a sense of Afghanistan as an “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) – as well as a site of social contestation.

In fact the battles over censoring diverse expressions of gender and sexuality including women’s bodies occur only in the context of terrestrial television. This is due to the fact that the owners of terrestrial television stations, constrained by technology, are obliged to heed government regulations regarding what is acceptable to broadcast in order to maintain or secure a limited frequency wave. Paradoxically, pornography and pornographic imagery are readily available and accessible on satellite television. Additionally, such content is also downloadable on cell phones even in remote provinces, and available for sale in the form of cheap video disks (DVDs) behind the counter in every media kiosk in shopping bazaars.

Arguably, television is a national barometer of the state of the nation, its heartbeat and pulse, the venue that is inciting and/or inspiring the most cultural contestations. It is the only medium in Afghanistan that reaches the masses and enables large-scale dialogue even though that dialogue sometimes takes violent forms as well. It also has the subversive and counter-hegemonic potential to help support broad reform and change. The larger questions as to whether television is elevating debate and creating a public sphere or re-feudalizing the country by inciting sensationalism and polarizing public opinion are central to this thesis.

Afghan Media: A Distinctive Political Economy

One the central goals of my dissertation is to ask how the case of Afghanistan, and by extension other non-western media practices in “developing countries”, might add to an expanded understanding of media that truly takes a more global, as well as more local, perspective. My research suggests that the frameworks used in contemporary media studies regarding the political economy of the media might need to be more diverse, breaking open the binary of market-driven or public service broadcasting which is the historical legacy of much of the communications literature.
While this has been occurring in the context of the diversification of media practices due to satellite, cable, and digital technologies in the west, the growth of media industries throughout the world offers new and important challenges to theory building (Shohat and Stam 1994, 2004). Groundbreaking ethnographic studies in non-western contexts, such as that of Lila Abu Lughod, Andrew Skuse, Arvind Rajagopal, and Purnima Mankekar, have helped to break open the paradigm based on western models.

Through my research, I discovered that television in Afghanistan is funded in ways that were never imagined by any media theorists. In a number of cases, overhead and production costs are funded (1) indirectly by arms and/or opium revenues; (2) directly through investments by foreign governments with particular agendas for Afghan winning hearts and minds; and (3) by commercial ad revenues. Speaking in broad terms, in the west, the political economy of television has been established in two ways; the British public service broadcasting model of citizen “uplift” and the American commercial model in which advertising is crucial for profits. In Afghanistan a third, distinctive economic model is emerging that is rooted in the relationships of patronage that were established during the Cold War, through opium/arms trade and via development aid.

While most television station owners describe their networks as private enterprises that function solely on advertising revenue some investigation made it clear that other sources of support also comes from a combination of activities and sources, both Afghan and foreign, clandestine and candid. Iran, India, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, China, Japan, Korea, and the United States, among a number of European nations, fund many of the television stations and/or programs. Where the funding comes for Afghanistan’s thirty-three (and growing) broadcast television stations is no secret to the Afghan population either. For the most part, they know which television stations are affiliated with which political parties, ethnicities, underground economies, and/or foreign powers and watch them accordingly. Writers and directors also frequently complained about the constraints and editorial supervision of their programs not only from Afghan government and religious censors, but from foreign backers as well.

In an environment where vast majority of Afghanistan’s Gross National Income consists of international humanitarian aid, Afghanistan’s mediascape can best be understood as “development realism” to use Abu-Lughod’s term (2005). The international donor community, along with Western media corporations such as BBC World Trust, Internews/VOA/USAID, and UNESCO, have invested heavily in Afghanistan’s media sector to support democratic sensibilities.

Post 9/11 in December of 2001, over 90 countries promised more than 20 billion dollars in the first Bonn Conference for the reconstruction of Afghanistan
including its media sector. The US is the largest of the donors with an average contribution of 6 billion dollars per year. Although it is difficult to ascertain what the total amount of aid received was since all the countries did not deliver on their promises, estimates range between 60% to 80% of Afghanistan’s Gross National Income consists of international humanitarian aid. In 2009, international humanitarian aid comprised 67% of Afghanistan’s GNI. In the 2010 the US State Department budgeted seventy-two million dollars for “communications and public diplomacy” alone in Afghanistan (Auletta 2010). Ten years later, in the second Bonn conference, held in December of 2011, most of the same countries also promised financial aid to Afghanistan. However, as a result of the international economic crisis the promises were much more tempered. In the words of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton: "As everyone is aware, the international community faces fiscal constraints,” and they cannot give exact figures for future aid yet.  

In this competitive arena, most Afghan media owners and producers vying for international donor aid use the rhetoric of development: progress, education, and elevation of society. However, the effectiveness of these joint transnational efforts cannot be accepted without further analysis of their impact on the lives of people in Afghanistan. Namely, in what ways have these Western sponsored media campaigns been successful in their mandates and in what ways they have failed to translate cross-culturally?

On the one hand, the resultant transnational productions have a progressive multicultural approach to nation building; they produce media messages aimed at uniting the nation by promoting human rights awareness, diversity, and plurality. On the other hand, some foreign funders support niche television stations affiliated with specific ethnic and religious groups, which are “retribalizing” Afghanistan by feeding deep-seated ethnic/racial, tribal, and/or gender tensions.

Ultimately though, in this push and pull between national and ethnic, internal and external allegiances, on Afghan television stations the national wins

2 Known as the Bonn Agreement or Accord, under the auspices of the UN, a series of meetings were held to establish an interim government which temporarily made Hamid Karzai president and created a constitution. The event was controversial for the reasons of who amongst the Afghan community were invited to participate, such as “former” warlords and who was not invited at all. Of course the constitution which was later drafted in 2004 and the national elections in which Karzai officially become president were also mired in similar undemocratic practices.
3 Global Humanitarian Assistance website: http://www.globalhumanitarianassistance.org/countryprofile/afghanistan
out every time for those established with terrestrial technology that allows them to broadcast across the country. To appear to only address their own ethnic group or worse yet foreign interests is akin to socio-political and economic suicide in the eyes of national advertisers and broad-based international donor campaigns that seek to reach wide audiences. In order to aggrandize their influence and maximize their profit from donors, advertisers and/or warlords, television stations have to at least feign being oriented toward a national audience. This is especially the case with the most commercially successful private stations such as Tolo TV and Arianna Television Networks (ATN) who downplay their ethnic origins. In the end, most television stations, despite their ethnic affiliations, aspire to be national ones. Stations that are polarizing public sphere debates with blatant ethno-religious messages and/or foreign allegiances and tele-visually attack other ethnic groups tend to be marginalized.

What is the impact of the broader political economy, which is partially supported by war economies, partially by the international donor community, and partially by advertising, having on programming? The answer lies in the opening up of the Afghan economy once the Taliban regime was pushed out of power by international military forces, setting the stage for the entrance of the international donor community, which is itself embedded in international circuits of capitalism. Studies have shown that via hiring and contracting practices, the incentives of many foreign non-governmental organizations and transnational aid organizations are to actually support the growth of their own home country’s economies rather than those of the host country’s. That is not to say that they do not support local development and growth; many Afghan media outlets at least partially rely on international aid for their existence and survival. However the priority of international donors often clearly points to their own government mandates that dictate the return of a large percentage of the allocated monies back to the home countries. Beyond the ideological rhetoric of spreading or teaching democracy, facilitating the return of revenues, is one of the central functions of collaborative, joint, and/or transnational media productions between foreign countries and Afghanistan. As anthropologists have demonstrated “gifts” never come without debts (Mauss 1922). Applying this to the Eurasian context Bruce Grant has shown how the power dynamics between Russia and its satellite caucasus is one of imperialism and social control but couched under the banner of giving and altruism (2009).

What this means for Afghan media producers is that they operate in a very competitive media market. Even if they are lucky enough to have fostered strong relationships of foreign patronage, they still have to compete with thirty-three other television stations. So regardless of whether they are mostly subsidized by foreign aid, advertisements, or war profiteering money, their long-term success is ultimately contingent on a commercial model that depends on popularity of programming. They need to fill the most air space with the cheapest programs.
that reach the widest audiences in order to attract either advertisers, donor money, or both. Within this Afghan television economy, based on my reception studies, the most popular genres of programs are imported dramatic serials, foreign reality television formats, and local political satire serials.

Briefly tracking sources of funding across these popular genres makes the political economies that sustain television in Afghanistan more transparent. It also provides a clear example of the democratic and undemocratic tendencies of the various types of funding.

**Far from Mere Entertainment: Dramas of Democracy**

Sources of financial support can be mapped across and onto three of the most popular and controversial genres – dramatic serials, reality television, and political satire – each of which engender their own public debates.

Dramatic serials on Afghan television are imported from and often times financed and/or subsidized by the same countries that produce them, ranging from the far eastern countries like Korea and Japan to western countries like America. Yet by far the most popular ones are from India. Their high output and subsidized pricing coupled with their high production values and overall quality of story telling, make it difficult for Afghan dramatic serials to compete with in the same capacity, given that they have only started in the last few years. This clearly poses problems for the development of Afghanistan’s own media and artistic productions.

However, in the case of Indian and Iranian serials, Afghan religious and tribal leaders attack them for tainting an imagined pure Afghan Islamic culture; they worry about the cultural influences of Hinduism or Shiite Islam respectively. Although they use the rhetoric of cultural imperialism in order to incite fears of cultural homogenization, their arguments are actually grounded in the promotion and imposition of a strict version of Islam that is not consistent with Afghanistan’s own diverse cultural history. Three decades of war have erased Afghanistan’s varied experiences with Islam, and with this challenge to media from abroad, these religious authorities play out what new media scholarship from Syria to Iraq has also argued: continual attempts by religious authorities in Arab countries to block some programming and commission others confirm that television drama is far from mere entertainment (Abu-Lughod 2004; Salamandra 2004; Stanley 2012).

The international donor community and western media corporations also sell reality television formats to Afghanistan at subsidized rates. Locally produced reality TV shows such as Dream and Achieve, Who Wants to be a Millionaire, and Afghan Star, are based on international formats but tailored to
Afghan audiences. Commercial advertisers as well as USAID and other western funders sponsor these reality TV shows. These competition-based television shows identify winners by the votes of audiences via mobile phones and/or by a panel of judges. For many audience members, this may be the first time they have participated in choosing via voting. The educational messages are both implicit and explicit in promoting the benefits of capitalism and elections. In contrast to the undemocratic patronage systems that sometimes sustain the political economy of some of these television productions, the televisual projections of these shows are characterized by celebratory messages of neoliberal capitalist entrepreneurship.

A common complaint that was often relayed from television producers concerned the nepotistic and unjust systems of aid distribution that are pervasive in Afghanistan in general and specific to media as well. Lack of transparency and clandestine contracting and subcontracting practices such as not advertising calls for project proposals consistently favored certain media outlets and their western collaborators who both gained by continuing to amass large profits, despite perhaps not adequately demonstrating merit and quality or by barely demonstrating compliance with donor protocols via superficial markers.

Tolo TV, one of the main producers of reality formats and one of the most successful television stations is often singled out by competing television stations for being favored by American governmental organizations. They received over three million dollars from USAID for start up money and continue to receive money for existing and new programs (Rubin 2010; Auletta 2010). Other television owners and producers argue that Tolo is enabled via American funding practices to exercise monopolistic control and/or monopolize the market, thus disabling an even playing field for its competitors. Clearly such conditions provide Tolo with an advantage but it is arguable whether that advantage is unfair because Tolo can in turn argue that their commercial success and popularity with audiences demonstrates the quality of their programming, meets donor protocols, and therefore merits their favored status. In addition to the criticisms of unfair capitalistic practices by competitor, a common concern expressed by conservative elements in the country is the Americanizing effects of such programs.

However, it is also important to note that international donor aid to the media infrastructure is responsible for not only promoting the merits of capitalism and the free market but also for creating and fostering a significantly different public service model of television. RTA, Radio Television Afghanistan, which is the national broadcasting station receives most of its funding from the

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4 Altai Consulting – Afghan Media Survey in 2010, p. 29
international community as do many other stations that also receive significant portions of their operating and productions costs from foreign sources. These stations tend to produce much-needed educational and informational programs as well as crucial public service announcements, which are sponsored by international initiatives aimed at specific public projects and nation building more broadly.

It is also important to distinguish between different types of capitalism. Whereas the overlapping interests of western corporations and international donor organizations are responsible for producing Afghan versions of western reality television programs, locally produced political satire shows are supported by a different type of commercial model. The former requires high costs of production and attracts large international advertisers. For example, international corporate advertisers such as Roshan, a telecommunication giant, whose parent companies operate throughout the world, support programs like Afghan Star, the Afghan format of American Idol and Pop Idol.

Whereas Afghan political satire shows are low in cost and enable smaller local businesses to advertise. Yet despite their relatively modest production values, they are at least equally popular with viewers. I was in Afghanistan carrying out research during the turbulent presidential and parliamentary elections of the summer of 2009, and had the chance to witness television’s new prominent role in staging the debates about democracy, capitalism, and “nation-building.” Afghan broadcast television very openly critiqued all aspects of Hamid Karzai’s campaign, his policy failures, and investigated accusations of corruption. Programs such as Zang Khatar (Danger Bell) on Tolo TV and Talak (Trap) on Nooren TV are part of a growing genre of political satire that combine investigative journalism and comedy sketches to confront abuses of power stemming from politicians and warlords within and outside of the government. They are presenting the problems that Afghanistan is currently facing and therefore also bringing up the country’s tumultuous recent history for reflection as well. Indeed, although political satire in its current tele-visual form is new, as a genre it has a long history in Afghanistan in print form as well as in oral traditions of short verse poems or jokes (Edwards 1993). It has been a favored venue for critiquing social and political structures and individuals for at least a century. Additionally, while internationally backed reality television programs are enabled by and therefore partially support large scale capitalism, political satire supports and is supported by mostly local Afghan actors, producers, writers, advertisers, and audiences as well.

Each of these genres inspire their own contest and co-produce different kinds of subjectivities. It is tempting to look more closely at the differences and debates of each genre as I have done in my dissertation, but another question is more pressing. How effective is the public sphere in a conflict zone?
The Public Sphere in a Conflict Zone?

Contrary to popular terminology Afghanistan is far from being a post-conflict zone. Today Afghanistan is a barely functioning democracy on the verge of collapse. The government has to readily acquiesce to the power of religio-tribal warlords and drug traffickers at the expense of the many. The judicial and the electoral systems are fraught with corruption and fraud. The vast majority of people think that the presidential and parliamentary elections are a sham. The rule of law is virtually non-existent. In stable countries, the terms of the debate are set, defined, and protected, but in a country where guns, local militias, foreign militaries, and physical force are the status quo, can a public sphere protect people, or even exist?

Afghanistan is far in time and space from Jurgen Habermas’s idyllic cafes of the mid 18th century Europe where white male elites came together to discuss the latest news in the growing print media. Although the empirical adequacy of Habermas’s characterization of this bourgeois public sphere has been subject to considerable debate (Calhoun 1993, Fraser 1990, Negt and Kluge 1993etc),, its
role in extending basic human rights and human dignity continues to draw
academics and activists from a wide array of disciplines to develop its potential.

As Craig Calhoun reminds us, in its pure theoretical essence, the public
sphere by its definition offers a third space for people to make their voices heard.
As Habermas describes it, between the oppression of the state and the tyranny of
commercial culture, the public can invoke the public sphere via mass media to
express their own opinions in critical dialogue with one another. In that way, the
public sphere can challenge oppressive forces/institutions by making them
accountable to “the tribunal of the people.” (1993, 28)

Since the days of John Dewey’s provincial village and townhall meetings
are a relic of the past, today’s proverbial “global village” exists without an
accompanying and singular public sphere. But without such a space, people
cannot coalesce into a strong public to voice their concerns. Therefore, the key
factor in the equation for the creation of a public sphere, the cornerstone of
democracy in a society, is predicated on a free mass media. The independence of
the mass media is important in all countries but especially dystopic ones like
Afghanistan. That seems axiomatic, but the critical question is how to constitute
it.

Unlike most of its neighbors, Afghanistan has many apparent foundations
for freedom of expression. First, that freedom is legislated in its post 9/11
constitution drafted in the wake of the criticisms of the Bonn Agreement
(although the dangerous Article 3 which prohibits anything that is deemed to be
“contrary to the sacred religion of Islam” is often used to limit that freedom and
many other democratic expressions).

Second, with almost three dozen free new terrestrial television stations
and counting, Afghanistan can boast that it offers viewers more choices for
programming than many developing or even developed countries. After all this is
the basic formula of Habermas’ theory of the public sphere; more free channels
(in his case study publications) equal more sources for the dissemination of
information and entertainment which equals more competition for the creation of
a market place of debate and ideas. Applying for a license and getting registration
for a new broadcast television station that is not affiliated to the State is nearly
impossible, on the other hand, in neighboring Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan,
Tajikistan, Iran, China, and Pakistan. If the public sphere depends on freedom,
and that depends on having an alternative to state-run television, Afghanistan is
certainly far ahead of its neighbors.

5 Marshall McLuhan coined the term.
By contrast in Iran some of the most subversive and progressive social thoughts such as the Green Movement are coalescing via the internet because it is more difficult for the government to control the content of the ether although both Iran and Pakistan are actively trying (Harris 2010; Khiabany and Sreberny 2010). Afghanistan was also invited to join and is currently an active member of SAFMA (South Asian Free Media Association), a powerful regional media association.

The Sword is Mightier: Who Bears the Burden of Freedom of Expression?

At the same time, a common joke amongst Afghan media professionals is that you have freedom to express yourself but no more freedom after the expression. A good example of this is the case of Parwaiz Kambaksh, a college student and journalist from Balkh, who was sentenced to death for distributing an article from the internet that was critical of the Quran’s dictates regarding
women.6 The government also detained Qais Azimy, a reporter for Al-Jazeera Afghanistan during the presidential elections for producing a report that showed the strength of the Taliban outside of Kabul.

In fact, every media organization and institution I went to visit was heavily guarded and gated. Many organizations also featured a “showcases of martyrs” located either outside their offices, in their courtyards, or in their lobbies. These decorated showcases displayed large portraits or photographs of journalists, telecommunication engineers, producers, or other on and off screen television employees who were killed in the line of doing their work, a symptomatic instance of the larger instability and conflict-ridden state of Afghanistan.

So how exactly do the free media and a public sphere function in a barely functioning country? Controversial cultural issues such as abortion rights, LGBTQ rights, and immigration rights also inspire violence in the West but different institutions are in place to check and balance the various interests. In the “post-war” environment of Afghanistan, the one institution that offers any recourse for justice or hope for democracy is under constant threat and attack, by internal and external forces.

High level media personnel and wealthy media owners who are often prominent public figures, such as politicians, war/druglords, religious leaders, and/or businessmen, hire body guards and live behind gated mansion fortresses while low level television personalities and reporters are subjected to threats, physical attacks, and even death for providing people with programming they want to watch and which gives them a platform to raise their voices. They – not the owners of television – bear the burden of developing media independence by exposing abuses of power by warlords, critiquing foreign powers and the national government, and airing diverse lifestyles, cultures, and tele-visual representations of women. Their secular, nationalist, and reformist agendas are sometimes at odds with both the owners of the television stations they work for and the foreign governments that are the patrons of the stations.

When Killid Media Group exposed the corruption of a prominent Jihad era commander who had illegally seized and confiscated people’s land claiming he was building a mosque, Najiba Ayubi, the manager of Killid was visited by a group of thugs in her office threatening her. On another occasion armed “soldiers” of a prominent member of parliament who was named when Killid produced a 125 episode radio series on war crimes and war criminals also visited

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6 After being imprisonment and subjected to torture for almost two years, Karzai under pressure from Afghan reformers and the international community, pardoned him and gave him amnesty to leave the country.
Just like most Afghans, Ayubi is no stranger to threats and violence; yet by profession Afghan journalists, the good ones at least, have to come face to face with these dangerous individuals. Cases of “zoor awarah” or “zoor mundah” which can be translated as strongmen or thugs, beating up, threatening, and/or destroying equipment are all too common amongst media makers. This is a new word in the Afghan lexicon that has been born out of the nation’s turbulent recent history and troubled present. It is used ubiquitously to describe ruthless powerful people, well-known warlords and lesser known “mini-warlords”, who brutally exercise violence without worry of retribution.

Afghan media producers and journalists frequently complain that people have unreasonable expectations of them, hoping they will publicly shame every corrupt politician and government official who is still using their power as a stronghold or chokehold on the people. From forced marriages to forceful land grabbing to murders (including mass murders of specific ethnic groups), people have a litany of grievances and charges against current/former warlord types. For example, Sanjar Sohail, the director of Political Affairs and News programming at Saba TV as well as the executive editor of Haste Subh (Eight in the Morning), Afghanistan’s largest and longest running independent daily newspaper post Taliban, explained:

We get inundated with letters and phone calls regularly from people demanding that we broadcast the abuses of this warlord or that warlord. They want to tell the terrible things that have happened to them or their families at the bloody hands of these zoor awarah (thugs). They are very angry and adamant. They think that the media will finally give them some justice or at least a little peace of mind. I do not blame them. People who have been wronged deserve justice and they deserve to be heard. But it is very complicated and dangerous figuring out how to maneuver the ethnic fault lines as well as substantiate information for when the government or the Shura of Ulema come after you. Sometimes we investigate and produce a segment. Often times our hands are tied due to larger pressures and lack of resources. We are unarmed media makers. We are not the police or the court of law. We do not have the resources to thoroughly investigate and report every crime but neither do they…

He went on to explain that with their newspaper they have more liberty to report on abuses of power, partially because they partner with the Independent Human Rights Commission of Afghanistan. In the wake of the Taliban regime, the UN supervised transitional government apparatus constitutionally mandated IHRCA. Although affiliated with the Afghan government and international efforts, IHRCA

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7 Interview, Kabul, September 2009
is to exist as an independent body without coercion from any institutions. Widely known for their hard-hitting investigative reporting and fastidious research they have earned the respect of Afghans throughout the country.

Ironically on June 1st of 2011, the Shura of Ulema via Karzai’s office made a declaration that Hashte Subh will be shut down immediately. Al Jazeera’s Afghanistan bureau reported that under pressure from the Shura of Ulema, Karzai sent a message to Hashe Subh that "Publishing material that is against religion, against national unity, and against the high interest of the nation” will not be tolerated (Mashal 2011). In this particular case, Sohail prevailed because the courts decided in his favor citing that he was only echoing the findings of a respected human rights organization. However Sohail worries about the next time, especially since Karzai seems to be succumbing more and more to conservative forces with criminal histories, he aptly says “If we write on sexual assault and expose problems, the government's hands should not be on our throats, but rather on the perpetrators" (Mashal 2011). In 2012, after a series of battles with the IHRCA, to international dismay and outrage, Karzai often extolled for enabling free speech in Afghanistan, illegally fired three of their top commissioners and appointed new ones.

People realize that dealing with such powerful and ruthless individuals is beyond the means of tribal justice systems of holding loya jirgas, or public assemblies of elders. And since the official justice system of Afghanistan is corrupt and international law has failed them, people want the media to be the judge, jury, and executioner of warlords and war criminals. They know that the American government is complicit in bringing many of these dubious characters, ranging from druglords to ethnical mass murderers, to power in the first place and are appalled that post 9/11 the Afghan government has given many of them official posts within the government. Like village loya jirgas where familial or tribal justice is enacted on a small scale, they want a national forum and venue, whereby they can publicly bring their grievances against these national criminals and demand retributions.

In this equation, where warlords, or jung salarah, have become the ultimate villains of the Afghan psyche, journalists are the ultimate protagonists and superheroes of the people. Journalists who have established themselves for their fearless reporting have large followings of fans that revere them and perceive them as saviors, protectors, and an extension of their wills. Journalists uncover, investigate, and expose everything from the corrupt, fraudulent, and violent activities of warlords to other cases of direct and indirect abuses of power that warlords inflict on innocent individuals and the larger public. Thus people are highly sensitive to and become incensed when journalists are harmed in any way. When journalists are targeted and attacked and/or killed by these larger forces, other media outlets in solidarity broadcast and/or publish the incidences
and pay homage to them. The outpouring of support and grief for these heroes reverberates throughout the country.

When in January of 2010, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, a notorious CIA-funded Cold War-era warlord, killed two Afghan journalists in the Pakistani border town of Quetta, for writing unfavorable accounts of his track record, the clamor could be heard across Afghanistan. When earlier in September of 2009, Sultan Munadi, while on assignment as a fixer for New York Times journalist Stephen Farrell, was kidnapped by the Taliban and later Farrell was safely rescued while Munadi was shot, killed, and left with no explanation, people protested for over a week in Kabul. The news, echoing public opinion, reported that there was an international conspiracy and cover-up that required the killing of Munadi by British forces. They also expressed a common sentiment that Afghan journalists, camera people, fixers, and translators are considered dispensable and highlighted other such situations wherein Afghan media professionals were killed or not negotiated for while their western counterparts are saved and freed (Bishara 2006).

The same sense of outrage was expressed over the January 2012 acid attack on the well-known and respected journalist Rezaq Mamoon. The gathering and outpouring of support outside of his hospital in Kabul was massive. Contrary to some news reports that he was targeted for personal reasons, most of the news outlets confirmed Mamoon’s own account that the Iranian government was responsible. Via his reporting for newspapers, his online blog, and a new book Mamoon has been actively critiquing Iran’s treatment of Afghan refugees, their prison system, as well as their involvement in the opium trade. Likewise, the media and the public demanded justice and condemned the Iranian government’s involvement in Afghan affairs. Journalists who have built a reputation for fair, independent, and courageous reporting by virtue of their honorable work, move outside the bounds of ethnic, tribal, or religious sectarianism. They are applauded and celebrated as national heroes.

The Cover Story: The Honor Killings Narrative

However this is not always the case with the attacks and murders of female media makers and television personalities, which are often categorized and dismissed as honor killings. Gender has always been a contentious issue in Afghanistan; Islamic and pre-Islamic, Persian and tribal, practices and customs such as nang, naik naamy, sangeeness, namoose, baad exchange are at the heart of why Afghans are very sensitive and reverent to the concepts of honor and shame. Yet it took the start of the Soviet Invasion when the CIA began to

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8 These concepts are explained in detail in my dissertation
clandestinely fund some of the most conservative elements of the Afghan population for the gender wars to really begin.

In May of 2005 Shaima Rezayee the 24 year old host of a popular music video call-in show called Hop also on Tolo TV, was shot in the head and killed in her own home in Kabul. In May of 2007 Shakiba Sanga Amaj, the popular 22 year old presenter and reporter for Shamshad TV, was shot and killed by a gunman, also in her own home in Kabul. Less than a week later, Zakia Zaki, the manager of a radio station in the Parwan Province ironically called Sadah-i-Sulh or the Voice of Peace was shot and killed by seven gunmen who entered her home. These are just a few of the more publicized cases of the many media related crimes and murders. Thus far in 2012, at least three women in involved in the media sector have been reportedly killed.

It is difficult to ascertain whether these murders are actually honor killings since the label is often times an easy way for the authorities to evade responsibility. By claiming that the murder of a female journalist and/or television personality is an honor killing, the authorities can deflect from larger political truths, forces, and problems that the victims were perhaps trying to uncover.

The owners of television stations, likewise, are quick to absolve themselves of any responsibility for the murders of their female employees. Fazel Karim Fazel, the owner of Shamshad TV echoes almost exactly what Saad Mohseni, one of the sibling owners of Tolo TV, said in regards to the death of Shaima Rezayee about the death of Shakiba Sanga Amaj which is that it was a family/personal affair.

Reporters Without Borders has made a declaration on their website that honor killings must be investigated like any other murder. The Committee to Protect Journalists, on the other hand, surprisingly only includes Zaki in their list of “Journalists Murdered in Afghanistan.” They believe that according to their definition, Rezayee was not a journalist and Amaj’s murder was personally motivated.9

Nai, an Afghan non-profit organization supported by Internews/USAID has been documenting a rise in acts of violence and murders perpetrated against all but especially female news anchors, singers, and actors, with 2011 seeing the highest incidents of violence for all Afghan journalists and media makers since the supposed fall of the Taliban in 2001. Based on my research and interviews, out of all the transnational journalist watchdog groups, Nai, which is based in

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9 This information was imparted to me in a series of email correspondences in October of 2011 by Madeline Earp, senior researcher, and Bob Dietz, program coordinator, of CPJ’s Asia bureau.
Afghanistan, by far conducts the most thorough and extensive research on violence against Afghan journalists and other media professionals. They have comprehensive statistics on many aspects and incidences of violence perpetrated against media makers and have recently launched an online data-mapping project.  

**The Dynamics of Culture and Media: Complicating the Backwards/Modern Dichotomy**

When hearing of such cases of misogyny and violence against women, it is easy to automatically jump to the conclusion that Afghans are innately conservative or worse yet “backwards”. However, it is a mistake to interpellate Afghan society as “conservative,” as some journalist accounts of the situation have done. Likewise, it is important to distinguish between practices of Islam in

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10 To see their latest data as well as surveys and graphs tracking the situation of journalists for the last ten years of free media in Afghanistan, please visit their website: http://data.nai.org.af/
everyday contexts and Islamism as a legal and political framework (Asad 1993; Göle and Ammann 2006; Gregorian 2004; Mahmood 2005). We would not judge the entire USA based on the conservative and regressive policies espoused by the Tea Party.

Anyone who is familiar with Afghan history knows that the long struggle for women’s rights (and sexuality) has been an ongoing battle between modernist state policies and the more restrictive and repressive interpretations of Islamic law and tribal laws (Dupree 1984; Gregorian forthcoming 2013; Majrooh 1989; Maley 1996, 1998; Nawid 2000; Osman 2005). As such, women’s lives and bodies have been under the jurisdiction and regulations of tribal/religious elders and historically relegated to the private sphere. Although this is a mute point for the grieving families of the media martyrs, in this respect, the deaths of female and male television personalities and other types of journalists are not completely in vain. Ordinarily, such incidents would be considered a private matter and brushed under the carpet in a small village and nobody would have known. Yet because these people were public figures, their cases received more attention and television enabled this publicity. It is precisely this public engagement with cultural and political issues pertaining to human rights, democracy, and nation building that is a source of strife for the Islamists and other conservative groups and a celebration for the defenders of free media in Afghanistan.

Arguments about the “in/suitability,” “in/appropriateness,” “im/proper,” and/or “im/mortality” of women’s (and to a lesser extent men’s) representation and expressions of sexuality on Afghan television stations are arguments about cultural authenticity grounded in claims about what constitutes true Afghan identity. However, national identity cannot ever be reduced to a singular truth. A sense of a nation’s sensibilities can only come into focus through the blurry lens of cultural contestations. Culture by its very definition is in flux and discursive. It is never static.

Contrary to its reputation as a hostile and impenetrable country, thanks to British and Soviet/Russian colonial mythologies and also due to its harsh mountainous geography, in the age of globalization Afghanistan is no more impervious to cultural influences and change than any other country. During British Colonial rule of the region and the three Anglo-Afghan Wars, the British tried to build railroad tracks to stretch their empire. Fearing foreign invasion, Afghans in tribal areas repeatedly destroyed them. Whereas India and Pakistan now have intricate national railroad systems, Afghanistan does not have any railroad network.
Today, Taliban and other religio-tribal groups destroy tele-communication satellite towers that transmit and broadcast signals for wireless telephones, the internet, radios, and televisions with the same fears. Concerns of culture vulnerability and cultural imperialism are legitimate. As a result of the destruction of its cultural institutions such as its media, education, and museums,
culturally speaking, presently, Afghanistan is particularly unsedimented and unsettled. Therefore, such questions take on a new urgency in a place and space where the possibilities of redefining national identity are wide open. However, the key difference is that unlike the “iron horse” of the British, the people of Afghanistan popularly support these technologies of communication.

To bring national issues up for public reflection and discussion there is, depending on whom you ask, no better or worse medium than television. It provides a counter-hegemonic function in at least two crucial arenas. First, as an institution, it enables local Afghans to “talk back” to the international community that has Afghanistan in its purview of influence and discourse. Second, it provides a platform for television producers to act as local reformers, presenting indigenous modernities and cultural practices that challenge local conservative groups that have aggrandized their power base as a result of three decades of war.

The Future of Afghan Media, The Future of Afghanistan

However, no arrests are made and no one is prosecuted in most cases of media related crimes and even murders including the ones mentioned above. As brave and courageous as the media makers are, their low socio economic status despite their high profile leaves them vulnerable to abuse and death. Yet despite the range of dangers and constraints they face, supported by the demand and popularity of their work, they continue to speak to and for the public by catalyzing debates about topics that are central to the everyday lives of the majority of their viewers. So yes television is currently the only candle that glimmers in the darkness but how much longer will the people who run television fuel its flame at the cost of their lives? They are thrown to and engulfed by the cultural fires for their principles and reformist vision for an Afghan media world that is inclusive and democratic.

Therefore, its not surprising that self-censorship is becoming more and more prevalent amongst media makers. A strategy commonly deployed by television stations in the battle over censoring women’s bodies amongst other imagery that incite conservative groups, is to blur, fade, or re-edit “offensive” content. At first this was an act of defiance to ward off government censors on the grounds that the vague media laws do not condone banning entire programs but object to only small segments, which can be altered or removed. However the continued use of self-censorship is now beginning to take a Foucauldian turn to self-discipline as a means of appeasing the hegemonic powers of a few elites.

Once the venues for mass communication and mediation are controlled and censored by direct force and/or fear and intimidation, cultural debates cease to be in the service of the public. The question now then is how much longer will
the media remain a viable institution of the people if the threat of internal and external zoor awarah or zoor mundah goes unchallenged and if crimes committed against media professionals goes unpunished?

Thus far I have argued, that media in Afghanistan “remains an institution of the public itself, operating to provide and intensify public discussion” (Habermas et al. 1974) but what will happen with the eventual pull out of the international donor community which has subsidized so much of the current mediascape? Will there be a media blackout, leaving only state controlled media, religious media, or a few commercial monopolistic broadcasting outlets?

Charmaine Anderson, director of Internews Afghanistan, one of USAID’s main arms for establishing the “fourth estate,” explains that “USAID’s Office of Transitional Initiative’s goal was to set up the media in Afghanistan as an emergency measure to facilitate transition from a war environment” but that they ultimately want the media networks to be financially independent. They train media professionals not only in the ethics of independent reporting but also in how to establish relationships with the market and secure advertisers and other commercial sponsors. She predicts that “in this kind of artificially inflated media market, once the development aid decreases, attrition will naturally force only those with good business models to survive and the rest of the media venues will close”.11

Currently Tolo TV and its numerous media outlets, arguably a media empire, is the most commercially viable and self-sufficient. If Tolo TV becomes a model for the future of media in Afghanistan, will the remaining television stations, in order to survive and compete, follow suit and provide more programming that appeals to wide audiences? Will Tolo TV itself be forced to reduce its in-depth news coverage, political satire shows, and other public service programming? If a commercial model prevails, will less entertaining programs that focus on elevating dialogue by providing much needed information and education, such as Challenge (Negah TV) and Roshani (XX), disappear and programs that appeal to base desires become the main attraction? Will the public sphere degenerate from in-depth coverage and debate to sensationalism and shallow signifiers of progress such as women without veils singing and dancing?

In the battle for establishing national and cultural legitimacy and authenticity, giving audiences what they want is as much a by-product of capitalism as it is of democracy. Therefore, we must be critical of that line of argument since agenda setting in the various international ratings systems is a problem in commercially developed media environments. Only by being

11 Interview, Kabul, December 2009
attentive to the overlap of content analysis with the careful gauging of reception can we determine the needs of audiences and therefore national interest, which will enable us to determine if the content is delivering.

**Military Pullout, Media Blackout?**

As problematic as the international community’s involvement might be, an impending military pull out must not mean a development aid pull out. Afghans are sensitive to not only foreign invasions but also being used to fight proxy wars such as the Cold War, which started the collapse of the Soviet Union. They have not forgotten the chaos and civil war that ensued following America’s abandonment after the Soviet withdrawal – the consequences of which are still reverberating. If international aid and funding is solely contingent on military presence and expenditure then it reinforces the common sentiment amongst Afghans that the Americans are only here for their own long term strategic interests and to exploit natural resources, thus making peace and democracy a rhetorical ploy.

ISAF, NATO, and American forces try to protect tele-communication towers by either placing them within the compound walls of their military bases or having soldiers guard them. It is time to also protect the flesh and blood people who run the one institution with the most democratic potential to protect the people. Television owners must be held accountable for the safety of journalists or at least insure them and their families in cases of harm and death.

In this critical juncture in the tangled history of Afghan-US relations, daunting though the task might seem, the international community must not abandon the country’s nation building and development projects, especially the media. Otherwise all the high tech and costly media technologies that enable broadcasting from Afghanistan and crisscross international datelines via satellites will prove to be futile against good old-fashioned technologies of violence such as bombs, guns, sticks, and fists. And Sharia Radio might once again become the only media outlet.

In development circles and in political science terminology, Afghanistan is frequently described as a “failed,” “broken,” “fragmented,” or “collapsed” nation (Ghani and Lockhart 2008; Rubin 2002), terms that have replaced the earlier classifications of “late state formation,” “the rentier state,” and “third world despotism,” (Rubin 2002). Such terms continue the pervasive rhetoric of “failure” in western discourse and thereby gloss over progressive historical achievements of nations like Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod 2006; Mitchell 1991, 2002). Yet at the same time it cannot be denied that currently, Afghanistan, having experienced thirty years of guerilla warfare and international militarization, has lost its
previous state, civil, and governmental infrastructural capacities. Decades of ethnic, religious, and gender violence have left an almost indelible mark of disunity, and fractured any sense of a cohesive society. Therefore, the language of “failure” can be useful, keeping its problematic colonial and neo-colonial epistemological roots and agendas in mind, but only as a starting point to understanding the complexity of contemporary Afghan social worlds, not as a teleological framework.

And within that circumstance, the media world of Afghanistan offers glimpses of possibility, of the alternative modernity that might in the end, shape an Afghan national imaginary in which Afghan citizens feel they have a stake beyond their local loyalties. Mending of the broken, collapsed, and failed nation that is Afghanistan, or to use the official language, “nation-building” or “reconstruction”, can only happen via a mass venue for healing and purging, remembering and forgetting, debating and imagining. For that, there is no better or worse medium than television.
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