Modern Afghanistan

The Impact of 40 Years of War

Edited by M. Nazif Shahrani

What impact does 40 years of war, violence, and military intervention have on a country and its people? Modern Afghanistan is a collection of the work of interdisciplinary scholars, aid workers, and citizens to assess the impact of this prolonged conflict on Afghanistan. Nearly all of the people in Afghan society have been affected by persistent violent conflict. The book focuses on social and political dynamics, issues of gender, and the shifting relationships between tribal, sectarian, and regional communities. Contributors consider topics ranging from masculinity among the Afghan Pashtun to services offered for the disabled, and from Taliban extremism to the role of TV in the Afghan culture wars. Prioritizing the perspective and experiences of the people of Afghanistan, new insights are shared into the lives of those who are hoping to build a secure future on the rubble of a violent past.

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BROUGHT TO YOU BY FOREIGNERS, WARLORDS, AND LOCAL ACTIVISTS: TV AND THE AFGHAN CULTURE WARS

Wazhmah Osman

With more suicide bombs, attacks, and killings of civilians by official and unofficial Afghan and foreign forces, 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. After the ouster of the Taliban and renewed promises by the international community to rebuild the country, many Afghans and non-Afghans wishfully imagined that the country was entering a postwar, postconflict, post–religious extremism era. A decade and a half into international and local efforts to build the nation and bring a semblance of peace to the site of the United States' longest running war, Afghanistan continues to plummet into lawlessness. The dream of a functioning democratic nation is moving further from reality. Yet the media are 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.

After almost four decades of war, including a six-year blackout by the Taliban of all media except their own Shari'a Radio, post–9/11 Afghanistan is experiencing a surge in new media creation with dozens of new free broadcast television and radio stations, mobile telephone providers, and a fledgling but steadily growing internet infrastructure. The political economy that sustains this rapid proliferation of media is distinctively Afghan and rooted in long-standing relationships of patronage, development aid, and war economies that emerged during the Cold War and dramatically increased since 2002. Also, contrary to the uprisings that have fomented in the rest of the Middle East and Asia, the medium at the heart of the most public and politically charged social movements and activism in Afghanistan, instigating often violent cultural clashes, is

television. In this chapter, based on a larger book project, I examine the role of media in the development of the public sphere in post–9/11 Afghanistan, the cultural contestations that it is producing, and the impact of the political economies that sustain it.

Via production and reception studies, along with content analysis of the most popular genres on Afghan television, I assess the everyday influence of new, radically increased media forms. I argue that despite operating in a dangerous arena—facing a range of constraints, threats, violence, and regimes of censorship—Afghan media producers are supported by the popularity of their work and provide a platform for local reform, activism, and indigenous modernities to challenge both local conservative groups and the international community that has Afghanistan in its purview of influence and discourse.

In other words, a fragile but vibrant public sphere has emerged. The development of a robust and free media as the key feature of a public sphere is important in all countries but especially in dystopic ones like Afghanistan. As a counterbalance to the government, warlords, and foreign interests in Afghanistan, the formation of a vibrant public sphere has the potential to underwrite democracy, national integration, and peace. After over thirty years of ethnic, racial, tribal, gender, and class violence, the media are providing a semblance of justice, debate, and healing.

However this comes at a high price. Like the wider public, Afghan media producers are caught between warring ideologies that range from Islamist to commercial to "developmentalist." Their secular, reformist, and nationalist visions are often at odds with powerful forces endogenous and exogenous to the government, sometimes including the owners and funders of the media institutions they work for. Their high profiles coupled with their low socioeconomic status leaves them vulnerable to all kinds of abuse and death. Hence the larger question for the future of Afghanistan is how much longer can a public sphere protect people or even exist in a country that has lost most of its previous state and civil infrastructure, where guns, local militias, foreign militaries, and physical force are the status quo?

Imperial Ambitions and Foreign Projects

In order to understand the complexities of Afghanistan's current media landscape, it is first imperative to understand its geopolitical history and ethnic and racial makeup.

Known as the "Gateway to Asia," Afghanistan has historically been at the crossroads of imperial ambitions. In what was called the Great Game, the colonial powers of England and Russia would often instigate trouble, pitting the various ethnic groups against one another. Part of their divide and conquer strategy also involved annexing parts of Afghanistan, thus redrawing the boundaries of

the country in their own interest.[2] For Afghan rulers, maintaining the country's sovereignty involved a balancing act of minimizing foreign annexation while also appeasing the interests of a heterogeneous population consisting of autonomous ethnic groups such as the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras, and Turkmans, among many others smaller groups.

Early on, as a result of these border uncertainties (see Qassem, in this volume), the state attempted to implement an isolationist policy. Likewise, as a result of constantly being under the threat of foreign invasions, the people of Afghanistan have always been suspicious of foreign involvement and interference. During British colonial rule of the region, the British tried to build railroad tracks to stretch their empire. Fearing foreign invasion and influence, Afghans in tribal areas repeatedly destroyed their "iron horse." As a result, whereas India and Pakistan have intricate national railroad systems, Afghanistan did not have any to speak of until this last decade (there are now two railway lines).[3] Likewise, today the Taliban and other religio-tribal groups destroy telecommunication satellite towers that transmit and broadcast signals for wireless telephones, radios, and televisions (The Killid Group 2016).

Yet in actuality, the government's isolationist policy was largely a failure. These incidents aside, Afghans themselves have long bypassed scholarly, geographical, and political barriers through their own cultural and economic exchanges with Central Asia, China, India, Iran, and Pakistan as well as other countries. Yet in academia and popular culture, the myth of Afghanistan's "isolation" and "irredeemableness" continues to gain currency and has become a formidable paradigm (Barfield 2010; Crews 2015; Dupree 1973; Gregorian 2013).

In the age of globalization, Afghanistan is even less impervious to cultural influences and changes. Due to Afghanistan's distinctive post-9/11 economy, the vast majority of its media funding and actual media technologies and products comes from its regional neighbors as well as cross-regional interests. As media ethnographers who study transnational media and the effects of globalization have begun to explore, satellite television is rapidly transforming the mediascape in the Gulf countries from Syria to Iraq (Abu-Lughod 2004; Kraidy 2010; Salamandra 2016a,b). How is Afghanistan's distinctive geographic location in Central Asia and distinctive sociocultural position, dominated by Indian, Iranian, Turkish, and Western media products and at the margins of Arab and Russian influence shaping or impeding its development? Is this laying the foundations of cultural imperialism or fostering freedom of speech, debate, diversity, and democracy for the entire region? These are the questions I grapple with in this chapter.

As a result of the destruction of its cultural institutions such as its media, arts, education, and museums, contemporary Afghanistan is, culturally speaking, particularly vulnerable and unsettled. Also, after almost four decades of war and instability, there is serious concern that with the impending withdrawal of

the the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and American troops, another civil war could break out. Indeed, security is deteriorating considerably, especially in the north. Taliban and Al Qaeda violence is now augmented by the appearance of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in eastern border regions. Therefore, questions about cultural vulnerability, cultural imperialism, the role of empire, and civil unrest and more wars, are legitimate and take on a new urgency in a place and space that continues to be at the crossroads of imperial ambitions, where ethnic violence remains pervasive, and the possibilities of redefining national identity and allegiances are wide open. In Afghanistan, national television systems, and politics more generally, are shaped just as much by internal dynamics as they are by relationships with neighboring and more distant countries. While this is true of all nations, it is particularly the case in Afghanistan due to its geopolitical position and significant dependence on foreign aid.

Ethnography of the Televisual Village

Given this dystopic state of affairs, coupled with television's national and transnational reach and high illiteracy rates in Afghanistan, television is imagined as a particularly powerful medium by local and foreign officials for uniting or dividing the nation and the region by reconciling differences and promoting peace or aggravating tensions. While social media played a pivotal role in the Arab Spring and Green Movements, this is not the case everywhere. In Afghanistan and many of the former Soviet Republics, internet diffusion is low due to issues of state surveillance and barriers to access. Although internet infrastructure is slowly being built in middle-class neighborhoods of the capital Kabul, for the most part, internet use via computers and mobile devices is limited to social elites and some university students.

As I have argued elsewhere (Osman 2014a), technological determinism and the fetishism of digital and new media have precluded more nuanced understandings of social activism in the region and beyond. By focusing exclusively on the transformative or liberating aspects of new media, such studies erase the socioeconomic and political digital disparities that exist between and within nations. Television is still the dominant media form in many parts of the world and therefore one of the best means to study national politics, popular movements, and social activism across the Middle East, the Caucasus, and South and Central Asia (see Abu-Lughod 2004; Kraidy and Khalil 2009; Mandel 2002; Mankekar 1999; Oren 2004; Rollberg 2014; and Rajagopal 2001).

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 self-representation. Early and contemporary media scholars have been exploring the potential and problems of communication technologies in

establishing the conditions for democracy in large-scale societies (Dewey 1927; Lippmann 1925; McLuhan 1952; Schudson 1998). The role of media in the formation of identity and subjectivity, both in the individual and collective sense, has been a central concern of media theorists. An integral part of this research is scholarship on the formation of publics, counterpublics, and split publics (Calhoun 1992; Dornfeld 1998; Rajagopal 2001; Robbins 1993).

Thus my goal with this research project became to redirect the global dialogue about Afghanistan to local Afghans themselves. In other words, how do Afghans' institutions "talk back" to discourses pertaining to Afghanistan that have been reverberating globally on an unprecedented volume and scale?

How do modern Afghans conceptualize and measure signifiers of cultural progress and regression outside of the developmentalist models? What do terms like *conservative* or *progressive* mean in contemporary Afghanistan? How are diverse belief systems, sensibilities, and understandings of themselves constituted and expressed on a daily basis? How are charged issues such as gender and sexuality, human rights, democracy, and religion contested, framed, and negotiated by local cultural producers?

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. The fact that television is broadcast nationally and simultaneously, viewed together within large household structures, and relatively accessible and popular has made television an important nationwide 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. Arguably, television is a national barometer of the state of the nation, its heartbeat and pulse, the venue that is inciting and 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 refeudalizing the country by inciting sensationalism and polarizing public opinion are central to this thesis.

To fully grasp the rapidly transforming cultural dynamics and complexities of a place like Afghanistan requires a method that taps into and is tuned to the everyday lives of the local people over the course of a substantial amount of time. Thus my methods are largely ethnographic, drawing on media studies that have inspired my own, including the work of Lila Abu-Lughod (2004) and Faye Ginsburg (1995, 1999, 2002) among others.

In general, Afghanistan has been neglected as a serious site of ethnographic research with a few notable exceptions (Barfield 2010; Shahrani and Canfield 1984; Crews 2015; Dupree 1973; Gregorian 2013; Mills 1991; Tapper 1991; Saikal,

Nourzhanov, and Farhadi 2012). The media, in particular, have had almost no scholarly attention with the exception of a few influential scholars (Edwards 1995; Skuse, Gillespie, and Power 2011). My research is the first in-depth ethnography of the Afghan mediascape. I conducted a total of eighteen months of fieldwork in Tajikistan, Pakistan, India, and Turkey, including a full consecutive year, from 2009 to 2010, in Afghanistan. While there, I visited and conducted research in almost all the provinces and major cities, but the bulk of my time was in the capital city of Kabul.

While my research is primarily an ethnography of local television production and transnational media circulation in Afghanistan, in the absence of serious media scholarship on Afghanistan, I had to also engage with the reception side of the debates. 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. On the production side, I interviewed international consultants, embassy officials, and media producers and distributors in order to understand their motivations and goals for funding, marketing, and circulating their own cultural products as well as "local" coproductions in Afghanistan. I also interviewed Afghan television producers to assess their own meaning-making processes. Thus, I carried out over one hundred formal interviews with high- and low-level media producers and government officials as well as a cross section of Afghans ranging from those living in slums to presidential candidates and religious leaders.

Political Economy of the Media Sector

In the decade and a half since 9/11, Afghanistan has experienced a rapid expansion of media outlets and an influx of media imports from the surrounding nations and beyond. Currently there are thirty-six free television stations and the numbers are growing. 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 funding also come from a combination of activities and sources, both Afghan and foreign, clandestine and candid.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the United States government identified Afghanistan, Pakistan, and its northern Central Asian neighbors as particularly problematic due to the rise of Islamism in the form of extremist networks such as the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Thus, Western attention turned to the Central Asian Republics with promises to bring democratic policies and structures. With this mission, the United States military, in addition to providing arms through the Department of Defense and the State Department, identified the media as a central means of disseminating its messages. The British government followed suit with the Department for International Development (DFID) and the BBC. The explicit

aim of BBC's overtly named Marshall Plan of the Mind, established in 1992 and later renamed BBC Media Action in 1999, was to "teach capitalism to the communists" (BBC Media Action 2017, Select Committee on Foreign Affairs 1999). The chairman of the organization explained, "The BBC-MPM is an educational, charitable trust … to transfer skills and knowledge of democratic principles and market economies via national radio and television to assist the transition process. It is the most significant project dedicated to mass knowledge transfer within the Former Soviet Union" (Mandel 2002, 213).

The framework for development aid originated in a series of discussions at the Bonn Conferences. Organized and spearheaded by the United Nations and the United States, Afghan and international civil society organizations and prominent individuals were invited to establish a new transitional government and were tasked with creating a new constitution, which would codify the terms of the new state, from the media to the justice system. In December of 2001, over ninety countries promised more than twenty billion dollars in the first Bonn Conference for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, including its media sector. In fact, the information and communication technologies (ICTs) sector, which includes everything from telecommunications infrastructure building to media training and literacy, was designated as a key target area for funding.

Although the numbers and figures are difficult to ascertain because not all the countries met their projected promises and, since the worldwide economic recession of 2008, international funding has significantly decreased, approximately 60 to 70 percent of Afghanistan's gross national income consists of international humanitarian aid. Likewise, although we know that the media and communication sector is one of the main areas targeted for aid by the United States and the United Kingdom and therefore heavily funded, the exact figures are also difficult to ascertain because there are many different branches of the governments that distribute the money to many different nongovernmental and governmental organizations and subcontractors, both local and from the donor countries.

Even though the US government is legally required to be transparent and make their expenditures public, following the money trail to find exactly which media projects are funded by which branches of the US government and for how much is nearly impossible—as they only provide piecemeal figures associated with some of their branches.

Despite the statistical and quantitative obfuscation, there is enough information to have a sense of media funding patterns, which I discuss in the next section. In this respect, whereas in the West, historically, television and television studies has been shaped by either the British public service broadcasting model of citizen "uplift" or the American commercial model in which advertising is crucial, Afghanistan's media system falls outside of this paradigm. Given our limited academic models, Afghanistan's mediascape can best be understood as "development

realism" (Abu-Lughod 2004). The international donor community specifically funds two types of television programming: (1) they produce original programs in collaboration with local Afghan producers, and (2) they subsidize or provide, at no cost, their own programs dubbed in local languages (when necessary).[4]

Yet the development model is not adequate to fully understand the complexities of Afghanistan's political economy either. Unofficial sources of funding include arms smuggling and opium revenues. In fact, a number of television stations are owned by "warlords." In Afghanistan a third, distinctive economic model has emerged, an amalgam economy, rooted in longstanding relationships of patronage, development aid, and war profiteering. Since the media in Afghanistan are funded in ways that were never imagined by any media theorists, my research reveals the need to break out of Western media frameworks. Hence, the media proliferation that has happened in the decade and a half since 9/11 is sustained by a new and old configuration of resources from the international donor community, transnational media corporations, and local economies.

Sectarian Violence, Warlord TV, and Foreign Funding

In this competitive arena, most television producers vying for international donor aid use the rhetoric of development, including progress, education, and elevation of society. 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.

This is especially true with the most successful private stations, Tolo TV, Ariana Television Networks (ATN), and 1TV [Teliviziuni Yak] Afghanistan, which downplay their ethnic origins. The public is traumatized by years of sectarian violence. Therefore, TV stations that polarize public sphere debates with blatant ethno-religious messages or foreign allegiances and televisually attack other groups tend to be marginalized. To appear only to address their own group or, worse yet, foreign interests is akin to sociopolitical and economic suicide in the eyes of national advertisers and broad-based international donor campaigns that seek to reach wide audiences.

Nonetheless, some foreign funders and niche television stations owned by warlords with questionable histories continue their efforts to retribalize Afghanistan and polarize the region. It is important to note that, depending on a particular Afghan's ethnic affiliation, one person's warlord is another's hero. In the power vacuum left by the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, most of the Soviet era commanders and leaders vying for control and a place at the table for their ethnic groups took part in the ethnically divisive and violent civil war (1992–1994). The line between protecting their own people, retaliation, and hate-motivated attacks and mass killings became blurry. The most notorious warlords are considered to have the most "blood on their hands," specifically carrying out large-scale acts of violence against other ethnic communities, but hardly any of them have clean hands. In the

local languages, the term for warlords is *jung salarha*. Other common names for them are *zoor awarha* (Dari) and *tupaksalaran* (Pashtu), which can be translated literally as strongmen and gunslingers, but more generally, these are ruthless, powerful people, such as warlords and lesser known "mini-warlords" and their thugs who exercise brutal violence with impunity (see Chiovenda, chap. 9 in this volume).

Warlord television stations try sometimes to feed deep-seated ethnic, racial, tribal, and gender tensions by promoting their own blatant ethno-religious messages or foreign allegiances and televisually attack other ethnic groups and countries (for details, see Osman 2012). One common method that most warlord television stations employ is to produce promotional specials that glorify their leaders. These self-aggrandizing productions usually take the form of elaborate docudramas that feature their own television owners and financiers as natural heroes and saviors who guide their own ethnic groups and tribes through an epic journey and battle against ruthless and amoral foes to victory. In the process of presenting the greatness of their leaders, these pseudohistorical narratives conveniently distort history to erase their warlords' track records. Needless to say, people from other ethnic groups, especially those who have been directly impacted by the war crimes of the featured warlords and their militias, do not respond well to these productions.

For example the television stations Noor and Badakhshan, which are financed by the Tajik political party Jamiat-e Islami, have been one of the most prolific producers of such docudramas in homage to their late leaders Burhanuddin Rabbani and Ahmad Shah Mas'ud. As the Northern Alliance, Rabbani and Mas'ud's commanders joined and led the US coalition to oust the Taliban and Al Qaeda, which resulted in the assassination of both men by the Taliban and Al Qaeda. [Mas'ud's assassination occurred on September 9th 2001—i.., before the US intervention and partnership with the Northern Allaince and Rabbani's a decade later in 2011] Ever since then, they have achieved a venerable martyred status for fighting Islamic extremism and terrorism, which masks and makes mention of their tarnished human rights records dangerous (Sifton 2005, sec. 3.A. and 3.C.; Human Rights Watch 2006; Nordland 2012).[5]

While these promotional programs and specials are commonplace among ethnically affiliated television stations, some specific stations go further by engaging in direct televisual attacks. The epic battle between the secular Tajik television station Emrose and the religious Hazarah Tamadon television is one of the longest running and heated examples of ethno-religious mudslinging. Najibullah Kabuli, who is the owner of Emrose TV as well as a member of parliament (MP) and a businessman, claims that Tamadon TV, owned by the leader of the Shi'a Shura yee Ulama (Council of Shi'a Clerics), Ayatollah Mohseni or Shaikh Mohseni, "is a puppet of the Iranian government" since the Iranian government has built multiple mosques throughout the country for Mohseni. Mohseni, in turn, has accused Kabuli of using his television station as a platform for Tajik and

Pakistani agendas. To support their allegations, they both have provided ample but unsubstantiated televised evidence such as secret government documents showing financial backing from neighboring countries.

Yet none of the ethnically oriented stations are immune from trying to use their broadcasting powers to aggrandize their political base and influence national politics. During the last elections in 2014, many of the ethnic television stations were fined for biased coverage (Khitab 2014). Dawat Radio and Television Group, owned by Abdur Rabb Rasul Sayyaf, an ethnic Pashtun, was charged with one of the heftiest of the fines. Sayyaf who is also a current MP, has an illustrious record of warlordism (Sifton 2005, sec. 3.A. and 3.C.; Human Rights Watch 2006).

Additionally, while the international community publicly promotes democracy through public information campaigns (described below) as well as funding actual elections, it is no secret that the United States has its favorites too and uses various mechanisms to influence the results (Rohde and Gall 2004). There were widespread uprisings and public outcries during the last presidential election (in 2014) over what was deemed as US government manipulation of free and fair elections through mechanisms of public opinion management, namely, dubious polling and media campaigns (see Osman 2014b).

Overall, stations that blatantly incite ethnic bias tend to be marginalized by viewers and discredited in televised debates by the more reputable stations. According to my interviews, people are traumatized by years of ethnic, racial, gender, and religious violence. The culture has shifted, in large part due to television's influence, so that at least publicly, bias and racism are no longer tolerated.

In a highly saturated and inflated television market, television programmers 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. 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. The less ethnically divisive stations, Tolo TV, 1TV Afghanistan, and Ariana Television Networks (ATN) happen to also be the most commercially successful ones and the ones funded most heavily by the United States. As such, the argument can be made that there is a direct correlation between being attuned to the democratic principles of diversity, inclusivity, and pluralism and the language of profit. In other words, having a progressive multicultural approach to nation building in order to attract potential audiences, donors, and advertisers, is not just a lofty social justice ideal but also, simply put, a good business practice.

Genres

Within this distinctive media economy, the most ubiquitous and popular genres are (1) jointly produced public service announcements (PSAs) and the news, (2) imported dramatic serials, and (3) foreign reality television formats. Through

content analysis and reception studies, I analyzed the effects of these local and transnational productions.

The PSA, Political Satire, and News

The PSA has become the favorite launching pad for much needed educational and informational campaigns by the international community. Initially, PSAs were solely sponsored by various Afghan government offices in conjunction with international donor organizations; now, due to their popularity, even the few stations that are outside of the purview of international funding are producing PSAs independently. Their messages include topics like teaching democracy, women's rights, antiwar protest, and national, transnational, racial, and ethnic unity.

During the 2009 and 2014 presidential elections, the democracy PSAs ranged from procedural ones about voting rights and how to vote to expository ones on what voting and elections are and what it means. Others explained to people that it is not in their best interest to allow village or tribal elders to "buy" their votes. The women's rights PSAs addressed everything from street harassment to encouraging women to join the police to more complicated cultural phenomena such as honor killings and *baad* exchanges (offering girls in marriage to resolve blood feuds).

The news and PSAs also address the practical challenges of living in a war zone such as demonstrating how far civilians must stay away from passing US Army convoys and how to identify areas that have been cleared of mines and avoid areas that are still mined. Additionally, the news and special bulletins throughout the day inform people of where there are road closures due to military or insurgent activities. In Afghanistan, television literally helps Afghans navigate daily life and can mean the difference between living and dying.

The antiwar PSA messages are particularly powerful and popular with audiences. The "*Jung bas ast*!" or ("Enough War!") series has short vignettes that feature real newsreel footage of horrific acts of violence and its victims, dead and living, from the aftermath of suicide bombings and other types of violence inflicted on Afghans by other Afghans. The culprits of the violence remain ambiguous but the implication is that they are Afghan extremists or insurgents such as the Taliban and other groups that are motivated by racial, ethnic, gender, and religious xenophobia. The PSAs in the series always end with a male announcer stating sternly "enough war!" in either Dari or Pashto, with accompanying black text in the respective language and a blood red exclamation mark that slowly drips over a white background.

In the United States, due to the stratified nature of capitalism, news-based coverage of war, particularly of war-related deaths and violence, is censored by the overlapping interests of the advertising industry, television executives, and the government. Likewise, Afghan television stations predominantly funded by the US government are likely to be pressured and constrained. News producers

complained that they were pressured by owners, directors, and managers not to air newsreel footage of violence perpetuated by the US military, especially when the violence resulted in civilian casualties.

However, despite the constraints, Afghan television producers manage to show a variety of newsreel violence and a lot of it. Media organizations also have taken on the very dangerous task of holding warlords accountable for present and past atrocities.

For example, the Killid Group, in conjunction with their extensive network of radio stations, Radio Killid, and multiple nationwide magazines, produced a 125-episode series on war crimes and war criminals. Saba TV, in conjunction with their newspaper, *Hashte Subh* (Eight in the Morning), Afghanistan's largest and longest running daily since the ouster of the Taliban, also regularly produces hard-hitting investigative reports on abuses of power. They partner with the Independent Human Rights Commission of Afghanistan, a UN-mandated independent body.

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. During the 2009 and 2014 elections, I witnessed television's new prominent role in boldly staging the debates about democracy, capitalism, and "nation-building." Afghan broadcast television very openly critiqued and analyzed all aspects of the candidates' campaign platforms (including the campaign of the incumbent Hamid Karzai), addressed policy failures, and investigated accusations of corruption and wrongdoing. Operating in a fictitious world of humor and parody enables political satire programs to evade the censors to a degree, though their commentary, like the news, can be equally damaging and incisive. In one episode of *Talak*, which aired after the last elections, the hosts went to an animal market to interview sheep and goats about their thoughts on how democracy and nation building is working out in Afghanistan.

As I discuss later in this chapter, these brave media challenges to warlords and other ruthless political elites do not pass without reprisals and punishment. Yet for the media makers and their organizations who continue to produce such damning reports, their desire for justice outweighs their fears. Having been traumatized by decades of war, they, like the rest of the public, are avowedly and explicitly against war, which they hope to convey through PSAs, political satire, and the news. As seasoned antiwar activists know, showing the realities of war and war-related violence and producing well-researched reports that document war crimes, as opposed to the edited, sanitized, biased, and sensationalized Hollywood and US news-style violence, is a very effective means of perhaps not achieving peace but at least coalescing public opinion and the tide of change against war and, in the Afghan case, also against warlordism.

Dramatic Serials

Dramatic serials, or soap operas, from many countries, ranging from regional neighbors to Western countries, can also be found on most Afghan television stations. Yet, by far, the most ubiquitous and popular are from India, with Turkey and Iran trailing. Islamists and tribal leaders attack them for tainting an imagined pure Afghan Islamic culture and charge them with cultural imperialism, the dark side of globalization theory; they worry about the cultural influences of Hinduism, secular Sunni Islam, or Shiite Islam.

The common concern among media activists and cultural critics is that distinctive heterogeneous and local cultural ideas and practices are being erased, tainted, and diffused by the homogenizing force of Western capital expansion. Media studies scholars interested in the transnational political economy (Bagdikian 2000; McChesney 2004; Schiller 1976, 1989) have also analyzed the structural imbalances and capitalist expansionist strategies that enable global media to flow disproportionately one way in favor of Western nations. However, new media scholarship is also revealing that the tides of change are dissociating "global media" from the West, and that new global players are emerging from non-Western countries. For example, Indian media exports are finding avid consumers all over the world (Ganti 2004; Larkin 2008).

In Afghanistan, is there a reason to worry about cultural imperialism from its regional neighbors? The fact is that, as a result of four decades of war, Afghan television stations cannot compete with the established media industries of India, Iran, and Turkey.[6] Due to dispossession and displacement as well the destruction of media archives and the targeted killing of Afghan media stars, personalities, and producers during the different wars, the Afghan media industry lost tremendous talent and a well-honed tradition of production aesthetics and styles. However, in this case, Islamists use the rhetoric of cultural imperialism to promote and impose their own brand of "true" Islam. This is a direct attempt at erasing Afghanistan's diverse cultural history and varied experiences with Islam. Additionally, the large fan base of these imports find these dramatic serials valuable and liberating in many ways, particular in generating debates over domestic and gender issues both at home and in the public arena.[7] Likewise, it is important to distinguish between practices of Islam in everyday contexts and Islamism as a legal and political framework (Asad 1993; Göle and Ammann 2006; Mahmood 2005).

Reality TV

Reality television formats have also found an avid viewership in Afghanistan. Based on international formats, these serials are locally produced and tailored to Afghan audiences in collaboration with their Western sponsors. A few of the popular ones include: *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* (1TV); *Afghan Star* (Tolo), based

on *Pop Idol* and *American Idol*; and *Dream and Achieve* (Tolo), which is a business entrepreneurship show similar to *The Apprentice*. These competition-based television shows, which identify winners by the votes of audiences via mobile phones or a panel of judges or both, are funded by Western media corporations and governments with the explicit goal of promoting both democracy and capitalism. Whether their mission is successful or not is difficult to determine. For example, in Ruth Mandel's 2002 article, "A Marshall Plan of the Mind: The Political Economy of a Kazakh Soap Opera," an influential work in transnational media studies, Mandel seizes on a serendipitous opportunity to examine how a mandate by the British Foreign Office to introduce Kazakhs to capitalism via the British format soap opera *Crossroads* plays out.

The British writers instructed the Kazakh writers to include in their scripts elements that positively represent free markets and entrepreneurship. However, Mandel explains, it is quite difficult to determine whether the "economic literacy" scenes in which people were writing checks and running shops at a bazaar (an outdoor market) actually encouraged any of the viewers to open bank accounts or small businesses or even shop, for that matter. Similarly, it is difficult to ascertain whether *Dream and Achieve*, *Afghan Star*, and *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* are converting Afghans into rabid consumers and capitalists. All we can say with certainty is that they are providing guidelines for a certain type of success, one that is based on both the accumulation of wealth and following your dreams. Some tend to be more overt in their messages and others are subtler. The commercials that air during these shows advertise new luxury housing suites, cars, appliances, banking, and telecommunications, promoting a capitalistic model of a materially lavish life, which is far outside of the means and reach of the vast majority of viewers.

The ideology that underpins and frames such media campaigns pairs capitalism and democracy to be mutually constitutive, one paving the path for the other. According to the award-winning documentary *Afghan Star*, made by the British filmmaker Havana Marking, which is based on the third season of the television serial *Afghan Star*, apparently a third of the country voted on short message service (SMS) for their favorite singers; for many audience members, this was the first time they have participated in voting. This is cited in the voice-over as demonstrative of the democraticizing effects of the program, as if voting for your favorite singers is akin to choosing an elected leader, whose decisions affect every facet of our lives. Lest we forget, the phone ompany that sponsors the program, Roshan, also makes money from the audience's SMS voting.

It is also important to note that *Afghan Star*, the documentary, like the television series, was produced by Tolo TV, the Afghan version of the popular western "Pop Idol" format. Tolo TV, which is arguably one of Afghanistan's most popular television stations, is also one of the largest recipients of USAID funding (Auletta 2010). Hence, if we follow the commodity funding trail, such assertions

in the documentary are not independent observations but part of the larger US ideological mission. Conservative forces have also condemned these shows, especially the participation of the female contestants, for their Americanizing or westernizing effects. This is similar to their argument that Indian, Iranian, and Turkish dramatic serials are turning the public or public opinion in favor of adopting Hindu, Shiite, or secular Sunni codes of being.

The Pen or the Sword?

Continual attempts by religious authorities and the Afghan government to block some programming and commission others confirm that transnational television production and circulation in a place like Afghanistan has implications far beyond just entertainment. "Thus revealing the political significance of texts dismissed by many social scientists as fictive and therefore inconsequential, as 'mere' entertainment or, less charitably, as kitsch," Purnima Mankekar writes in her groundbreaking ethnography of the impact of television programming in uniting and dividing India (Mankekar 1999). This is not to underestimate the significance of providing entertainment and distraction in a dystopic country like Afghanistan. However, it is precisely for this reason, given Afghanistan's current dismal state of affairs, that the media offers the one counterbalance to the injustices of the government, warlords, and foreign interests in Afghanistan and hope for democracy, national integration, and peace.

Afghanistan is far from being free of conflict, war, and the Taliban. 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 nonexistent.

People realize that dealing with such powerful, ruthless *zoorawarah* is beyond the means of tribal justice systems' practice 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, alleged war criminals and even corrupt government officials. They know that the American government is complicit in bringing many of these dubious characters, ranging from drug lords to genocidal mass murderers, and Western trained kleptocrats to power in the first place and are appalled that since 9/11, the Afghan government has given many of them official posts within the government. Like village *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 retribution. Afghan media producers and journalists frequently

complain that people have unreasonable expectations, hoping and sometimes demanding that the media avenge them by publicly shaming every *zoorawar* who is still using their power as a stronghold or chokehold on the people.

Indeed after experiencing almost four decades of war and its brutalities, a traumatized Afghan public has very high expectations of media and journalism in general, and television in particular. My conclusion is that Afghan media producers are delivering and meeting those high demands. As we have seen thus far, with PSAs, the news, and political satire, media makers uncover, investigate, and expose everything from cases of corruption, abuses of power, and violence stemming from local officials to international warlords and government officials. With dramatic serials and reality television programs, Afghan media programmers are providing to the avid and large viewership of these programs glimpses into the world's diverse lifestyles and cultures and televisual representations of gender and sexuality practices of people from around the world, which opens up space crucial for private and public discussion around sensitive cultural issues of national importance.

Yet there is a huge cost to this emergence and quick expansion of the public sphere in Afghanistan. Just like most Afghans, media makers are not strangers to threats and violence; yet by virtue of their profession, Afghan media makers, the good ones at least, fall directly into the crosshairs of these dangerous individuals on a regular basis. In the examples previously mentioned, Najiba Ayubi, the manager of Killid group, who produced the 125-episode series on war crimes and war criminals, was repeatedly visited and threatened by a group of *zoorawarah*. Sanjar Sohail, the director of political affairs and news programming at Saba TV and their corresponding newspaper *Hashte Subh*, came under attack by the Kabul Shura yee Ulama (Council of Clerics) in June of 2011 with threats of heavy fines and closure for reporting on the finding of the Independent Human Rights Commission of Afghanistan (IHRCA).[8] Subsequently, in 2012, after a series of battles with the IHRCA, to international dismay and outrage, Hamid Karzai, who has often been extolled for enabling free speech in Afghanistan, illegally fired three of IHRCA'S top commissioners, including Nadir Nadery, the top investigator on the human rights abuses report, and appointed new ones. Cases of *zoorawarah* thugs and their militias, endogenous and exogenous to the government, threatening, destroying equipment, and beating up media makers, is all too common. Some pay with their lives.

In this equation, where *zoorawarah* and *jung salarah*, have become the ultimate villains of the Afghan psyche, media makers and journalists are the ultimate protagonists and superheroes of the people. Media producers and programmers who have established themselves for their fearless reporting and programming have large followings of fans that revere them and perceive them as saviors, protectors, and an extension of their wills. Journalists who have built a reputation for fair, independent, and courageous reporting by virtue of their honorable work

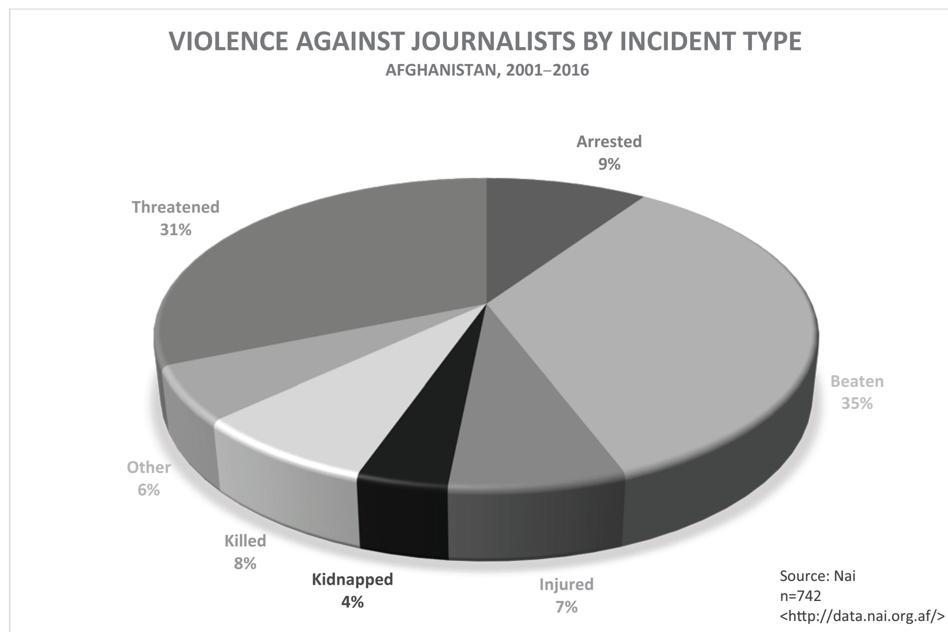

Figure 8.1.

move outside the bounds of ethnic, tribal, or religious sectarianism. They are applauded and celebrated as national heroes.

Thus, people are highly sensitive and become incensed when media makers and journalists are harmed in any way. In this reciprocal relationship, the media explosion in Afghanistan is providing audiences with a platform for issues that are crucial to them, and in return, people are voicing their support for the media. Audiences have coalesced to form a strong public, vociferously rising in opposition to conservative elites and in defense of the media. When respected media makers are harmed, people protest, hold vigils, and riot for weeks.

As I have argued elsewhere (Osman 2014a), while globally, governments are cracking down, often violently, on popular uprisings in public spaces, in Afghanistan, public protests are proving to be a powerful social force, mainly because the government is relatively weak and spaces for public gatherings, *maidaans*, or town centers, are plentiful. During my field trips, I witnessed a range of uprisings, riots, and protests over incidents of election fraud, Qur'an burning by US soldiers, the Shiite Marriage Law (otherwise known as the Rape Law), civilian casualties, government corruption, deaths of journalists, student tuition hikes at Kabul University, and the banning of popular television programs, among other issues. The outpouring of support and grief for fallen or slain media heroes also reverberates throughout the country.

The case of Ajmal Naqshbandi, a well-respected reporter, who also worked as a fixer and translator for foreign correspondents, is an example of this. In March of 2007, he was working with an Italian journalist on a dangerous assignment in Helmand when they were both captured by the Taliban. Subsequently, the release of the Italian journalist and Naqshbandi was negotiated in exchange for the release of five Taliban prisoners. Yet in the chaos of the actual exchange, while the Italian was recovered, Naqshbandi was accidently left behind and later beheaded by the Taliban. Their driver Sayed Agha was the first to be beheaded. Once the beheadings, captured on video, were released and televised in Afghanistan, the public clamor could be heard across Afghanistan in the form of riots and protests as well as peaceful vigils and public murals honoring the victims.

Another example of support for local homegrown media heroes is that of Sultan Munadi, another respected Afghan journalist. In September of 2009, while on assignment as a fixer for the *New York Times*, Sultan Munadi and his contact, journalist Stephen Farrell, were both kidnapped by the Taliban near Kunduz. British special forces safely rescued Farrell in a nighttime raid and in the process, shot and killed Munadi as he was attempting to board the rescue helicopter, mistaking him as the enemy. To add insult to injury, his body was left behind with no explanation. Widespread anger ensued as people protested for over a week in Kabul. Local news, echoing public opinion, expressed anger at a common sentiment that Afghan journalists are considered dispensable or worse yet disposable in the international news production circuit.[9]

The same sense of public outrage was expressed over the January 2011 acid attack on well-known and respected journalist Razaq Mamoon who was formerly a host of a popular weekly political commentary and interview program on Tolo TV. 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 agents were responsible, since he had just published a book detailing and condemning the Iranian government's involvement in Afghanistan's affairs. He is a fierce critique of Afghanistan's neighbors' interference in Afghan affairs.

When media makers are targeted, attacked, and killed by *zoorawarah*, media outlets, in solidarity with one another, also advocate for themselves and pay homage to the victims by (1) providing in-depth news coverage of the attacks on media makers and media censorship more broadly, (2) televising the subsequent protests on the news, and (3) producing special programs that provide in-depth investigation of the incidents of censorship and violence as well as expository programs that address the role of media freedom in democratic societies. Between the large outpouring of people at these protests and the subsequent broadcasting of the protests on television and radio, in the majority of cases, government officials have been forced to address the public. In order to prevent public protests from

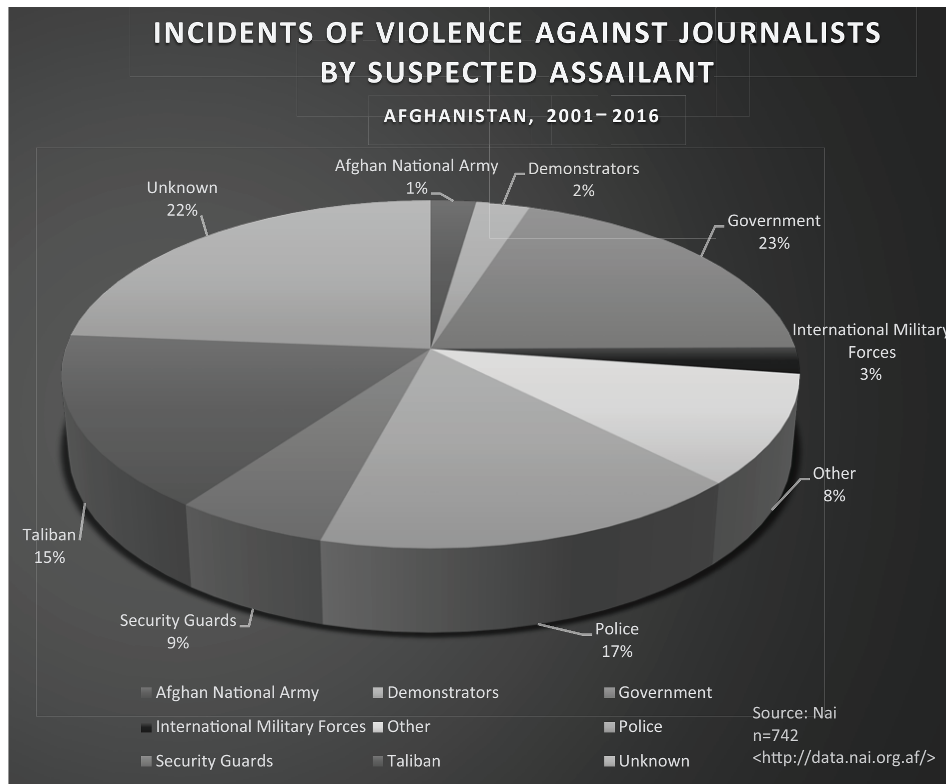

Figure 8.2.

devolving into riots, they have to at least make rhetorical gestures to appease the public and acknowledge collective grievances that have become sites for mass mobilization. It is hard to determine whether the media are capitalizing on people's protests or creating the conditions for protest in the first place.

In either case, it is a mutually beneficial phenomenon, whereby, each party amplifies one another's shared interests and messages, thereby creating larger and longer mass gatherings, which in turn require more news coverage.

One example of this is the ongoing battle between religious authorities within and outside of the government and Afghan television stations over censoring representations of women's bodies. The Afghan government has repeatedly issued decrees banning the televising of international dramatic serials, music video shows, and reality television for "indecency" and "inappropriate" expressions of gender and sexuality. Yet the television stations use their popular support continue to air them. For example, after Ariana Television Network (ATN) abruptly stopped airing the popular Indian serial *Kum Kum* in May of 2008 due to pressure from the Shura yee Ulama (Council of Clerics) via the Ministry of

Culture and Information, fans of the program held protests outside of both the ministry and the ATN headquarters in Kabul. Using the protests as evidence of the serial's popularity, ATN fought in the courts to reinstate the serials by arguing that the government does not have the right to ban entire programs, that blurring and fading exposed parts of women's bodies and Hindu religious idols should suffice. They succeeded in getting the programs reinstated and set a precedent for other stations as well.[10]

In a similar case, when a reporter and a cameraman were physically assaulted and their equipment damaged by the Afghan secret police in December 2009, Sepehr TV subsequently featured the event repeatedly on their news. They also aired a special program on media laws and free speech the following week and for several weeks afterward. The program showed the injuries of the victims who were brutally beaten and the destruction of their equipment along with interviews from media law experts about the illegality of the government's actions. Instead of evading responsibility and danger by brushing the incident under the proverbial Afghan rug, the owner of Sepehr, Dr. Najib Sepehr, and manager Elham Mohammadi made the brave decision to use their station to generate discussion around the violence.

Likewise, in January of 2016, when a Taliban suicide bomber attacked the staff bus of Kaboora Productions, an affiliate of Tolo TV, injuring dozens and killing seven people, Tolo TV took the incident, as did several other television stations, as an opportunity to both condemn the Taliban and produce multiple programs educating people about media freedom.

Conclusion

Without a doubt, the combined power of the public arena and broadcast media is a very effective social tool for collective action in Afghanistan. Yet there are serious limits to both the media's self-advocacy and the public's strong and unwavering support. The media-related crimes and murders mentioned in this chapter are a few of the many. Yet no arrests are made and no one is prosecuted in most of these cases.

Zoorawarah can continue to censor media makers with impunity and without fears of retribution. Broadcasting the incidents of violence and censorship against media personnel and the media writ large, as well as the subsequent protests and production of investigative and expository programs is indeed generative in creating dialogue and raising awareness about media rights and the important role of a free media in a society, but it is clearly not enough.

Thus far, we have seen examples of two types of potential cultural imperialism. By aggressively promoting and offering their own media products, programs, and formats, at little or no cost, the argument can be made that foreign countries are impeding the development of Afghanistan's own media industry, artistry,

and media crafts. Additionally, we have seen examples of censorship, both from endogenous and exogenous forces, ranging from pressuring the government to ban programming or directly pressuring producers to do so.

In extreme cases, we have seen an egregious third form of censorship becoming prevalent in Afghanistan. High-level media personnel and wealthy media owners who are often prominent public figures, such as politicians, warlords, drug lords, religious leaders, and businessmen, hire body guards and live behind gated fortress mansions, while low-level television personalities and reporters are subjected to threats, physical attacks, and death for providing people with programming they want to watch and which gives them a platform to raise their voices. Hence, it is the mid- and low-level media professionals, not the owners of the television stations they work for nor the foreign governments that are the patrons of the stations, who bear the ultimate burden of media freedom and reform in Afghanistan. Caught between warring ideologies that range from Islamist to commercial to "developmentalist," as brave as these Afghan media personalities and journalists are, and despite their high media profile, their low socioeconomic status leaves them vulnerable to abuse and possible death.

Reporters Without Borders, the Committee to Protect Journalists, and Nai, an Afghanistan-based journalist watchdog group supported by Internews and USAID, have been documenting rising statistics in acts of violence and murders perpetuated against media makers including violence against news anchors, journalists, singers, and actors. In the Reporters Without Borders' "Deadliest Countries" section of its *Round-Up 2016 of Journalists Killed Worldwide* report, Afghanistan ranks second, with war-torn Syria leading in first place, and cartel-ridden Mexico trailing in the third spot. In the Committee to Protect Journalists' *2016 Global Impunity Index*, Afghanistan ranks seventh in having the most unresolved cases of journalists murdered. Since 2001, Nai's extensive online data mapping project has collected evidence of 742 incidences of violence against journalists in Afghanistan.[11] Their "Top Five Organizations Experiencing Violence" are, respectively, Tolo TV, Ariana Television Network, 1TV Afghanistan, Pajhwok Afghan News, and Civic Activists.

The extent and extremity of violence against media makers—some of whom I came to know during my research in Afghanistan—was one of the surprising findings of my fieldwork. The Ministry of Information and Culture, who oversees television broadcasting, has been repeatedly targeted by different groups. Almost every media institution I visited has a showcase of "Media Martyrs" displayed prominently either in their lobby or outside area. For women working on screen, visibility itself can be deadly. The semiotics of televisual representation have become highly volatile. A number of Afghan women, ranging from news broadcasters to hosts of music video programs, have been victims of alleged "honor killings."[12] Afghan media producers, writers, editors, reporters, engineers, and

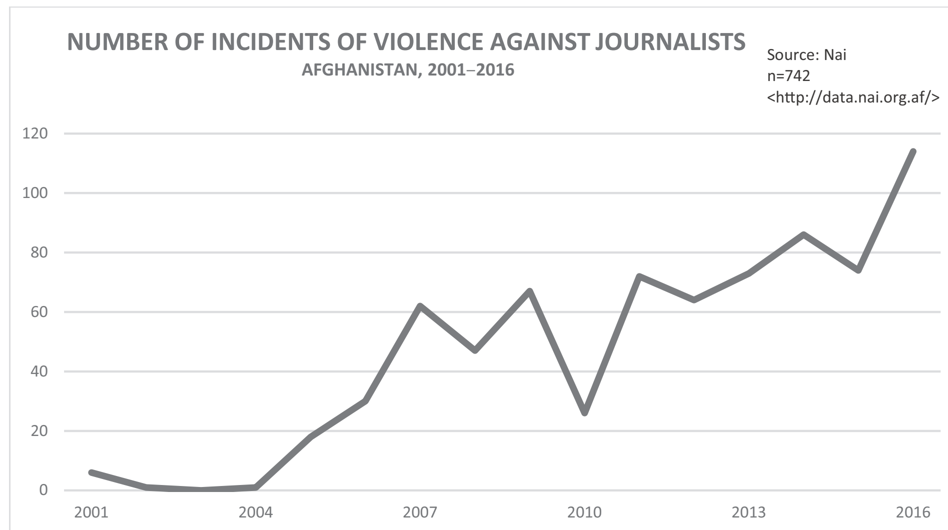

Figure 8.3.

fixers have been kidnapped, attacked, wounded, and killed by forces ranging from the Taliban and other extremists, to agents of surrounding countries, and international military units.

The *zoorawarah* of ruling elites and extremists like the Taliban and ISIS also destroy telecommunication towers that transmit and broadcast signals for wireless telephones, radios, and television. ISAF, NATO, and American forces try to protect telecommunication towers by either placing them within the compound walls of their military bases or by having soldiers guard them. The big difference between the "iron horse" of the British Raj and the internationally funded media of today is that the public almost unanimously supports today's media. It is time to also protect the flesh and blood of the people who run the one institution with the most democratic potential to protect people and restore peace and justice in the dystopian country. Television owners, the Afghan government, and the international community must be held accountable for the safety of Afghan journalists, presenters, singers, and actors. This is not just a problem of personal safety; the future of independent media in Afghanistan depends on it. While the violence directed at media makers is productive in generating debates, if violence continues to increase as it has without any real legal enforcement measures, it does not bode well for the future of Afghanistan.

Currently self-censorship is becoming more and more prevalent among media makers. Over the last decade, it has taken a Foucauldian turn to self-discipline as a means of appeasing the hegemonic powers of a few power elites. Once the venues for mass communication and mediation are controlled and

censored by direct force or by fear and intimidation, cultural debates cease to be in the service of the public. The question, then, is how much longer will the media remain a viable institution reflexive of the peoples' voices, if the threat of internal and external *zoorawarha* or *zoormandha* goes unchallenged and if crimes committed against media professionals go unpunished? What will then happen to the lively, though often volatile, debates that the media are currently fostering? Will the public service and developmental programs disappear entirely? What new models of media, if any, will emerge?

My final cautionary point is that while the international community's funding of the Afghan media sector is problematic in certain ways, the impending military pull-out must not mean a corresponding pull-out of development assistance. Surprisingly, at least the media development model of a much grander national reconstruction project, long a source of critique from the Left, is proving successful in Afghanistan. This is contingent, of course, on the input and agency of local producers within media institutions, itself contingent on those same producers being protected and valued.

The saving grace for Afghanistan is that the model of media development that is being implemented is a multilateral development model, whereby resources and funding are dispersed from the international donor community, thus making it more akin to the public interest model. That is, there is a direct correlation between the amount and diversity of international resources that is being funneled into the Afghan media sector and the number and diversity of media outlets and programs that result. The fact that Afghanistan is not unilaterally dependent on US aid is precisely why Afghanistan has not yet fallen down into the slippery slope of commercialization and its media world remains vibrant and viable, albeit fragile. Furthermore, being under the gaze of international backers ensures that Afghan media institutions are more accountable to freedom of speech. There are many international media watchdog organizations, including some affiliated with the US government, who genuinely believe in their mission to create an independent media and diverse public sphere in Afghanistan.

At this critical juncture in the tangled history of US-Afghan relations, daunting though the task might seem, the US-led international community must not once again abandon the country's nation building and development projects, especially regarding the media. As globalization theory reminds us, just as media technologies cause global reverberations, so too do technologies of violence. No country can be deemed inconsequential to global peace and stability, especially one with a tumultuous recent history. Mending the "broken," "collapsed," and "failed" state of Afghanistan can only happen via a mass venue for healing and purging, via remembering and forgetting, debating and imagining.[13] For that to happen, there cannot be a better or worse medium than television.

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Notes

1. Ramazon Bashardost, former presidential candidate and current parliamentarian, first coined the phrase. He is one of the few members of parliament who has not been involved or implicated in the numerous corruption scandals that has plagued other MPs.

2. For example, in 1893, more than a decade after the conclusion of the Second Anglo-Afghan War, the ethnic Pashtuns, whom the British deemed as particularly problematic due to their numerous uprisings, were divided between Afghanistan and modern-day Pakistan, then British India (see Saikal, chap. 1, and Qassem, chap. 7, in this volume for details).

3. Completed in 2010 and funded by the Asian Development Bank, one stretches from Termiz, Uzbekistan to the airport in Mazar-i-Sharif, and the other railway, funded by Turkmenistan, links Serhetabat, Turkmenistan with Toorghundi and has reportedly been halted due to security threats posed by the Taliban.

4. Iranians, Tajiks, and Afghans share dialects—Farsi, Tajik, and Dari, respectively—of the same language, Persian, which is one of the official languages of Afghanistan. Additionally, during the Soviet occupation, many Afghans became refugees in Iran and Pakistan. Subsequently, Afghans became more fluent in Farsi or learned Urdu, which is very similar to Hindi. In the north of Afghanistan, most of the tribes and ethnic groups, such as the Uzbeks and Turkmen, also understand Turkish. Thus, most Afghans can understand the imported programs without the common overdubbing in Dari or Pashto.

5. Aina Television, is owned by Abdul Rashid Dostum, an Uzbek leader and Afghanistan's current first vice president, has a history of alleged human rights abuses (Sifton 2005, sec. 3.A.; Human Rights Watch 2006), also produced and nationally aired at least three promotional specials glorifying Dostum during my fieldwork.

6. Although space constraints do not permit me to elaborate on this point, it should be noted that in contrast to India, Iran, and Turkey, the media flows between Afghanistan and its neighbors to the north such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, as well as to the east to Pakistan, are bilateral and multidirectional.

7. For more information see Osman (2011).

8. Sohail also explained that with *Hashte Subh*, their corresponding newspaper, they have more liberty to report on abuses of power because, due to high illiteracy rates, the information does not reach the masses.

9. For more information on the vital role of local frontline journalists in the international news production chain as well as the unjust structural disparities that favor international correspondents and embedded journalists and place local frontline journalists in grave danger, please see Osman (2017).

10. For more information on the role of international dramatic serials in the Afghan culture wars, please see Osman (2011).

11. The graphs and pie charts that illustrate the statistics on violence against media makers in this chapter are created by Christalyn Michaelle Steers McCrum for the author, based on Nai's reports at http://data.nai.org.af/.

12. For an in-depth analysis of gender and gender-related media attacks and killings, see Osman (2014a).

13. In development circles and in political science terminology, Afghanistan is frequently described as a "failed," "broken," "fragmented," or "collapsed" nation (Ghani and Lockhart 2008; MacMunn 1977; Rubin 2002), terms that have replaced the earlier classifications of "late state formation," "the rentier state," and "third world despotism," (Rubin 2002). This language of "failure" with its problematic colonial and neocolonial epistemological roots is frequently used as a teleological framework.

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