

Between the White House and the Kremlin: A Comparative Analysis of Afghan and Tajik Media

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In their postwar, postindependence, and post-Soviet moments, why did two neighbors, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, who share cultural, linguistic, and historical similarities, take radically divergent paths in the development of their mass media, public sphere, and democracy? In this article, I argue against the popular sentiment that the reason for their striking post-9/11 disparities—namely Afghanistan’s relatively open and diverse media environment and Tajikistan’s repressive media regime—is that Afghanistan remains under the purview of influence and development aid of the United States and, conversely, Tajikistan is still under Russian control. Using case examples from my fieldwork in both countries, I demonstrate that the fact that Afghanistan is not unilaterally under the influence of U.S. aid is precisely why Afghanistan has not yet fallen down the slippery slope of commercialization, and its media world remains vibrant and viable, albeit fragile.

Keywords: Afghanistan, Tajikistan, media, globalization, development, democracy, cultural imperialism

Introduction and Background

In their postwar, postindependence, and post-Soviet moments, why did two neighbors, Afghanistan and Tajikistan, which share cultural, linguistic, and historical similarities, take radically divergent paths in the development of their mass media, public spheres, and democracy? In the aftermath of the Soviet-Afghan War and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, there was a brief moment of opportunity for the nations to rebuild their democratic institutions and shed the authoritarian hold of the former Soviet Union. Their respective publics were hopeful that a new era of freedom of expression and human rights was finally within reach. Yet both countries plummeted into bloody civil wars, with various ethnic groups, tribes, and religious sects vying for power. The wars culminated in the rise of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, which enforced and subjected the people to its draconian brand of Islam, and the oppressive Kremlin-sanctioned

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Emomali Rahmon returning to power in Tajikistan. However, that moment of reprieve and transition came for Afghanistan with the ousting of the Taliban by the International Security Assistance Force and NATO troops. After nearly a decade of a strict ban on media imposed by the Taliban, post-9/11 Afghanistan experienced a surge in new media outlets. Mass media debates about human rights, democracy, modernity, and Islam now permeate and have become part of the fabric of local and international development efforts to nation-build. In Tajikistan, on the other hand, the political situation has become worse. The media is a mouthpiece for the ruling elite. With Rahmon now serving his fourth fraudulent term as president (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2014), democratization seems to be a distant dream.

By highlighting the failures of Tajikistan and the successes of Afghanistan, I argue that the reasons for their vastly different development of media and society are due to the different political economic regimes that sustain them and the extent to which such regimes support and control the two countries. By identifying the key factors in the development of two radically different political systems within a comparative framework, we can understand how to manifest the inherent potential of historic transitional moments. After all, such instances of civil unrest are a break from the status quo and have the potential to represent the will of the people to form new populist systems of governance. In other words, during these transitional moments, how can local and international institutions set the stage to help ensure emancipatory politics and deter autocratic regimes from arising again?

Most media scholars agree that democratic media societies are marked by (1) diversity of media content and programming, (2) a high volume and flow of media and information, and (3) reduced barriers, if not equal access, to the media for new producers and everyone else. These factors together then create the fourth and most important attribute of a democratic media society: high levels of informed debate, citizen engagement, and social and political activism. This is the normative ideal for the media—to open up what has been theorized as a “third space,” public sphere, and a “fourth estate.” Amid the tyranny of the state, commercial forces, and other hegemonic large-scale powers, the media can provide people with an equalizing platform to voice and express their demands, desires, needs, and wants, which ideally will lead to actual social and political change based on the will of the people (Calhoun, 1992; Habermas, 1991b; Hallin & Mancini, 2004; Robbins, 1993). Conversely, the opposite is true of repressive or oppressive media societies. They are marked by little or virtually no diversity of content, a low-volume, if any, information flow, and very little access to the media by the citizenry and nonelite producers—hence creating a suppressed or silenced environment where the media is highly controlled by one or a few elite groups instead of a plethora of voices.

The variables that determine where a society falls on this media continuum, with democracy and autocracy being the two extremes and many shades in between, are (1) the level of control or openness of the media infrastructure; (2) censorship/media laws, including mechanisms of violence and surveillance; and (3) checks on and a balance of elite powers or lack thereof, which includes a vibrant or halted civil society and independent or controlled branches of the government. By closely analyzing these key factors, I demonstrate that Tajikistan has a repressive media system and conversely that Afghanistan, while far from a true democracy, exhibits many of the attributes of democratic media systems. I argue that the type of political economy that underpins a society has a direct bearing on the development of its media system and vice versa.

Method

This article is based on ethnographic research I conducted from 2008 to 2014 to analyze the underlying factors that have contributed to the different trajectories the two neighbors have taken in building democratic and representative institutions. Supported by two Social Science Research Council fellowships, the research is based on 18 months of multisite fieldwork in the region, including a full summer in Tajikistan and a full consecutive year in Afghanistan in addition to previous trips to the region for other types of work and to maintain cultural ties and connections. In general, Afghanistan and Tajikistan have been neglected as serious sites of ethnographic research, with a few notable exceptions (Barfield, 2010; Crews, 2015; Mills, 1991; Shahrani, 2018; Shahrani & Canfield, 1984; Tapper, 1991). The media, in particular, have received almost no scholarly attention, with the exception of a few influential scholars (Adinabay, 2013; Edwards, 1995, 2005; Skuse, Gillespie, & Power, 2011).

My research is the first in-depth comparative ethnography of the Afghan and Tajik mediascapes. Although I visited and conducted research in almost all the provinces and major cities, I was primarily based in the capitals of Dushanbe and Kabul because most media production and development projects are based there. With my multiethnic background, regional language fluency, and media production experience, I was able to gain access to the Afghan and Tajik media worlds and use ethnographic methods of participant observation and qualitative interviews to study them. Specifically, I conducted more than 100 interviews in Afghanistan and 31 interviews in Tajikistan with high- and low-level media producers, government officials, representatives of nongovernmental organizations, and a cross-section of audiences. In Afghanistan I carried out interviews with personnel from 26 of Afghanistan's 38 television stations, and in Tajikistan I conducted interviews with media producers at BBC, Asia Plus, and K Plus, among others. Due to the autocratic nature of Tajikistan's media system, most of my sources spoke under conditions of anonymity. Transcripts of all interviews cited in this article as well as Institutional Review Board approval are on file.²

Media Forms in the Eurasian and Central Asian Context

Due to the slow development of broadband Internet infrastructure, the high cost of high-speed mobile technologies, and high illiteracy rates, television and radio are the dominant media in Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Although they are slowly gaining traction, digital media access and usage are still limited in Eurasia and the Central Asian republics compared to the rest of Asia. In a region that is the least Internet-connected in the world, Afghanistan and Tajikistan rank at the bottom. According to the 2018 Internet World Stats (2018), Afghanistan has a mere 16% Internet penetration, while Tajikistan supposedly jumped to 33% from the previous year's measurement of 19.5%. Most people who live in Tajikistan and Afghanistan can attest to the relatively low level of digital connectivity, access, and users. According to my research, usage in both countries is limited primarily to urban elites and some university students. The two main reasons for this are high illiteracy rates and the slow development of broadband and cable infrastructure.

² As this article progressed through the publication process, a few of my Tajik sources who had initially consented to go on record publicly subsequently asked me to anonymize their contributions due to fear of the Tajik government's increasing attacks on civil society workers and activists. They did, however, permit me to use the names of their affiliated organizations in conjunction with their quotes.

While illiteracy rates are considerably better in Tajikistan than they are in Afghanistan—where an estimated 28% of the population is literate, with a gender breakdown of 43% for men and 12% for women—the official Tajik government statistic of a 98% literacy rate is far from the reality, especially given the poor quality of the underfunded public education system (Fraenkel, Shoemaker, & Himelfarb, 2007).

Although broadband cable infrastructure is slowly extending to nonelite neighborhoods, many parts of both countries have access only to dial-up WiFi Internet that is offered by Chinese companies through satellite. Yet gaining access to even this unreliably slow Internet service is difficult due to the barrier of its high cost, which averages anywhere between a quarter and a half of an average person's monthly salary. In his ethnography of Tajik media, Esfandiar Adinabay (2013) corroborates this: "For a country with more than 40 percent of the population living below the poverty line, Wi-Fi seems too costly" (p. 24). Mobile phones are one of the few digital technologies that have become prevalent, but because data plans are similarly costly, people are limited in their use of mobile devices. Additionally in Tajikistan, similar to Iran's Basij, pro-government digital media users control freedom of speech online via harassment and violence. The government also regularly blocks the signals of popular platforms such as Facebook and YouTube.

In contrast, the broadcast media of television and radio have grown exponentially and reach large segments of the population in the region. It is important to note that this is the case only for broadcast or terrestrial television, because the signal can be picked up for free as long as a person owns a television. Satellite and cable television, like digital media, are exclusive and accessible only to certain segments of society that can afford them. Due to the high cost of satellite and cable, I estimate that less than a quarter of urban populations have access to these services.

Peacework, a project of the United States Institute of Peace, estimates that close to 89% of those living in urban areas of Afghanistan own a television and watch broadcast television an average of four hours a day (Fraenkel et al., 2007). In rural areas, 26% own a television, making it the second most common form of media after radio (Fraenkel et al., 2007). According to my research, access to television is equally high in urban areas of Tajikistan. Additionally, the government and the private sector have increased television ownership by providing loans to Afghans and Tajiks who would not be able to afford TVs otherwise. Furthermore, television viewing usually occurs in the context of larger extended-family structures, so even those who might not own a television set will have access to it. Outside the home, it is also common for men and boys to watch television in public venues. Whereas Internet cafes require a fee for use of the computers and the Internet service, most *chai khanas* (teahouses) and restaurants offer free television viewing with the purchase of tea or a snack.

Public space and public protest is proving to be a powerful social force in Afghanistan. Because the central government of Afghanistan is relatively weak and spaces for public gathering such as *maidaans* or town squares, stadiums, and bazaars are plentiful, massive protests in urban areas across the country happen regularly. The combined power of public space and broadcast media is an effective social tool for collective action in Afghanistan. Tajikistan also has plenty of grand Soviet-era spaces for public gatherings; however, these sites are underutilized and convey a feeling of eerie emptiness. As in Afghanistan, television is the dominant medium in Tajikistan, but it is less popular because it is viewed as a state propaganda tool.

As I explain in the next sections, this perception is due to mechanisms of censorship and control that are predicated on a repressive political economy.

Political Economy and Its Effects

In the West, historically television and television studies have been shaped by either the British public service broadcasting model of citizen “uplift” or the American commercial model in which advertising is crucial. In Afghanistan and Tajikistan, a third, distinctive economic model is emerging that is rooted in long-standing relationships of patronage, development aid, and war economies stemming from the Cold War. Although most Afghan and Tajik television station owners describe their networks as private enterprises that function mainly on advertising revenue, some investigation made it clear that other sources of funding come from a combination of activities and sources, both local and foreign, clandestine and candid.

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the United Nations and United States identified the media as a crucial component of intervention and stabilization in Afghanistan and the region. The United States led the International Security Assistance Force and NATO military intervention in Afghanistan, now the longest war in U.S. history. The intervention was premised on stopping the spread of Islamism—specifically the extremist networks of the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and now ISIS, deemed as particularly problematic and dangerous. The Rahmon government also feared the rise of these Islamist movements among others that had opposed his regime in the civil war and subsequent elections, and he reluctantly solicited help. Thus, Western attention returned to the Central Asian republics, with promises to build democratic institutions to fight and counter Islamism, which had replaced communism as enemy number one. With this aim, the United States Departments of State and Defense, including the U.S. military, identified the Afghan and Tajik media sectors as central to their mission of promoting democracy and disseminating their messages. However, although both countries were initially central to the U.S.-led strategy in the region, it is clear that funding and interest in the countries were not implemented or distributed equitably.

Although initially Tajikistan was viewed geopolitically as being integral to eliminating the Taliban, U.S. and international aid and interest decreased, leaving the media and society at large to turn to Russia as a source of funding (Adinabay, 2013). The implications of this shift in geopolitical realignment would prove to have adverse consequences for Tajikistan. International neglect of Tajikistan threw the emerging nation-state back under the purview of Russia’s influence and control.

The drive to develop the post-civil war and post-Taliban infrastructure of Afghanistan, on the other hand, continued full steam. The framework for development aid originated in a series of discussions held in Bonn, Germany, and known as 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 deliberate a new transitional government and tasked with creating a new constitution that would codify the terms of the new state, from the media to the justice system.³ In December 2001, over 90

³ This information was gathered from interviews with civil society groups that were invited to participate as well as from a published copy of the Afghan constitution (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2004) that details the proceedings.

countries promised more than \$20 billion in the first Bonn Conference for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, including its media sector. Ten years later, in the second Bonn Conference, held in December 2011, most of the same countries also promised financial aid to Afghanistan. However, as a result of the international economic recession, the promises were much more tempered. In the words of then secretary of state Hillary Clinton (2011): "As everyone is aware, the international community faces fiscal constraints." It was, therefore, impossible to give exact figures for future aid. Although it is difficult to ascertain the total amount of aid received since all the countries did not deliver on their promises, estimates range from 60% to 80% of Afghanistan's gross national income consisting of international humanitarian aid; the United States is the largest of the donors with an average contribution of \$6 billion per year (Kordunsky, 2011). An estimated \$2.9 billion has been allocated to Afghan media development in the past 10 years as part of the U.S. war and international investments (Cordesman, 2012). Yet most funding figures are difficult to corroborate because they are revealed in a piecemeal manner and tend to be contradictory.

What makes it even more challenging to track exact figures of funding and their sources and recipients in an already opaque system is fear from both funders and recipients that audiences will charge them with biased reporting and programming favoring the interests of the donor nation—in other words, propaganda. About half of the television stations managers and owners I interviewed admitted to receiving funding from the international donor community, including the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), UNICEF, UN Women, the Department for International Development, the International Security Assistance Force, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, the Open Society Foundations, BBC Media Action, Internews, Voice of America, and other development arms of national and multinational government organizations. Yet the number of media outlets receiving money from the international donor community as well as from neighboring countries is actually much higher. TV owners simultaneously clamor for donor aid while distancing themselves from associations with "foreigners." For example, Sekandar Saleh (personal interview, September 2009), a manager at Tolo TV, one of Afghanistan's popular private television stations, which by many accounts has received the most USAID money (Auletta, 2010), insisted that the station operates commercially and would not admit to or give any figures of international aid received.

What is abundantly clear is that Afghanistan has an artificially inflated media market with an abundance of media outlets—a staggering 38 (and growing) private broadcast television stations that would not be financially feasible without development aid. Where the funding comes from to support Afghanistan's burgeoning media outlets, including television stations, is no secret to the Afghan population. For the most part, they know which television stations are affiliated with which political parties, ethnic groups, underground economies, and foreign powers, and they watch them accordingly. With over three dozen free new terrestrial television stations, Afghanistan can boast that it offers viewers more choices for programming than many developing, or even developed, countries. This variety and diversity of content that the television stations provide form the basis of Habermas's theory of the public sphere (1991a, 1991b): more free channels (in his case, study publications) equals more sources for the dissemination of information, which equals more competition for the creation of a marketplace of debate and ideas. If the public sphere depends on freedom of the press, and that depends on having alternatives to statist media, then Afghanistan is certainly far ahead of its neighbors. In 2006, Afghanistan was invited to join the South Asian Free Media Association, a powerful regional media rights organization.

Having an overachieving neighbor like Afghanistan has made the Tajik government acutely aware that the number of private media outlets that operate freely in a country is often correlated with overall media freedom, thus highlighting its own shortcomings, for which it has drawn local, regional, and international criticism. Hence, Tajikistan has mounted a public relations campaign to change its image by falsifying the statistics and figures rather than actually changing the media system. In a 2012 speech by Tajik president Emomali Rahmon to commemorate the progress of Tajik media under his rule, he grossly exaggerated the number of private media outlets in the country. Comparing the figures to 1991, when he first took the office, he stated that, whereas there were a mere four private print publications out of 139 journals and newspapers and the only news agency was state run,

Today, 446 newspapers and journals are published in our country, out of which 270 are private . . . nine out of the news agencies are private . . . and now 44 radio and TV stations operate across Tajikistan, out of which 28 radio and TV are private.⁴ (Adinabay, 2013, pp. 10–11)

The reality is much different. Despite efforts to improve the image of Tajikistan's mediascape abroad, the realities of the media situation at home, just as they are for Afghans, are no secret to the Tajik people. They know that only a handful of free television stations broadcast nationally and all of them are statist. Peter Rollberg (2014a), an expert on the media of Russia and its commonwealth, explains:

The factual ownership and decision-making structures reveal that most post-Soviet media are, above all, geared toward reinforcing the authoritarian status quo while gaining maximum profit. Economic and political power is so closely intertwined that serious media challenges to the ruling establishment are almost impossible. For this reason, both journalists and artists working in the post-Soviet media systems and their audiences look at media as patron-guided political players in themselves, promoting the values of the owners, not the common good. Just as in Communist societies, this is a passively accepted fact, not reason for outrage or protest. (pp. 176–177)

Although television is the dominant medium in both countries, the key difference is that in Tajikistan, television is almost universally understood by the public to be a state propaganda tool. According to an extensive television study conducted by Khoma (2014), a Tajik media nongovernmental organization with financial support from the United States, there is only one free private broadcast station, SMT TV, which serves Dushanbe, the seat of power. Anywhere between four and six other private stations, at least half of which are cable stations, are permitted to operate in other provinces, deemed less important by the government. In other words, in the capital, television is dominated by four state TV stations: TV1 or Shabakai One, Safina, Bahoristan, and Jahannama (Khoma, 2014). Tajiks watch television accordingly and

⁴ The government's Committee on TV and Radio Broadcasting reported in January 2013 even higher numbers, stating that there are 57 private and state TV stations registered in the country. In March 2014, Zinatullo Ismoilov, director of the government-affiliated Association of Independent Producers and Broadcasters, corroborated Rahmon's figures during his presentation at the International Conference on Telecommunication, Broadcasting, and Tajikistan's WTO Commitments.

supplement their viewing with video compact discs that they buy on the black market of programming from neighboring countries like Afghanistan and Iran, which share dialects of the same language, Persian. Tajiks who live close enough to the Afghan border can pick up Afghan television stations.

The Tajik media environment is in sharp contrast to Afghanistan, where people can access more than three dozen free terrestrial private television stations in Kabul and other major cities and a little fewer in rural areas. One of the main reasons for the discrepancies in the media environments, with Tajikistan's being restrictive and propagandistic and Afghanistan's being more open and freer, is the two nations' divergent regimes of control and censorship.

Regimes of Censorship and Control

Both Afghanistan and Tajikistan officially have laws protecting and promoting freedom of expression, yet neither country's government abides by the laws. In Afghanistan, Article 3 of the 2004 constitution, which prohibits anything that is deemed "contrary to the sacred religion of Islam" (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2004, p. 5) is often used by government officials to try to censor, ban, charge, and fine television stations. Article 3 is also used as a rationale to imprison journalists and television station managers and producers. In Tajikistan, a 1998 amendment to the constitution put the media under the direct control of the president, giving the government the power to monitor all media content prior to broadcast and publication. In fact, Rahmon, at his own discretion, has changed the constitution multiple times. There are virtually no checks and balances on his power. Via rigged elections, he controls both the judiciary and the parliament.

Through registration and licensing laws, the Tajik government also severely restricts the start-up of new media outlets that are not affiliated with the state, especially new independent broadcast stations. Furthermore, the government restricts the few non-state-affiliated TV stations to the ultrahigh frequency and levies 17 different taxes on media outlets (Allison, 2006).

Additionally, through libel and defamation laws the courts are stacked against independent media organizations and producers. Although the original libel clause in the Freedom of Press Law, which made all viewpoints critical of the government punishable, was rescinded due to international criticism, other libel laws based on "irresponsible journalism" have crept back into the constitution. In cases where elite members of society, such as government officials or prominent businesspeople with government affiliations, allege that their honor and reputation have been tarnished, the elites always win, leaving already-struggling independent organizations and individual media producers and journalists facing ridiculously hefty fines and lawsuits and possible imprisonment (Allison, 2006).

To meander through this dense labyrinth of bureaucracy and opaque laws of taxes, registration, and licenses, all nonstate media outlets either have a lawyer on staff or regularly hire lawyers. Khoma's (2014) media survey found that 80% of independent television companies have to hire lawyers. This, along with lack of transparency in the government's bureaucracy, was one of their biggest complaints. Additionally, it is commonplace to pay mandatory bribes to various government offices. Although not officially reported, a researcher for the Khoma survey stated that bribery is a big problem (personal interview, January 2014).

Independent media institutions in Tajikistan have to walk a tightrope that involves juggling legal and illegal measures in order to assess and minimize the many dangers and risks embedded in the system. Even when independent media outlets somehow manage to comply with the state's numerous extra- and intrajudicial codes, laws, and demands, if the government still wants to shut down an outlet, it resorts to more egregious and violent measures. Reporters Without Borders (2018), also known as Reporters Sans Frontières, reports that incidences of firebombing facilities and offices, illegal evictions, harassing advertisers, confiscating equipment such as transmitters, and threatening, attacking, and killing media producers are sadly commonplace.

In addition to keeping a tight leash on all local civil society and media organizations, the Tajik government views all international nongovernmental, governmental, and civil society organizations as threats to and opponents of the state. "Foreign" media as well as "foreign" media organizations that seek to support and collaborate with local media organizations are deemed particularly dangerous. In an effort to curb the flow of foreign media, the government has repeatedly denied Asia Plus, a popular Asian satellite TV provider, a license, thereby effectively keeping its footprint out of Tajikistan. BBC TV and radio are intermittently suspended in many provinces, including the capital. The offices of Internews have also been forcibly shut down for long periods of time. Adinabay (2013) reports that in the wake of rapid media proliferation in Afghanistan, in 2003 the Tajik state passed an "information security" law to protect the nation's "information space" and installed over 300 radio and television transmitters on the borders to jam broadcast signals from bordering countries. I observed on both sides of the Afghan and Tajik border that people with antennas can pick up cross-national broadcast television. The exception to the rule is Russian media. Russian governmental, nongovernmental, civil society, and media organizations have almost free rein in Tajikistan. According to an employee of Internews Tajikistan who spoke anonymously, "Tajikistan is the only Central Asian country that allows the Russian state propaganda TV channel ORT and RTR TV to broadcast" (personal interview, January 2014). Russian journalists also have more access than Tajik journalists.

The impact of this restrictive and violent regime of censorship on content and programming is profound. In Tajikistan, according to a member of the National Association of Independent Media who spoke under the condition of anonymity, more than half of the programming aired on the state television stations is recycled content from Russian television that is only sometimes dubbed into Tajik (personal interview, February 2014). Aside from a cursory shift in language, including one program that teaches the Tajik language in an effort to remove some of the Russian words that have become part of the vernacular, the Tajikization reforms promised by the Rahmon government to appease the Islamic opposition as part of peace negotiations have not materialized into substantial changes. The Khoma (2014) survey found that the limited original Tajik programming and content that does exist consists mainly of entertainment, soft stories, and laudatory features about government elites or historical figures. This is the case even with the few private media outlets. Needless to say, there are no programs that feature opposing viewpoints or independent news. The programming contains no religious viewpoints, including those of the Sunni majority; nor does it include programs that address the interests of ethnic minorities such as Uzbeks, who make up about 15% of the population. This exemplifies Rahmon's superficial approach to creating a more inclusive government, mirrored in his dropping of the Soviet suffix *-ov* from his surname.

While the conditions are not exactly utopic in Afghanistan, the media are able, to a certain degree, to challenge and check the power of state and nonstate actors. Even the most ardent opponents of the Afghan government admit that, compared with neighboring countries, the freedoms that the Afghan media have are a cause for hope in building democratic institutions in the country.⁵ Whenever Islamists and warlords within and outside the government attempt to ban local or imported programs, they have been met with opposition on multiple fronts. On several occasions, the Ministry of Information and Culture has tried to ban various programs ranging from local music videos and political satire programs to Indian dramatic serials and Western reality television. Thus far, all the television stations have refused to heed the bans and remove the programs.

Media owners are able to challenge the legality of government censorship, and in the process, they are defining the media laws in the Afghan courts. For example, when the Afghan government issued a decree in May 2008 to ban the televising of popular Indian dramatic serials, Tolo TV and Ariana Television Network—launched in 2004 and 2005, respectively, and arguably Afghanistan’s most popular private television stations—refused on the grounds that the vague media laws do not give the government the power to ban entire programs, but only small portions, which can be altered or removed. After several years of intense fighting with religious authorities, Tolo TV and Ariana Television Network negotiated a deal whereby they self-censor the content of Indian soap operas by a combination of blurring, fading, and re-editing shots of Hindu religious idols and any “inappropriately” exposed parts of women’s bodies. The two stations have set a standard for all other stations (Osman, 2011).

Afghan broadcast television stations readily criticize government officials and government policies as well as Islamists and warlords. News programs, magazine-style programs, and call-in programs that candidly present, discuss, and critique abuses of power from local and foreign elites are very popular and ubiquitous on media outlets. For example, Saba TV, a television station funded primarily by European development aid money, regularly produces hard-hitting investigative reports on abuses of power. It partners with the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), a UN-mandated independent body (S. Sohail, director of political affairs and news programming at Saba TV, personal interview, September 2009; N. Nadery, human rights commissioner at AIHRC, personal interview, November 2009). Homegrown 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 combines investigative journalism and comedy sketches to confront abuses of power among elites within and outside the government (Osman, 2018).

Traditional codes of honor and shame as well as modern libel laws, which in Tajikistan are wielded by elites against media professionals and other vulnerable groups to silence them, can in some cases support and protect the powerless in Afghanistan. For example, Sheikh Asif Mohseni, a controversial religious leader and owner of the religious Tamadon TV, which is partially funded by the Iranian government, was widely and publicly shamed in the media for drafting the Shiite Marriage Law (commonly known as the Rape Law)

⁵ Ramazan Bashardost, former presidential candidate and current parliamentarian, first coined the phrase “the media is the candle that burns in the darkness” (personal interview, September 2009). He is one of the few members of the Afghan parliament who has not been involved or implicated in the numerous corruption scandals that have plagued other members of parliament.

in 2009 and forcibly marrying an underage girl in 2010. Likewise, in 2016, despite President Ashraf Ghani's attempts to delegitimize the latest charges of abduction and rape of a political rival by the vice president of Afghanistan, Abdul Rashid Dostum, a well-known warlord and owner of Aina TV, which has ties to the government of Uzbekistan, the media thoroughly investigated and reported on the claims. The media scrutiny also unearthed Dostum's history of human rights abuses, which led to his expulsion to Turkey ("Afghanistan: Justice for war criminals," 2006; Sifton, 2005, Section 3A).⁶

Needless to say, Afghan media makers are in the crosshairs of powerful, dangerous, and ruthless people. Similar to Tajik media makers, Afghan media makers and journalists, especially the good ones, are routinely subjected to violence ranging from threats and beatings to murder. In response to rising attacks, television producers use the media to highlight their plight and challenge restrictive policies. Most television stations have deployed an effective tactic whenever militias associated with the government or warlords target television reporters, camera operators, directors, and actors with acts of violence. To coalesce public opinion in their favor, they (1) document the threats, intimidation, and clashes and subsequently air them on their news programs and (2) often produce special expository programs that use the attacks as an opportunity to raise awareness about the role of media in democratic societies. For example, after a reporter and a camera operator from Sepehr TV were physically assaulted and their equipment damaged by the Afghan security forces in December 2009, Sepehr TV featured a special program on media laws and freedom of speech. The program showed the injuries of the victims and the destruction of their equipment along with interviews from media law experts about the illegality of the government's actions (N. Sepehr, owner of Sepehr TV, personal interview, December 2009; E. Mohammadi, manager of Sepehr TV, personal interview, December 2009).

Media owners and producers use their popular support, the media itself, and the courts to challenge censorship, threats, and violence from oppositional forces and advocate for themselves. This is possible in Afghanistan and not in Tajikistan because the government is not autocratic in the same way. Although the Afghan government is mired knee-deep in corruption, nepotism, factionalism, and partisan politics, the different branches of the government—consisting of the president's office, two parliaments, and the courts—as well as United Nations and international oversight are able to check and curb one another's powers to some degree.

Yet the relative openness and expansiveness of Afghanistan's media system does not automatically correlate to complete freedom of speech and media democracy. Television is first and foremost an elite medium. Due to its technological manifestations, starting and running a television station requires huge capital investments. Aside from a few nonprofit television stations backed by large international grants, the vast majority of television station owners in Afghanistan, as in the rest of the world, are also part of the power elite. High-level media personnel and media owners are often prominent public figures, such as politicians, warlords/drug lords, religious leaders, and businesspeople. Afghan media makers are caught between the pressures of local media owners and their foreign backers. Writers, producers, and directors from many of the stations complained in interviews about the constraints and editorial supervision of their programs from their Afghan owners, government and religious censors, and foreign backers. Their secular,

⁶ Both of these incidents were thoroughly debated and reported on most Afghan television stations.

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.

Just as Tajik TV produces laudatory features about ruling elites, several Afghan television owners have used their stations as a platform to extol their own greatness, further their careers, and aggrandize power. They produce ahistorical narratives of epic proportions that glorify their ethnic-affiliated owners. Using newsreel footage as well as interviews with their followers, these pseudo-documentaries portray sometimes ruthless individuals as larger-than-life gods or prophets who were ordained by destiny and their remarkable skills and talents to lead people to various victories or help people in dire circumstances.

Due to public backlash, I witnessed during my fieldwork that most of the ethnic stations have stopped making and airing this genre of "documentaries." They learned quickly that the broadcasting of these fictionalized films leads to debates on other television stations and therefore generates public debate about the accuracy of the information. As a result, most warlords and their affiliated television stations, preferring to shield their seedy track record and history from research and scrutiny, have stopped producing or airing such docudramas. 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 elections in 2014, many of the ethnic-specific television stations were fined for biased coverage (Khitab, 2014).

Stations that blatantly incite ethnic bias tend to be marginalized by viewers and discredited by the more reputable stations in televised debates. 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 media's influence, so that at least publicly bias and racism are no longer tolerated.

The commercially successful and nationally oriented television stations such as Tolo TV, 1TV Afghanistan, and Ariana Television Network do not engage in divisive sectarian productions. They happen also to be the most U.S.-funded and commercially successful ones. 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 not to alienate potential audiences, donors, and advertisers is not merely a lofty social justice ideal but also, simply put, a good business practice.

Cultural Imperialism

Local media owners are not the only ones who attempt to exert their hegemony through the media. Like a page out of the heated cultural imperialism debates of the 1970s, which culminated in the United States and United Kingdom leaving UNESCO, the issue of the global media dominance of a few economically wealthy countries over the rest of the world is nothing new.

As we have seen, the elites in Afghanistan and Tajikistan incite fears of cultural imperialism—the dark side of globalization—to curtail or ban foreign media imports. Via mechanisms of licensing, blocking signals, and closures, Rahmon's regime has effectively prevented most foreign media, with the big exception of Russian media, from establishing a footprint in Tajikistan. Likewise, Islamists, warlords, and tribal elders

continue to pressure the Ministry of Information and Culture to ban foreign programming—particularly Indian, Latin American, and Western media products—without much success. The opponents of foreign media claim that the influx of imports is tainting an imagined pure and monolithic indigenous culture.

The common concern among media activists and cultural critics is that distinctive heterogeneous local cultural ideas and practices are being erased, tainted, and diffused by the homogenizing force of Western capital expansion. Media studies scholars interested in transnational political economy (Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney, 2004; Schiller, 1991) have demonstrated how structural imbalances enable global media and its profits 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 and Turkish media exports are finding avid consumers all over the world (Ganti, 2004; Larkin, 2008; Yesil, 2015, 2016).

In Afghanistan and Tajikistan, are there legitimate reasons to worry about cultural imperialism from regional neighbors and the West and Russia respectively? Are foreign media imports thwarting the development of their own Tajikization and Afghanization processes? Whereas some Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan have placed strict limits on foreign content to promote a reindigenization process, postindependence, Tajikistan has not curtailed the influx of Russian media products, and Afghanistan’s television stations are awash in foreign media from all over the world.

By aggressively promoting and offering their own media products, programs, and formats, at low or no cost, the argument can be made that foreign countries are impeding the development of Afghanistan’s and Tajikistan’s media industries, artistry, and media crafts. As a result of years of war and instability, Afghan television producers cannot compete with the established media industries of India, Iran, Turkey, and the United States; nor can Tajik television producers compete with Russian media. Due to dispossession and displacement as well the destruction of their cultural institutions and the targeted killing of Afghan and Tajik media stars, personalities, and producers during the different wars, the two nations’ media industries lost tremendous talent and a well-honed tradition of production aesthetics and styles. Therefore, questions about cultural vulnerability, cultural imperialism, the role of empire, 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.

However, opponents of foreign media in both countries use the rhetoric of cultural imperialism to promote, impose, and maintain their own ideologies and autocratic rule. In the case of Islamists in Afghanistan, for example, who are staunchly opposed to the broadcasting of popular dramatic serials from India, Turkey, and Iran, this is a direct attempt to erase Afghanistan’s diverse cultural history and varied experiences with Islam and impose their own draconian brand. They worry about the cultural influences of Hinduism, secular Sunni Islam, and Shiite Islam. The large fan base of these imports finds these dramatic serials valuable and liberating in many ways, particularly in generating debates over domestic and gender issues both at home and publicly (Osman, 2011).

In Afghanistan, where the influx of foreign media is multinational, people I spoke with appreciated having access to content from around the world, both for entertainment and news purposes. Even in more autocratic media societies such as Tajikistan, labeled as “information black holes” by Reporters Without Borders, where the free flow of information is curtailed, people found various aspects of Russian media useful. Their desire for a diverse media diet does not automatically translate to opposition to Russian media.

Furthermore, while it is true that the postwar fledgling media industries of Afghanistan and Tajikistan are no match for the established powerhouse media industries of some of their neighbors and the behemoth global media of the United States and Russia, original Afghan and Tajik programs are not entirely eclipsed and overshadowed. Despite the high output and high production value of foreign programming, my interviews revealed that Afghan and Tajik viewers judge the quality of local content by its “Afghan-ness” or “Tajik-ness.” Afghan and Tajik audiences across different segments of society respond favorably to low-budget productions such as music videos, game shows, and call-in shows that speak to their own world of cultural knowledge. They can share in the poems, songs, inside jokes, and other national references of these Afghan- and Tajik-made shows. Afghanistan also airs original news and political satire programs. It is precisely the rough, homemade, sketch-like, intimate feel of certain productions, shaped by their local universe of references, that audiences truly appreciate. In other words, people want both foreign and homegrown media.

Cross-cultural media ethnographies, such as Ruth Mandel’s (2002) influential essay “A Marshall Plan of the Mind: The Political Economy of Kazakh Soap Opera,” reveal that there is not a causal relationship whereby Kazakhs were automatically indoctrinated by the British-mandated program’s mission to introduce capitalism and multiculturalism. Depending on their ideological perspective and other predispositions, everyone engages with a program differently. Yet generally speaking most people have the ability to find various aspects of foreign media useful and enjoyable and still think critically about the impact of foreign involvement and policies. Applying this notion to Afghanistan and Tajikistan, it is safe to say that American and Russian programming is not turning Afghans and Tajiks into rabid Americaphiles or Russophiles. Of course, they have an Americanizing and Russianizing effect as people become familiar with the language and culture of the sponsoring countries, but that does not impact most people’s ability to be discerning.

This does not mean that unrestricted foreign media is entirely benign. Rather, the real dangers lie in political machination and manipulation. For the imperial powers of the United States and Russia, their aid and patronage are contingent on promoting and protecting their vested geopolitical interests in the region, including their military dominance and the growth of their own economies. While the U.S. government uses the benevolent rhetoric of supporting democratic sensibilities and “winning hearts and minds,” the reality is far more complicated. Indeed, some U.S. development projects have yielded positive results, supporting the media, human rights, and other rebuilding projects. However, often these donor governments mandate the return of a large percentage of the allocated monies back to the home countries as well as extraction of wealth through mining natural resources from oil to metals and gems. As anthropologists have demonstrated, “gifts” never come without debts (Mauss, 1954). Applying this to the Eurasian context. Bruce Grant (2009) has shown how the power dynamic between Russia and its satellite Caucasus countries is one of imperialism and social control but couched under the banner of giving and altruism. The U.S. and Russian governments wield their political control over the media in order to manage public opinion and lay the

groundwork for maintaining and expanding their economic and political dominance. The egregiousness of the hand of empire comes in sharp focus in election engineering and war profiteering.

The recent presidential elections in Afghanistan and Tajikistan present an illuminating comparative case study to understand how local elites and the U.S. and Russian governments exert their economic, political, and cultural dominance and to what extent local media producers are able or unable to negotiate, resist, and contest their hegemony. Without a doubt, as confirmed by numerous international bodies, the few postindependence elections of both countries have been marked by fraud. For the former rival Cold War superpowers, the United States and Russia, managing and controlling elections to guarantee compliant proxy presidents is central to maintaining and aggrandizing their power in the region. U.S. support for Afghan presidential candidates is contingent on their support for the U.S.-led war, the longest in U.S. history, and continued maintenance and expansion of American military bases and prisons. Likewise, during Tajikistan's last elections, despite Rahmon's stronghold on power, he was able to secure Russia's backing only after his appointed parliament approved the Russian bases to remain operational until 2030 (Adinabay, 2013).

However, during the August 2009 and 2014 presidential elections, the Afghan broadcast media openly critiqued foreign interference as well as all aspects of the incumbent Ahmed Karzai's campaign, policy failures, and corruption involving him and his brothers. For example, many in the media alleged that Ahmed Karzai stopped being the U.S. favorite in the 2009 elections after his refusal to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement that would grant U.S. officials and soldiers full immunity in Afghan and international courts for acts committed on bases, in prisons, and in other facilities in Afghanistan. It is no secret that the United States has its favorites and uses various mechanisms to influence the results (Rohde & Gall, 2004). Likewise, widespread uproar on the streets and in the media occurred when a series of pre-election surveys sponsored by the U.S. embassy in Kabul were seen as manipulating the results of the first round of voting in the 2014 election (Osman, 2014).

Afghan television stations that are predominantly funded by the U.S. government are also pressured not to air footage on their news programs of violence (namely civilian casualties) perpetuated by the U.S. military.⁷ In the United States, due to the stratified nature of capitalism, news-based televisual violence is censored by the overlapping interests of the advertising industry, television executives, and the government (Osman, 2017). However, despite the restraints, Afghan television producers manage to show a variety of newsreel violence—and a lot of it. As media scholars have noted, seasoned antiwar activists know, and government officials have learned, showing the realities of war and war-related 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, warlordism.

On the other hand, in Tajikistan, criticizing the president, who is by far the Russian government's favorite candidate, other government officials, or Russian interference is a serious punishable crime. When Rahmon first came to power in 1992, he was quick to take over the state broadcasting companies and

⁷ Afghan television producers, who are overwhelmingly antiwar, told this to me under conditions of confidentiality.

simultaneously kill, exile, and imprison many oppositional media executives and political leaders (Adinabay, 2013).

With the 2013 elections, tremendous excitement was brewing on many fronts that change was on the horizon. Previously silent oppositional leaders began to speak up and build momentum for change. The prominent journalist and exiled leader of the Vatandar (National) Party, Dadajan Atavollah, launched a series of programs criticizing Rahmon's policies in Tajik on Kazakh opposition K Plus TV, which can be viewed on satellite TV and YouTube. First Rahmon blocked K Plus TV's signal. Then he blocked its website and YouTube. With hopes of winning the elections, various oppositional parties, including Atavollah's party, the Islamic Renaissance Party, and the Social Democratic Party, put aside their radically different ideologies ranging from Islamist to communist and formed the Union of Reformist Forces. They elected Aynehal Babanazarova, a woman human rights activist who worked with international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Open Society Foundation, as their nominee.

Citing a technicality in the law, the Central Election Commission threw out more than a million signatures of labor migrants and claimed that the opposition party had not collected the prerequisite number of signatures to participate in the elections. Through social media and the Internet, oppositional leaders immediately called for a nationwide boycott of the elections on the basis of their illegality on multiple counts. Yet their clamoring on digital media, mostly from exile, had absolutely no impact. In November 2013, despite serious irregularities reported by international monitors, Rahmon was "re-elected" to his fourth fraudulent term (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2014). According to the state's ridiculously inflated figures, Rahmon won 84.23% of the popular vote, with an unbelievable 90.1% turnout (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2014). "Many expected that the government's failure to fulfil its promises may potentially bring about social unrest, which in turn would have a serious impact on politics and governance" (Adinabay, 2013, p. 53). Yet the "independent" media remained silent, and not a single public protest took place anywhere in Tajikistan. "Moreover, there was little international pressure on the government, partly because Tajikistan has little influence in regional and global politics, even if a limited number of foreign election observers monitored the election" (Adinabay, 2013, p. 55). A year later, in 2015, Rahmon's regime launched a wide-reaching campaign of harassment, incarceration, and laws aimed at the Islamic Renaissance Party (also known as Islamic Rebirth or the Revival Party), which effectively shut them out of the parliamentary elections and cost them the seats they previously held.

Conclusion

Although it is a common sentiment in U.S. policy circles, it is far too simplistic to conclude that the divergent paths taken by Tajikistan and Afghanistan is due to the fact that the former is clearly still under the influence of Russia, while the latter is still under the influence of the United States.⁸ Just as scholars and media activists have often attributed the failures of the post-Soviet satellite countries to the repressive and autocratic nature of the Russian/Soviet economic and political system, Western democracy coupled with

⁸ State Department and USAID personnel, including Steven Susens, senior development outreach and communications officer, and Donald M. Bishop, director of the U.S. Embassy of Afghanistan's Public Affairs and Media Section, described this to me at the Green Zone in Kabul in January 2010.

free market capitalism, often extolled as the foundations of a functioning public sphere, has been harshly critiqued as well.

The deregulation of the media industry in the United States has had devastating consequences for freedom of speech and social movements. American political economy scholars such as Herbert Schiller, Ben Bagdikian, and Robert McChesney have been on the forefront of making crucial empirical connections between the rise of commercialization and the undoing of media and democracy in America and abroad. Bagdikian (2004) has shown that, over a relatively short time, a few corporations with the support of government elites have managed to monopolize larger and larger shares of the media market in the United States. By the mid-2000s, only five U.S.-based media conglomerates owned 90% of the United States' media and are reaching further into other markets globally. "This gives each of the five corporations and their leaders/owners more communication power than was exercised by any despot or dictatorship in history" (Bagdikian, 2004, p. 3).

Habermas (1991b) describes the historical process of commercialization of Western media in his influential work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. He explains the brief moment after feudalism when a vibrant public sphere emerged. During this utopian moment, newspapers flourished and the public sphere was actively engaged in vigorous partisan debates representing different viewpoints. According to Habermas, "This type of press can be observed especially in revolutionary periods, when papers associated with the tiniest political coalitions and groups spring up" (p. 402). However, with the rise of the market economy and its special interest groups, society was "refeudalized." The public opinion of the public sphere becomes one more commodity for sale, made possible by burgeoning public relations and political campaigning industries.

To apply the later Marxist theories of Louis Althusser (1978), modern governance involves a delicate balance of implementing mechanisms of the ideological state apparatuses and the repressive state apparatuses (pp. 142–146; 162–177). The media and communication ideological state apparatuses are understood to be especially effective in achieving hegemony over the population. Via mechanisms of "interpellation," people are unwittingly brought into the ideology of the ruling elite. Similarly, in modern warfare, as with the United States' longest war in Afghanistan, the neo-imperial army goes in with a highly mediated public relations campaign to "win hearts and minds."

Yet Vladimir Putin cannot shake off the iron fist. He was an integral figure in the former empire's system of subjecting its population to technologies of surveillance, control, and violence. The tradition of suppression of dissident, alternative, and oppositional voices and social movements through targeted killings has continued. As Russian media scholars have noted, Russia today is one of the most dangerous places for journalists and its wider citizenship (Becker, 2018; Lipman, 2018; Rollberg, 2014a, 2014b). The collapse of the Soviet Union, which is often cited as an example to illustrate the dangers of using violent means to suppress people, also demonstrates the efficacy of the Kremlin in managing and controlling its vast territory and population that stretched across Eurasia for almost a century. The long period of Sovietization, of living under an authoritarian regime, has also taken a psychological toll on Tajiks. Having suffered decades of trauma, Tajiks more readily acquiesce to a real or imagined power of the state. The fear of violence is just as compelling and strong as actual violence.

Hence, while the Arab world, Iran, Turkey, the United States, and Afghanistan have had their shares of populist unrest, insurrections, uprisings, and movements in the last decade, the attempts to protest in Russia and its federation, including in Tajikistan, have been met with much more severe and violent means of suppression. That is why, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan's 2005 Tulip Revolution, there has been no equivalent Central Asian Spring. The former Soviet republics are continuing to experience an unrelenting long Central Asian Winter.

The repressive mechanisms, while also strong within the U.S. government, are relatively weak within the Afghan government. This is not to say that Afghan media professionals do not experience violence but rather that the state is weak and the threats are diffuse and not only government-mandated. More importantly, just as attacks come from different groups, multiple organizations, including local and international media watchdog groups, can challenge state and nonstate violence. Many of the proponents of media independence in Afghanistan who train and support journalists' rights as well as monitor and lobby for the media more broadly are nongovernmental organizations funded by the United States, despite continued suppression of media freedoms, journalists, and whistleblowers on the home front in the United States. Additionally, the U.S. market is one of the toughest countries for new broadcast, cable, and satellite television companies to enter due to the strength of corporate lobbies and the Federal Communications Commission's consistent protection of their monopoly interests. For example, Al Jazeera, despite having established itself throughout Europe and the rest of the world and despite having the start-up capital, had to fight numerous legal and corporate battles in its largely failed attempt to gain entry to the American market (Youmans, 2017).

It is not surprising that in the World Press Freedom Index from Reporters Without Borders, the U.S. ranking has been on a general decline since 2010, falling from 33 to 45 out of 180 countries in 2018. Yet the Russian Federation's ranking is abysmally lower, at number 148. Although the American commercial model is in many ways just as degenerative and repressive as the Russian authoritarian model, the situation in Russia is, without a doubt, substantially direr. In fact, according to Reporters Without Borders's latest regional report, two-thirds of the post-Soviet countries ranked 150 or lower in the index, with scores that continue to plummet. According to the same report, the "eternal despots" in the region are intensifying their brutal hold on power, identifying Tajikistan (150th), Belarus (157th), Kazakhstan (160th), Azerbaijan (163rd), Uzbekistan (166th), and Turkmenistan (178th) as the worst (for the full report, see "2015: Another turn of the screw," 2015).

The saving grace for Afghanistan (120th) is that the model of development that is being deployed is a multilateral development model in which resources and funding are dispersed from the international donor community, thereby making it more akin to the public interest model. There is a direct correlation between the amount and diversity of international resources that are being funneled into the Afghan media sector and the diversity and plurality of media. The fact that Afghanistan is not unilaterally under the influence of U.S. aid is precisely why Afghanistan has not yet fallen down the slippery slope of commercialization, and its media world remains vibrant and viable, albeit fragile.

In Afghanistan, an artificially inflated media market more akin to the public service model than the commercial model is the cause of this vibrancy in media. In this competitive arena, for television

broadcasters to appear to address only their own group or, worse yet, foreign interests is sociopolitical and economic suicide in the eyes of national advertisers and broad-based international donor campaigns that seek to reach wide audiences. They need to fill the most air space with the cheapest programs that reach the widest audiences in order to attract 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. And being biased and propagandistic is not good for either. It just so happens that regulated capitalism, where competition is fair and new entrants are able to enter the media market, is mutually constitutive with democracy.

Charmaine Anderson, director of Internews Afghanistan, explains, "The true test for Afghanistan will depend on what happens once the international community pulls out and which media outlets will be able to survive independently" (personal interview, January 2014). When asked about the future of media and democracy in Tajikistan, my contact at Internews Tajikistan states, "We have had a few so-called golden eras, during perestroika, post-9/11, and the last election. At these moments there was international aid and attention but they were brief. Therefore, no change from the status quo came from them" (personal interview, January 2017). At this critical juncture when war and instability continue to plague the region, the international community must renew its commitments to support Tajikistan's nation-building and development projects, especially the media, and continue its support of Afghanistan. Otherwise, as long as Tajikistan remains solely under the purview of Russian influence, its media environment will remain repressive and statist. Likewise, without international support, Afghanistan's vibrant media infrastructure will collapse. If media outlets affiliated with warlords, Islamists, corporate and military interests, or other political elites are the only ones to remain open, Afghanistan could veer toward an autocratic media environment.

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