

Promoting independent broadcast media in Afghanistan

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independence

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Afghanistan remains one of the world's least developed countries.

The media have fared better than most sectors since the collapse of the Taliban regime in October 2001. Aid from abroad has come in the form of new equipment, programming and training.

Afghan officials and donors estimate that the government will need at least \$10bn over the next five years to rebuild the country's shattered infrastructure and develop an economy that can sustain its people.

Rebuilding the media, broadcast media in particular, is viewed as crucial to the process of national reconstruction in Afghanistan.

Broadcasts

Radio Afghanistan has resumed nationwide broadcasting and is eager to relaunch foreign broadcasts. But the country is still without a national TV service because both Afghan radio and TV are still in dire need of technical assistance from donor countries.

Afghanistan TV broadcasts in Kabul with a limited range, for five to six hours a day. In the provincial capitals, local radio and TV stations operate.

Foreign aid

Foreign broadcasters from a dozen countries have provided millions of dollars of equipment, programming and training. Since 2001, broadcasters either launched new services or stepped up existing broadcasts in Dari and Pashto.

The US has supplied two FM transmitters for Kabul, with more FM transmitters promised for other cities including Kandahar, Mazar-e Sharif and Herat, and is to install two MW transmitters with nationwide reach. The US has also donated a 1-kW TV transmitter to Afghanistan TV, which will extend its reception range to almost 70 km from the capital. The US Agency for International Development is also supplying equipment for educational programmes.

Japan will fund a new TV transmitter near Kabul as a step towards the resumption of a nationwide TV service.

The BBC World Service Trust, with the help of a €1.6m grant from the UK government's Department for International Development, has provided equipment to Radio-TV Afghanistan, trained more than 350 journalists in Kabul and the regions, and is working with the Afghan administration to assess future needs and the foundations for a regulatory framework for the media.

Iran has also been closely involved with the rebuilding of Afghanistan's broadcasting infrastructure, donating radio and TV equipment including a 50-kW radio transmitter and increasing Dari and Pashto programming on Iranian regional radio.

New services

In February 2002, a daily morning programme *Good Morning Afghanistan* went on the air from Kabul on Radio Afghanistan. The broadcasts are supported by the Baltic Media Centre, an aid agency based in Denmark, with financial support from the European Commission. In August 2002,

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broadcast media

Germany launched the Voice of Freedom FM station, which broadcasts news, music and language courses to Kabul from a nearby German military camp.

Deutsche Welle has supplied technical and programme assistance to Radio-TV Afghanistan. It also produces a 10-minute daily news slot for Afghan TV, as well as weekly documentaries. In April 2003, Kandahar TV received a 3.6-metre satellite dish and receiving equipment from Deutsche Welle, following a similar package for Kabul TV in 2002.

In Kabul, radio stations on the air include: Radio Afghanistan (national broadcaster); Radio Kabul, the “Good Morning Afghanistan” programme; BBC World Service (English, Dari and Pashto), Radio Free Afghanistan/Voice of America (Dari and Pashto), Radio France Internationale (RFI, English, French and Persian), all on FM; the US-run Information Radio (which transmits from the US base at Bagram in Dari and Pashto on MW and SW); and Voice of Freedom, a German army-run FM station (Dari, Pashtu).

Another service for listeners in Afghanistan is Nawa-e Dost (“Sound of a Friend”), which was inaugurated in October 2001. It is broadcast via



Solar-powered BBC World Service transmitter in Bamian

Radio Pakistan’s 300-kW medium-wave transmitter in Peshawar.

Eighty-two per cent of Afghans surveyed in Kabul listen to BBC World Service broadcasts in Persian and Pashto every week, according to the first media survey in that country since the Taliban left power in 2001. The survey gave the following estimated audience share figures: BBC – 82%; VOA and RFE/RL Radio Free Afghanistan combined service – 81%; Deutsche Welle – 41%; Radio Pakistan – 49%; Tehran Radio – 48%; All India Radio – 40%.

The BBC is also helping to promote dialogue among Afghans, for instance by producing educational radio programmes (via distance learning) and weekly teacher training radio programmes.

In the run-up to the elections in June 2004, the BBC will produce radio programmes to create an understanding among listeners of the election process and timetable and the actual mechanics of how they cast their vote.

Meanwhile Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, the US-funded

network, is running a six-month radio journalism programme to train young Afghan broadcasters.

In August 2002 the Dari and Pashto services of the Voice of America (VOA) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Radio Free Afghanistan service combined to create a new joint 24-hour stream of news, features and music in local languages.

Communities

Voice of Afghan Women commenced broadcasting on FM on International Women's Day, 8 March. Financed by UNESCO and a French non-governmental organization, it focuses on education and practical information. It broadcasts for one

hour a day in the evening in Kabul. It plans to set up branch stations across Afghanistan to broadcast its programmes on MW. In a society where it is estimated that at least 85% of women are illiterate, radio is an important medium.

UNESCO has supplied an FM station to Kabul University's Faculty of Journalism. Transmissions are expected to get under way shortly.

The two radios are the first new community stations to be established in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban regime.

An FM radio station staffed by women and targeted at a female audience was launched in Mazar-e

Sharif on 9 March and will broadcast for two hours a day. Afghan Independent Radio (AIR) is to be launched later this year. It will be the first independent radio station to be based in the former Taliban stronghold of Kandahar in southern Afghanistan. The project is funded by the Carr Foundation and the Open Society Institute (OSI).

Censorship

A press freedom bill was adopted in April 2002, ending years of censorship and a ban on free speech under the Taliban. However, there is concern that the bill requires that media owners seek permission from the government to operate, and stipulates that only citizens of



RADIO-TV AFGHANISTAN –
 RADIO KABUL – “GOOD MORNING
 AFGHANISTAN” – BBC WORLD SERVICE –
 RADIO FREE AFGHANISTAN/VOICE OF
 AMERICA – RADIO FRANCE
 INTERNATIONALE – INFORMATION
 RADIO – VOICE OF FREEDOM – NAWA-E
 DOST – RADIO PAKISTAN – DEUTSCHE
 WELLE – TEHRAN RADIO – ALL INDIA
 RADIO – RADIO FREE EUROPE/RADIO
 LIBERTY – VOICE OF AFGHAN WOMEN –
 AFGHAN INDEPENDENT RADIO

Afghanistan may print publications, which could leave local outlets too weak to withstand potential government pressure.

The public

Increasing numbers of urban Afghans have bought television sets and satellite dishes in the last year, but these remain beyond the budget of most ordinary Afghans.

After 23 years of war and the Taliban government, audiences say that they would rather hear and watch programmes that entertain and educate them, instead of endless coverage of the comings and goings of politicians.

For those who can afford them, there are alternative sources of news and entertainment in the form of satellite TV and radio programmes.

But the lack of private domestic radio and TV stations in Afghanistan means there is virtually no competition pushing state media outlets to respond to viewer demands.

Interference?

Recently, the press in Kabul have carried articles criticizing the Ministry of Information and Culture for allowing the installation of foreign radio relays by the BBC, Voice of America and Radio France Internationale on Afghan soil.

In January this year cable TV was banned by the most senior judge, saying it was against Islam, a decision reminiscent of the Taliban regime.

But last April, cable TV networks resumed broadcasting, in what can be seen as a victory for the more liberal elements in President Karzai's government.

Cable TV is cheaper and easier for people to watch news, music and

international movie channels. However, cable TV channel viewers across Afghanistan may not exceed 100,000 people.

Some Afghan papers commented that the banning or otherwise of foreign TV is a minor problem in the context of the huge difficulties faced by Afghanistan.

Media analysts say the disputes also illustrate broader questions of how to balance political coverage in a country with a divided post-war leadership, and how fast to introduce secular culture to a religiously conservative society.

Challenges

The possibility of a return of instability across Afghanistan, especially in the south and east, is growing. This will impact on reconstruction and could lead the aid and donor community to pull back in all fields, including the media. Donors want accountable and appropriate expenditure.

The extreme and strict interpretation of Islamic law, or shari'ah, is still continuing in the post-Taliban era. One of the key figures in the Justice Ministry, Mawlawee Miranshah, stated that the new Voice of Afghan Women radio station is against the shari'ah.

Another indication of the ongoing power struggle between conservatives and secular moderates or progressives in the transitional authority is that the official ban on singing on state television and radio has remained in place.

The main challenges in developing the media in Afghanistan are:

- how to promote an independent public broadcasting system, representative of the whole society, established on a legal footing and not just appointed

- by the Information Ministry;
- how to promote independent, pluralistic private media;
- funding problems; lack of a national advertising market;
- problems of a lack of technology;
- the need for an improved press law;
- the media's role in promoting nation building, making government and the public sector transparent and accessible;
- the media's role in providing a platform for public discussion.

Most Afghan officials remain confident that the country is making progress in encouraging an independent media. However, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan sounded a note of caution on 8 May when it noted that threats against Afghan journalists had increased in the previous two months.

Human Rights Watch, the New York-based NGO, is concerned about "a pervasive climate of fear in which journalists are afraid to openly publish articles that criticise leaders".