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I

On Media, Social Movements, and Uprisings: Lessons from Afghanistan, Its Neighbors, and Beyond

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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. Dozens of new television and radio stations, hundreds of publications, and

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a fledgling movie industry and Internet infrastructure have emerged, with funding from sources foreign and domestic, public and private. Debates about women's rights, democracy, modernity, and Islam have become part of the fabric of local and international development efforts to "nation-build." The medium at the heart of the most public and politically charged of these debates, instigating often violent cultural contestations and clashes, is television.

Often, at conferences and other venues, though, I am asked: Why television? Why not study the Afghan film industry, radio, Internet, or print media? They all seem valuable objects of study. I am also frequently reminded that in the Iranian Green Movement and the Arab Spring, social media and the Internet played a determining role in energizing and uniting the public into massive social movements (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010; Elyachar 2013; Fahmy 2013). However, this has not been the case in Afghanistan. Given high illiteracy rates and the relatively slow development of broadband and cable infrastructure, the promise of the digital age has only partially arrived in Afghanistan. While the Internet reaches over 50 percent of the population in Iran, only 5 percent of the Afghan population—primarily university students and social elites—has any access to the Internet.¹ By contrast, the broadcast media of television and radio have grown exponentially and reach large segments of the population. Television, then, provides an ideal way to study popular movements, collective action, self-representation, and people's agency (see Osman 2012), directing the global dialogue about Afghanistan back to local Afghans themselves.

In this brief essay, which is part of a larger book project, I argue against a media- or technological-determinist approach to studying social movements: in complex, repressive, and/or rapidly shifting political environments, the utility of particular media for reform and activism varies both with the sociopolitical conditions and with media users' and producers' ingenuity in deploying traditional and new media. Simultaneously, I argue that in Afghanistan, television performs a counterhegemonic function in at least two crucial arenas. First, as an institution, it enables local Afghans to talk back to the international community, which has Afghanistan in its purview of influence. Second, television allows producers to act as local reformers, presenting indigenous modernities and cultural practices that challenge local conservative groups that have aggrandized their power base as a result of three decades of war. The costs of such challenges, how-

¹ See Internet World Stats, Usage and Population Stats at <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>.

ever, are very high for all media makers, but especially for women. Visibility itself has proven to be deadly for women working on-screen.

The gender wars in Afghanistan

To understand why the tele-presence of women has become particularly problematic for extremist groups, it is important to consider recent gender history. In Afghanistan—as elsewhere—gendered contestations play a central role in attempts to define national, cultural, and social identities. This is especially the case if women appear in the public sphere or as public figures in the media. Yet in Afghanistan the stakes are much higher. More than three decades of war have fostered a special culture of violence and impunity, and the rise of fanatical misogynist conservatism in the name of religion and culture. The roots of this dystopian phenomenon are intricately embedded in the politics of the Cold War and the War on Terror.

The latest gender war began with the Soviet invasion in 1979, when the CIA clandestinely funded and armed some of the most conservative elements of the Afghan population, including the predecessors of the Taliban. As the Taliban consolidated power in the mid-1990s, international feminist organizations began to take note and clamor on behalf of Afghan women. Yet it took the events of 9/11 and the War on Terror for Afghan women to reach the mainstream Western spotlight in popular culture, evident in the proliferation of media such as fiction films, television programs, documentaries, books, and news that focused on their plight under repressive Islamic regimes.

Tapping into the vast repertoire of imagery from the era of colonialism, claims about saving Afghan women were used to justify a military assault on the Taliban and Al Qaeda. In keeping with the rhetoric of masculinist protection (Young 2003), the pretext of saving Afghan women added to the already-thundering beat of the war drum calling for the United States to avenge the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

Feminist scholars from a variety of disciplines have criticized the overwhelming portrayal of Afghan women as victims, a portrayal that failed to account for their actual or potential agency (Abu-Lughod 2002; Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002). Building on the work of these scholars, I have argued that through a complex process of spectacling, Afghan women have become Afghan Women, a singular passive entity that conforms to stereotypes of women under Islam, which have gained new currency since 9/11 (Osman 2005). Instead of giving Afghan women a podium from which to speak, this double-crossing discourse took what was left of Afghan wom-

en's agency in order to aggrandize the power of so-called expert individuals and organizations, both governmental and nongovernmental.

Due to their lack of cultural access, even transnational feminist organizations that genuinely sought to help directed their attention to and gathered their information from the same few websites of Afghan women's organizations that were available in English.² This overreliance on digital media created a very narrow cross-cultural bridge with limited scopic views, thereby contributing to the proliferation of Afghan Women as a hollowed out or, indeed, empty signifier that circulated widely online and offline. Their silent overexposure made Afghan Women a joke, a caricature that was mocked and ridiculed in satirical exposés in magazines and videos, in genres ranging from comedy to pornography.

As this powerful imagery ricochets globally, Afghan institutions are forced to talk back to the global circulation of Afghan Women. Ultraright tribal and religious institutions have chosen to talk back with decrees that call for violence, or with actual violence. For the Taliban and other extremist groups, Afghan women have become an even more contentious symbol of nationhood, and a new site for jihad against infidels, including local Afghan reformers. A host of issues, including the chador or veiling; purdah; dancing, singing, and other artistic expressions; and the expression of female (and, to a lesser extent, male) sexuality more generally—all of which were becoming nonissues before the successive wars—have become highly politicized and volatile. More than a decade after 9/11, this gender war is still going strong. The talking back has taken on more and more frighteningly violent forms of expression.³ Yet while discourse pertaining to gender in Islamic countries has been reverberating globally, little attention has been given to the cultural productions that constitute contested claims of identity and gender subjectivity in the daily lives of local people, especially in Afghanistan (Scott 2002).

² After 9/11 Western feminist groups predominantly cited and showcased the work of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA). While RAWA has played a significant role in the Afghan women's rights movement, including secretly smuggling videos of the Taliban's oppression of women out of Afghanistan during media black-outs, they are one of many Afghan women's organizations. Additionally, their standing within Afghanistan is contentious and complicated for a variety of reasons.

³ The recent case of Malala Yousafzai, which is receiving worldwide attention, is one example of this. While she is technically Pakistani, there are strong cross-border connections between people in the region. This is because during the First Anglo-Afghan War, the British redrew the border to make a large part of what had been Afghanistan, including the Swat Valley where Malala is from, a part of what was then British India. The border, which has never been accepted by Afghans, is regarded as porous on both sides.

New media, old media: A comparative analysis

In understanding the effectiveness of the use of media for self-presentation, collective action, and social movements, the determining factors include the degree of state authoritarianism, the state's mechanisms of censorship and enforcement, and the economic disparities that exist between and within nations. The contrast between Afghanistan and its neighbors is one striking example of nations with completely different media development.

Broadcast media, which have been conceived as hegemonic, are proving to be counterhegemonic in Afghanistan. That television is broadcast nationally and simultaneously, that it is viewed in groups within large household structures, and that it is relatively accessible and popular are qualities that have made it a particularly 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. No wonder, then, that hopes and fears about the future of Afghanistan, expressed by everyone from media executives to government officials, religious leaders, and international governmental and nongovernmental consultants, are being funneled into this medium.

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

With over three dozen new free terrestrial television stations and counting, Afghanistan can boast that it offers viewers more choices for programming than many developing or even developed countries. After all, this is the basic formula of Jürgen Habermas's ([1962] 1991) theory of the public sphere; more free channels equals more sources for the dissemination of information, which equals more competition and hence the creation of a marketplace of debate and ideas. Applying for a license and getting registration for a new broadcast television station that is not affiliated with the state is nearly impossible, on the other hand, in neighboring Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Iran, China, and Pakistan. For example, Tajikistan has only five broadcast television stations, which are all state run and still under the purview of Russian control. Iran has six to eight broadcast televi-

sion stations at any one time, all controlled by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting. If the public sphere depends on freedom, and that depends on having an alternative to state-run television, Afghanistan is certainly far ahead of its neighbors. At the same time, the Afghan government frequently tries to ban television programming.

In the case of Iran, experts continue to cite social media as the exemplary medium of the people—this despite new research that demonstrates that the revolutionary rhetoric ascribed to digital media was exaggerated and that social media has come under increasingly effective regimes of censorship (Wojcieszak, Smith, and Enayat 2011–12).⁴ In the aftermath of the Green Movement, the state-sanctioned Basij have been targeting people who are being “oppositional” online.⁵ The government also slows down Internet speed, making it impossibly slow during politically sensitive moments, especially in Tehran.⁶ Iranians have been forced to turn to mobile telephone technologies, which in turn have also come under surveillance, thereby leading people back to older media or smaller media such as graffiti, CDs, DVDs, and video CDs (Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994; Sreberny and Khiabany 2010). To evade the censors and to reach different audiences, many of the television employees in Afghanistan also work across media platforms; when they produce a segment for a television program, depending on their message, they often repackage it for multiple other mediums. Even the Taliban have moved beyond using just their Sharia Radio. They have recently tapped into mobile telephone technology and DVD production to disseminate their messages.

Initial excitement about the liberatory potential of public uprisings and the reclaiming of public spaces has also been subdued by subsequent government crackdowns. From Gezi Park to Occupy Wall Street to Tahrir Square, we are witnessing rapid and often violent government raids on protesters and takeovers of public spaces. In Tehran, too, the Iranian government has been deploying new urban planning strategies to control public space and to disperse people to prevent massive protests.

⁴ In the Egyptian context, scholars have provided ample evidence of Western manipulation and involvement through funding and training both pro-Western political figures and networks of cyber activists, which is not to undermine the agency and power of the people in the Tahrir Square uprisings (Ramadan 2012).

⁵ The Basij is a government-funded and -recruited volunteer force that polices “dissidents” (defined broadly) in the Islamic Republic of Iran. They are authorized to use many tactics, including organized violence.

⁶ Even during the Green Movement, new research by the Iran Media Program demonstrates, the revolutionary rhetoric ascribed to digital media, especially Twitter, has been exaggerated (Wojcieszak, Smith, and Enayat 2011–12; Wojcieszak and Smith 2014).

In Afghanistan, on the other hand, the new post-9/11 government is relatively weak, and spaces for public gathering are plentiful. Therefore, public protest is proving to be a powerful social force. During my fieldwork, I witnessed a range of uprisings, riots, and protests over incidences of Quran burning, civilian casualties, deaths of journalists, student tuition hikes at Kabul University, and the banning of popular television programs, among other issues.⁷ 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 devolving into riots, they have to at least make rhetorical gestures to appease the public and acknowledge grievances that have become sites for mass mobilization. This has proven to be especially successful with protests over the banning of popular television programs, since programs are often reinstated. Thus, the combined power of public space and broadcast media is a very effective social tool for collective action in Afghanistan.

Although vibrant and productive, public space is also fraught and exclusionary. At protests in Afghanistan against the problematic Iranian Shiite Marriage Law (otherwise known as the Rape Law), for example, I witnessed women protesters being attacked by radicalized youth from the massive mosques that Iran has built and funded. As news of these attacks spread, fewer women and girls attended subsequent protests. Under such dire circumstances, social media became a more democratic and inclusionary sphere. Similarly, when Afghan government officials refused to investigate the deaths of female journalists and television personalities, local college students and voices from the Afghan diaspora demanded justice via Facebook fan pages as well as blogs, which afforded the safety of anonymity and distance but do not constitute a public sphere in Afghanistan.

The transformative and repressive potential of different media changes dramatically across different sites of research and depends heavily on the sociopolitical and economic realities of the region of study as well as on the ability of media users and producers to learn, adapt, and work across platforms in order to stay ahead of repressive policies. Media scholars and cultural commentators who passionately extol one medium or, conversely, who blast and attack another, fail to take into account the disparities in

⁷ I conducted a total of eighteen months of fieldwork in Tajikistan, Pakistan, India, Turkey, and Afghanistan, including a full 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. Transcripts of all interviews are on file with the author.

access, media laws, and regimes of censorship that exist between and within nations; these factors determine media usage and (in)effectiveness, not the specific characteristics of a given medium.

Beyond critique: Constituting subjectivity and locating agency

It is within this extremely dangerous arena that brave Afghan reformers, both women and men, are challenging oppressive forces to reclaim a more just culture. Yet it is the televisual representations of women, especially Afghan women, and women's rights that have instigated the Islamists and other extremists the most. Thus, it is particularly daring for Afghan women to work on-screen in television. Oftentimes their decision to work on-screen in television, though, is determined as much by their socioeconomic predicaments as by their courage to stand up for women's rights, artistic freedom, and other issues.

Roya Sadat is a writer for Afghanistan's first dramatic serial, *Raazab En Khana* (Secrets of this house), produced by Tolo TV. Tolo TV, one of Afghanistan's most popular and controversial stations, also happens to be one of the biggest recipients of USAID money (Altai Consulting 2010, 146; Auletta 2010; Rubin 2010). Sadat explains how difficult it was for the production team to find any actresses for the program. After holding several auditions where only men showed up, they began to solicit in poor neighborhoods of Kabul. In fact, most of the female actresses on the serial took the job not because they had a desire to act or to be stars but out of economic desperation. Since the program aired, at least two of the actresses of *Raazab En Khana* have been forced to escape to other countries due to threats of violence.⁸

In May 2005, Shaima Rezayee, the twenty-four-year-old host of a popular music video call-in show called *Hop* (also broadcast on Tolo TV), was shot in the head and killed in her own home in Kabul. In May 2007, Shakiba Sanga Amaj, the popular twenty-two-year-old presenter and reporter for Shamshad TV, was shot and killed by a gunman, also in her own home in Kabul. Less than a week later, Zakia Zaki, the manager of a radio station in the Parwan Province ironically called *Sadah-i-Sulh*, or Voice of Peace, was shot and killed by seven gunmen who entered her home. These are just a few of the more publicized cases of the many media-related crimes and murders in Afghanistan. Nai, an Afghanistan-based journalist watchdog group supported by Internews/USAID, has

⁸ Interview with Sadat, Kabul, September 2009.

been documenting a rise in acts of violence and murders perpetrated against media makers, including news anchors, singers, and actors.⁹

Raheem Samandar, head of the Afghan Union of Journalists, said that Zaki and Amaj had contacted the union to report threats from warlords.¹⁰ However, Afghan authorities are quick to categorize and dismiss most of these cases as *quatlay namus*, which roughly translates as “honor killings,” because they apparently brought shame to their families. No arrests are made and no one is prosecuted in most of these cases, including the ones mentioned. As brave as these female media personalities and journalists are, their low socioeconomic status, despite their high profile, leaves them vulnerable to abuse and death.

It is difficult to ascertain whether these murders were honor killings, particularly because the label may be invoked to allow the authorities to evade responsibility. Claiming that private family matters fall outside their jurisdiction, law enforcement authorities absolve themselves of the dangerous responsibility of finding the real culprits for politically motivated murders. The cultural understanding that the state will not actively intervene in private matters also allows family members to elude scrutiny if they are involved in the murder of their female relative. If the families were not involved and are outraged (as is true of most cases), they can still be pressured by the murderers into taking responsibility. Subsuming the murder of a female journalist or television personality under the rubric of honor killing deflects from larger political truths, forces, and problems that the victims were trying to expose.

The owners of television stations have also been quick to absolve themselves of any responsibility for the murders of their female employees. Both Fazel Karim Fazel, the owner of Shamshad TV, and Saad Mohseni, one of the sibling owners of Tolo TV, have insisted that the deaths of Amaj and Rezayee were family or personal affairs.¹¹ Surprisingly, the Committee to Protect Journalists includes only Zaki on its list of “Journalists Murdered in Afghanistan,” stating that by its criteria, Rezayee was not a journalist and Amaj’s murder was personally motivated.¹²

⁹ Nai has comprehensive statistics on many aspects of the incidence of violence and has recently launched an online data-mapping project, tracking the last ten years of free media in Afghanistan: <http://data.nai.org.af>.

¹⁰ Interview with Samandar, Kabul, January 2010.

¹¹ Interviews with Fazel and Sekander Saleh, Moseni’s assistant, Kabul, November 2009.

¹² This information was imparted to me in a series of e-mail correspondences with Madeline Earp, senior researcher, and Bob Dietz, program coordinator of the Committee to Protect Journalists’ Asia Bureau, in October 2011. See the “Journalists Murdered in Afghanistan” site at <https://www.cpj.org/killed/asia/afghanistan/murder.php>.

Havana Marking, the British director of the award-winning documentary *Afghan Star* and its sequel *A Fallen Star*, which were produced by Tolo TV and aired on HBO, stated that Tolo TV is not invested in what happens to reality-show contestants once they leave their shows (Marking, Edwards, and Osman 2011). The documentaries follow the lives of contestants on the popular Tolo TV-produced Afghan reality series *Afghan Star*, which is based on the *American Idol* and *Pop Idol* format. Ghulam Husain Daifoladi, the program director of the semireligious private television station Negah, asked, “Tell me what has *Afghan Star* done for Afghan women? Who has really profited from such programs? Has it really elevated the position of women in our society or even elevated the discussion?” He went on to explain how, in this highly politicized gender environment, “women have become a project for many television stations to seek international funding, or worse, to raise the stakes and create sensationalism for the sake of advertising money.”¹³

Anyone who is familiar with Afghan history knows that the long struggle for women’s rights (and sexuality) has been an ongoing battle between modernist state policies and the more restrictive and repressive interpretations of Islamic and tribal laws.¹⁴ As a result of the latter, women’s lives and bodies have been under the jurisdiction and regulations of tribal and religious elders and have historically been relegated to the private sphere.

In this respect, contrary to Daifoladi and other critics of Tolo TV, the representations of Afghan women in programs such as *Afghan Star* serve multiple functions. Because the women of *Afghan Star* and other shows are public figures, when they face violence, it brings attention to and encourages debate about these issues through television. Ordinarily, such incidents would be considered a private matter and brushed under the proverbial Afghan carpet in a small village, and nobody would know about them. Although this is a moot point for the grieving families of the media martyrs, in this respect the deaths of female television personalities were not completely in vain.

Numerous public service announcements aimed at promoting women’s rights have also found a home on almost every Afghan television station. They are often funded by international humanitarian and donor organizations such as UN Women in conjunction with Afghan government offices such as the Ministry of Women’s Affairs. The subject matters range

¹³ Interview with Daifoladi, Kabul, March 2010.

¹⁴ See Gregorian ([1969] 2014), Poullada (1972), Adamec (1974), Majrooh (1989), and Nawid (2000).

from encouraging women to join the police force to addressing more complicated cultural phenomena such as honor killings and *baad* exchange.¹⁵

Yet it is precisely for the same reasons that I also believe Daifoladi raises important questions. Beyond stirring up cultural contestations, television also has the ability (if not the responsibility) to raise awareness about the violence that ensues from such controversies instead of shying away from it as many media outlets do. In addition, if one of the goals of a television station really is to improve the position and status of Afghan women, as many television owners who are vying for international aid claim, their internal policies should reflect that. In other words, what safeguards does the station have in place to ensure women's safety both in the workplace and outside it? Does their programming include diverse representations of Afghan women, beyond the typical depictions of them singing and dancing? And demographically speaking, how many Afghan women, both on- and offscreen, does the station employ?

Conclusion

High-level media personnel and wealthy media owners, who are often prominent public figures such as politicians, warlords and drug lords, religious leaders, and businessmen, hire bodyguards and live behind gated mansion fortresses while low-level television personalities and reporters are subjected to threats, physical attacks, and death for providing people with programming that they want to watch and that gives them a platform to raise their voices. These low-level employees—not the owners of television stations—take on the risks associated with developing media independence by exposing warlords' abuses of power, by critiquing foreign powers and the national government, and by airing diverse televisual representations of lifestyles, cultures, and gender and sexuality. Their secular, nationalist, and reformist agendas are sometimes at odds with both the owners of the television stations they work for and the foreign governments that are the patrons of the stations.

¹⁵ In *baad*, women and girls are used to resolve blood feuds. According to the most recent Asia Foundation survey, even though the practice is illegal in the Afghan constitution and considered un-Islamic, most Afghans still prefer the often problematic and informal tribal systems of justice because the court system has no legitimacy (Asia Foundation 2013, 86). Like most infrastructure efforts, the corrupt and almost defunct justice system has proven ineffectual in serving justice. Hence, people have more faith in the tribal systems' reciprocal, "equal" exchange to remedy crimes, even if that means offering girls and women in marriage to appease the relatives of murder victims. But this is also the consequence of the ultraconservative values that characterize Afghanistan's thriving warlordism.

The International Security Assistance Force, NATO, and American forces try to protect telecommunication towers from the Taliban by either placing them within the compound walls of their military bases or having soldiers guard them. It is time to also protect the flesh-and-blood people who run the one institution with the most democratic potential. Television owners, the Afghan government, and the international community must be held accountable for the safety of Afghan journalists, presenters, singers, and actresses. This is not only a problem of personal safety; the future of independent media in Afghanistan depends on it. Currently, self-censorship is becoming more and more prevalent among media makers. The past decade has seen a Foucauldian turn to self-discipline as a means of appeasing elites. Once the venues for mass communication and mediation are controlled and censored by direct force and by fear and intimidation, cultural debates will cease.

As problematic as the international community's involvement might be, development aid should not be contingent on whether the US military pulls out or continues to have a presence in Afghanistan. At this critical juncture in the tangled history of Afghan-US relations, daunting though the task may seem, the US-led international community must not once again abandon the country's nation-building and development projects, especially the media. Mending the "broken," "collapsed," and "failed" nation of Afghanistan can only happen through the presence of a mass venue for healing and purging, remembering and forgetting, debating and imagining.¹⁶ For that, depending on whom you ask, there is no better or worse medium than television.

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¹⁶ In development circles and in political science terminology, Afghanistan is frequently described as a "failed," "broken," "fragmented," or "collapsed" nation (Rubin 2002; Ghani and Lockhart 2008), 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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Missing in Action: Gender in Canada's Digital Economy Agenda

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Global public interest advocates have hailed Canada, which has been developing federal policy and programs to increase citizens' Internet access since the 1990s, as an early promoter of online gender equity. But twenty years later, market fundamentalism and a retreat from the pub-

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