

What if the Kabubble bursts?

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Self-censorship and political pressures make Afghanistan journalism hazardous. And peace may not improve matters, say the pundits

In the publisher's office there is a framed poster of Edvard Munch's most famous painting, *The Scream*, with its menacing swirls of colour and sense of overwhelming doom and despair. Its position on the otherwise bare walls in an ice-cold house may only be a coincidence but it is probably also an apt summary of Afghanistan's political situation, which is fairly bleak. The media landscape, by contrast, seems to be somewhat more positive – vibrant and fairly robust. It remains one of Afghanistan's few success stories, but the shadow of a potential reconciliation with the Taliban lurks in the background, as does the threat of censorship self-imposed by journalists worried about reprisals and government interference.

Sanjar Sohail is the publisher of *Hasbt-e Sobh*, which translates as *8am*, a daily newspaper targeted at Kabul's educated elite, its business community, NGOs and the literati. While the press in Afghanistan is freer than most of its regional neighbours (apart from India), Sohail believes that Hamid Karzai's government has turned away from its original ideals. It has instead embraced tribal leaders and mullahs to try to garner credibility with the Taliban faithful in the hope of eventually bringing them to the table for peace talks, abandoning the concerns of liberal Afghans in the process.

"We know if the Taliban come back there will be no independent media," says Sohail, "but the Taliban are perhaps not as strong as we think. When the NATO forces first came in, the government of Afghanistan and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) didn't have a strategy. It was very difficult to get an Afghan official on the phone or to meet face to face. It

was typical Soviet behaviour, which is where most had learned their trade. This has changed, but ISAF still publishes a weekly paper called *Voice of Freedom*, printing almost 500,000 copies in three languages – Dari, Pashto and English. You can buy this paper by the kilo in the bazaar and people use it to wrap their meat or bread. But it impacts on our job. We are trying to give people the truth but often they think we are lying because of all that propaganda. What we need is a more responsible media.”

The Afghan media broadly break down into three categories: political, private and state-owned. The political media, especially TV and radio, are mostly owned by government supporters, provincial political-military powers, private proprietors – some foreign – and NGO sponsors. Many of those TV stations broadcast religious programmes and attempt to refocus public opinion. “Many of these people,” says Sohail, “claim that they are heroes because they say fighting the Soviets was a holy war. They have their political interests and their blacklists, too – some of them won’t interview me.” “These outlets,” says a lawyer and journalist who prefers not to be named, “broadcast that the other stations are un-Islamic, which is most negative.”

Little transparency over funding

The private, or commercial, media include Tolo TV, which started with funding from the United States Agency for International Development. When it first started Tolo offered what then was revolutionary programming in Afghanistan, and now broadcasts 24/7 news. (Channel One is another commercial venture, competing against Tolo.) Tolo’s parent company, Moby Group, and Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation started a Persian-language satellite station, Farsi 1, for Iran. When it comes to disclosing their sources of funding, Afghan media organisations are not always transparent. Many receive a lot more financial support from the U.S. government and other benefactors than they admit. There are about 30 private TV stations, hundreds of daily publications and 100 radio stations – it is difficult to keep count because the media landscape keeps changing. Sadly, the tradition of interested parties paying to have stories aired or printed remains widespread.

Last year *Hasbt-e Sobh* received 1.2 million hits on its website, 25 per cent from within Afghanistan. The paper started in May 2007 – consisting then of four pages circulated only in Kabul – with an initial print run of 2,000. This

has now grown to 20,000 copies distributed and printed around the country. There are 10 provincial offices and it prints in five major cities, the only newspaper to do so. The state-owned media – outlets include RTA television and the *Anis*, the Hewad website and *Kabul Times* – are completely under the control of the government, concludes publisher Sohail. “Intelligence tools depend on [funding from] Pakistan, the U.S., Iran and Afghanistan,” he says, “and people know which ones they are. It’s clear from the content. Influences from our neighbours, Pakistan and Iran, are towards radical Islam. Religion is couched in the language of politics. They offer training and education.” Sohail says his paper has criticised Iran, and in response has received letters signed by Afghan ministers warning it to be careful – “But we are not in Iran and not publishing there.”

Iran worries that a long-term American presence in Afghanistan will bring democracy, economic growth and further freedom of speech. “If this takes root in its impoverished neighbour, how will it affect Iran?” asks Sohail. “Iran believes the Americans came to Afghanistan because of [its proximity to] Iran. Iranians want to stop them, so they support all kinds of media, not only to Shias but also (Sunni) Pashtuns in the south and the east, as well as supporting the Taliban despite their diametrically opposed philosophies.” The Afghan government closes its eyes. “Iranians have bags of money and they are spending it freely,” adds Sohail.

Journalists freely attack Pakistan but are much more circumspect about Iran, says the Afghan journalist and lawyer who prefers anonymity. Emroz, a TV station, was closed down for several months due to protests from Iran, and late last year a Tolo TV journalist was called to the office of the attorney-general because the Iranian government had complained about him. While there are good journalists, many trained by international organisations, the media have a problem with a lack of well-trained professionals. Journalists often simply cut and paste from the internet. Infighting between the various media outlets is common and the 2004 media law prohibiting censorship still has not been properly implemented.

Out of a ghost city that was four-fifths destroyed by the time the Taliban rule had come to an end in 2001, Kabul sometimes seems like the phoenix risen from the ashes. The city itself is regenerating with large supermarkets stocking imported goods catering to well-paid ex-pats and rich Afghans. Massive houses, known locally as poppy palaces, are rented out at inflated rates. Some roads and pavements are being resurfaced, and a number of malls have opened. Kabul’s design centre does thriving business. There is life on

the streets. Little boys kick footballs, and little girls hold hands as they snake their way to school. Such life in Kabul is known as the Kabubble and it is easy to forget that conflict continues beyond the restricted blast-wall and sandbag “ring of steel” parameters of town. Outside Kabul one is reminded that the city is not Afghanistan: there the people are less educated, unemployment is high, day-to-day existence is more dangerous, services such as electricity are a constant worry.

At another newspaper, the *Kabul Weekly*, its owner, publisher and editor, Faheem Dashty, was sitting in his office contemplating the paper’s future when I visited earlier this year. The large room was dominated by a picture of “the great Massoud” – the legendary Northern Alliance leader looking poker-faced and wearing a pakul (a traditional Afghan hat). The photograph was taken in France during Ahmed Shah Massoud’s first and last trip to Europe, in 2001. Faheem Dashty explains that Massoud warned the world then that it had to help fight the Taliban and terrorism, “or it will reach you soon”. A few months later, two days before the 9/11 attacks, Massoud, who founded *Kabul Weekly* in 1993, was killed by suspected al-Qaeda affiliates posing as journalists.

Dictats from everyone are refused

“This is not an easy climate in which to print an independent newspaper,” said Dashty, who was wrestling with the fact that the next edition might well be the last. “In 2003, when I reopened the paper [it was closed in 1994, following an article attacking the Mujahedeen government] it was financially sustainable, but I knew that if I wanted to do anything for Afghanistan I would have to refuse any dictates from anyone.” As it was, the paper closed again for six months in November 2006, but reopened with help from Reporters Sans Frontiers, UNESCO and the Open Society Institute, which funded its regeneration without conditions. At a time when ethnic tensions could have exploded, Dashty glumly accepted that he might have to tell readers the paper was deep in debt and without more unconditional funding would have to close. The moment came quite soon, when, in March, the most widely-read paper in Afghanistan did indeed stop publishing.

Dashty told me that journalism in Afghanistan is a risky profession and that the media-savvy Taliban are a constant threat that have to be taken seriously. Other journalists are more concerned about threats from intelligence agencies. Barely a week passes without a journalist being

attacked somewhere in the country. One Afghan journalist said that he used to talk openly, but lately had become much more cautious. When he leaves home in the morning or returns at night he remains vigilant. Preferring to remain anonymous, he said: “The government is weak and cannot even protect itself, so how can we expect it to protect us?”

According to Dawood Azami, the BBC World Service bureau editor in Afghanistan, the Taliban have been sending emails and phoning journalists across the country to try to influence reporting. “Their main concern is to have their version of events included in reports in Afghanistan and via international media outlets.” Field commanders in several provinces sometimes put pressure on local journalists, asking them to cover attacks on Afghan and international forces. “The Taliban understand the importance of media and they have also moved with the times,” says Azami. “Previously they didn’t allow video, now they use it to their advantage.”

Afghan media have made a lot of progress over the past nine years. “Nobody expected in 2002 that the media would do so well in such a short period of time,” recalls Azami. “Despite some problems, the Afghan media are free to criticise the policies of the government and its international allies. It criticises the role of neighbouring countries, and is getting even bolder. Sometimes you do see self-censorship, and that can be for many reasons, including fear of reprisals on journalists or their family members. Freedom of speech and freedom of the press are guaranteed in the Afghan constitution, but some people are concerned that if the Taliban join the government as a result of the peace process, restrictions might be imposed on the media.”

Like media almost everywhere, the overall agenda is to attract a younger audience, which brings its own problems, continues Azami: “There are certain areas with which the Afghan government doesn’t feel comfortable. Officials keep in mind cultural sensitivities and the long established traditions and social norms. Some are against broadcasting revealing songs or showing films where actors or actresses don’t wear proper dress. Some [older] people are not comfortable watching this while they are in their homes with their families.”

Masood Farivar, general manager at Salam Watandar (Hello Countryman), the Internews Network’s radio programming service in Afghanistan and perhaps the closest thing the country has to national public radio, says that TV news is led by the foreign news agenda. “To a greater or lesser extent local media rely on foreign outlets for their coverage. Tolo and other major channels lead their nightly news with a story from *The New York*

Times, *The Washington Post* or the wires. This in turn influences the public debate here about the nature of war. Instead of asking questions pertinent to Afghan audiences, pundits frame them in ways that would be more familiar to westerners. Footage is shot and edited for western consumption. We need to rescue coverage for the people.”

While radio is still the most important medium, political internet sites, weblogs and TV are making inroads. Dr Omar Sharifi, an anthropologist and director of the Kabul-based American Institute of Afghanistan Studies, predicts in the next decade TV will overtake all other forms of information. And Haroun Mir, an Afghan analyst, believes “the print media are not very influential. We are an oral culture and print hardly leads the debate. Competition is harsh. Afghan youth want entertainment first, and news second. [President] Karzai would censor the media if he could. In the west free speech is institutionalised, but not here”.

The Afghan media have a struggle in front of them, not only to resist the Taliban but also to resist self-censorship and other threats, those that come with scholarships, or plots of land, or paid-for trips. Peace with the Taliban will be costly, thinks Faheem Dashty, and one price may be freedom of speech. “The government is becoming more conservative in order to pave the way to make a deal,” he said. And Nilofar Sakhi, an Afghan women’s rights activist, points out the restrictions in political debate: “The contrast in terms of the free media is huge. The current political instability and cultural restrictions prevent families allowing women to actively participate, especially on TV. The problem is our uncertain future and reprisals that may follow if the international forces pull out after 2014. Right now is a very unstable time.” Late last year the minister of information and culture, Sayed Makhdom Raheen, said that media airing programmes against Islamic values, or offending individuals, would be fined or closed, but Internews’s Farivar says: “I haven’t sensed a great deal of change. Afghan journalists are smart and they know the red lines they cannot cross.”

There is one other issue: aid agencies, such as USAID, have pushed to develop TV and radio stations, shovelling in millions of dollars to train journalists at record speed. At this point the market possibly suffers from over-saturation. Perhaps the most important question is one of sustainability: can all this media make money enough to survive?