AFGHAN MEDIA LEADERS DIALOGUE
ON THE FUTURE OF MEDIA
IN AFGHANISTAN

A Consultative Dialogue among Afghan media leaders and journalists, discussing the future of Afghan media, prompted by the 2012, BBC Media Action's Policy Briefing "The Media of Afghanistan: The Challenges of Transition"

7th March, 2013 at the Government Media and Information Center (GMIC)
Kabul-Afghanistan

AFGHAN MEDIA LEADERS DIALOGUE ON THE FUTURE OF MEDIA IN AFGHANISTAN

A Consultative Dialogue among Afghan media leaders and journalists, discussing the future of Afghan media, prompted by the 2012, BBC Media Action's Policy Briefing "The Media of Afghanistan: The Challenges of Transition"

7th March, 2013 at the Government Media and Information Center (GMIC)

Kabul, Afghanistan

CONTENTS

ACRONYMS

MoIC	Ministry of Information and Culture
RTA	Radio Television of Afghanistan (State owned national broadcaster)
IEC	Independent Elections Commission
PSP	Public Service Provider
AJF	Afghanistan Journalists Federation
AMC	Afghan Media Consortium
ANJU	Afghanistan National Journalists Union
AJSC	Afghan Journalists Safety Committee
ATRA	Afghanistan Telecommunications Regulatory Authority
GMIC	Government Media and Information Centre

1. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a collaborative effort, the event organizers would like to sincerely thank all the participants of this gathering especially, those who travelled long distances from the different provinces of Afghanistan to actively participate in this event.

We would also like to extend our special thanks and appreciation for the active involvement and constructive contributions of the following individuals without whom this gathering would not have been possible:

2. BACKGROUND

The phenomenal growth and development of the media sector in Afghanistan since 2002 is considered a major success story. From a baseline of virtually no media in 2001, eleven years later *77% of ordinary Afghans report that they look to independent media to keep the Government accountable* (AMDEP Altai Media Survey 2011).

However, to ensure the longevity and sustainability of this vibrant media sector, targeted technical support is still needed. With the transition to an Afghan-led security provision in the country by 2014 and beyond, Afghanistan faces enormous political, economic and military challenges. Critical to a successful transition and stabilization effort will be the ongoing presence of an independent and self-sustaining pluralistic media to provide essential information and education to all Afghans, to support Afghan civil society and government engagement and to play a crucial watchdog role.

The question is where such support will come from. The commercial sector in Afghanistan, particularly outside Kabul, is immature and under-developed. Concepts of expanding business growth and a client base through advertising are limited to outmoded strategies such as street location and billboards. Consequently income from advertising will require growth from the private sector before it can be looked to as a sustainable revenue source for the majority of media outlets in Afghanistan.

Many media outlets do not have their own effective governance and business systems, let alone basic financial management and accounting skills and systems. Journalists across the world do not possess skills in marketing, sales and business planning, yet journalists in Afghanistan inevitably end up being managers of most media outlets, as the longest serving and most educated staff members.

The May 2012 BBC Media Action policy briefing entitled "The Media of Afghanistan: The Challenge of Transition" echoes this sentiment. The briefing paper explored the current state of the media in Afghanistan in an environment marked by increased politicization, on the one hand, and diminished donor funding, on the other. It concluded that unless a mechanism was put in place to ensure continued support from the international community, the Afghan media risked derailing the democratic transition under way, rather than consolidating it.

The briefing paper has generated a great deal of international attention. Over the past year, BBC Media Action staff have presented its findings to government ministers, ambassadors, donors, think tanks, media and civil society organizations and many others in Afghanistan and around the world. All those engaged in this discussion agreed that the future of the media is extremely important to the country's future, but also insufficiently prioritized.

Despite this consensus view, very little has changed to improve support to the media in the twelve months since the briefing paper was launched. There is still no mechanism within Afghanistan or internationally to ensure that the future of the Afghan media is considered or debated, and no organization has an obvious mandate to pull together those who might have a common interest in shaping such a strategy.

3. AFGHAN MEDIA DIALOGUE EVENT – 7 MARCH 2013

The main purpose of this one-day dialogue was to facilitate an inclusive and continued dialogue among Afghan media leaders and media representatives from across the country to exchange hopes, ideas, questions and concerns about the future of Afghan media. The research findings of the 2012 BBC Media-Action's policy briefing were discussed and presented as a launching pad for this ongoing dialogue.

The fragile and uncertain future of the Afghan media sector was a dominant concern for all present, prompted in particular by the imminent transition of the country's security responsibilities from the International coalition forces to the Afghan Government by 2014.

More than 100 Afghan participants engaged in the dialogue, including representatives of the Afghan Government (MoIC, RTA, ATRA), key Afghan media organizations from Kabul and

Journalists, government representatives and peak body organizations where among the delegates from across Afghanistan who participated in the two day conference.

other provinces, and some international organizations (BBC Media Action, Internews, IMS, SAFMA). This consultative gathering took place at the Government Media and Information Center (GMIC) in Kabul on the 7th March, 2013.

Setting the tone for this event was a one day media and elections workshop at GMIC on the 6th of March, facilitated by Nai-Supporting Open Media and Internews and funded by AusAID. This workshop generated dialogue between media leaders, the government and the IEC on the Afghan media's role in reporting on up-coming elections. This theme was also carried over to the follow conference day.

H. E. Dr.Sayed Makhdoom Raheen (Minister, MOIC) addressing delegates during the opening ceremony of the Afghan Media Dialogue conference.

The Afghan Media Dialogue was opened by the Minister of Information and Culture, H.E. Dr. Sayed Makhdoom Raheen. Dr. Raheen presented an overview of the media landscape in Afghanistan from the government's perspective, stressing the important role of the Afghan media in shaping a positive public opinion about the future of the nation. He also raised his government's concerns about the negative impact the media can have through "scare-monger" reporting on the withdrawal of international forces by 2014, as if there were a "D-day after which the future of Afghanistan was hopeless." This, he argued, was having a negative impact on the building of a peaceful nation state, one where all citizens work together to design a positive future for Afghanistan - independent of International development support - well beyond 2014.

Dr. Raheen noted that the Afghan nation is not a newly-emerging nation, referencing the country's long and complex history throughout various phases of stability, prosperity and world leadership. H. E. Minister Raheen then reminded the media managers and journalists in the audience that "democracy" as a concept was often miss-used and even abused in the 1960s, emphasizing that freedom of speech needs to be exercised responsibly.

H.E. Mobarez Rashedi, Deputy Minister, MOIC.

Following the Minister's opening speech came a series of detailed thematic sessions lead by keynote speakers discussing major issues, trends and challenges facing the Afghan media sector including: media code of conduct, media regulation, the public broadcaster and national identity, media sector coordination and accountability, sustainability, journalists' safety and protection, the future of print media and social media.

The two days of media gatherings concluded with a closing speech from the Deputy Minister of Information and Culture, H.E. Mobarez Rashedi, who emphasized the importance of closer coordination and collaboration among Afghan media organizations and the government and announced the Ministry's full support of a free, independent and sustainable Afghan media. Deputy Minister Mobarez promised participants that he would be hosting a media summit in the new Afghan year (which began on 21st March) and which would bring together donors, other government departments, and provincial media to discuss the media's role in shaping the future of Afghanistan.

4. THEMATIC SESSIONS

Each session included expert panelists presenting what they perceived to be the most pressing issues, trends and challenges facing the Afghan media sector and engaged participants in discussion about potential solutions.

4.1. MEDIA CODE OF CONDUCT, REGULATION, THE PUBLIC BROADCASTER AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

This session included panel speakers: Mr Abdul Rahman Panjshiri; Mr Abdul Ghani Modaqiq from RTA; Mr Jailani Zwak from Kabul News and Mr Hashmatullah Radfar of the AJF. Mr

> " *When finalized and published, I request that you consider and observe the media code of conduct as your own and for your own good.*
>
> *Hashmatullah Radfar (Afghan Journalists Federation)* "

Panel Speakers, from left to right: Abdul Ghani Modaqiq (RTA), Hashmatullah Radfar (JFA), Ghulam Jailani Zwak (Kabul News), Abdul Rahman Panjshiri (RTA).

Radfar presented a brief overview of how the development of a consolidated media code of conduct has evolved and the status of the current drafting mechanism, emphasizing the importance of a consolidated code of conduct that all media could observe as a show of responsible self-regulation in Afghanistan.[1]

The second panel speaker, Mr Zwak, spoke about the role of the media in defining, projecting and creating a forum for strengthening national identity in the Afghan

---

[1] An array of Afghan media codes of conduct have been developed over the last 10 years by a range of media agencies and individuals. In 2013 the MoIC, in coordination with some independent media organizations, established a working group to develop a consolidated set of codes of practice for media self-regulation guidance on reporting and content standards

context. He also talked about the role and responsibilities of media in promoting national unity and tolerance, rather than promoting ethnic difference, rivalry or factional divisions. Mr Zwak emphasized the role of the government (or public service) broadcaster, the National Radio TV Afghanistan (RTA), in promoting democratic values and the rule of law. He said that he did not agree personally with turning RTA into a public service broadcaster, but because that is in the law, he felt that it should be implemented.

Abdul Rahman Panjshiri (RTA), giving briefing on regulation and national identity.

Mr Panjshiri and Mr Modaqiq discussed the critical role of a public service broadcaster (RTA) in the media sector and in Afghanistan. For RTA to be a credible media organization, they said, it has to be an independent entity with a level of editorial independence from the government. They also noted that legally, according to the Afghan media law, RTA should be an independent authority, funded by government and for the benefit of the community, but with a level of autonomy which allows for independent reporting.

Mr Modaqiq highlighted the important role Radio Afghanistan plays in this respect given its nation-wide reach and its history. He said if RTA were to be reformed and turned into a public service broadcaster, this body could celebrate the diversity of people and languages in the country, provide imaginative programming, provide educational opportunities and encourage civic responsibility. They also felt that RTA could work collaboratively with the private sector.

> " *Language has an important role to play in strengthening national identity. The independence of media is important and their sources of funding have a key role*
>
> *Jailani Zwak (Kabul News)* "

> " *A Public Service Provider should be at the service of all citizens of a country. RTA should be an independent entity both professionally and financially.*
> *Abdul Rahman Panjshiri (RTA)* "

4.2. MEDIA SECTOR COORDINATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY

This session included panelists Mr Fahim Dashti of ANJU and Mr Danish Karokhel of Pajhwak Afghan News. Mr Dashti talked of the need for improved coordination and collaboration among the Afghan media sector. He referred to the recently formed Afghanistan Journalists Federation (AJF), bringing together leaders from a range of media associations

as an example of constructive collaboration that could yield benefits to all media actors, through a united and stronger sector voice. As a consortium member of both ANJU and AJF, he detailed the history, scope, membership criteria and benefits of being a member of the newly formed Afghan Media Consortium (AMC), which consists of leaders of nine pre-existing media organizations and associations. Mr Dashti concluded by strongly emphasizing the benefits accruing to all from unity and coordination across the Afghan media.

The next panel speaker, Mr Karokhel, spoke about the media's role in ensuring government transparency and accountability. He also noted that the government had a role to play in cooperating in this effort, and would also benefit from this transparency, as it can bring increased citizen trust.

> " *I hope we have learned by now that by being scattered and divided we are weak and less-effective, but if we join our voices and have better collaboration we can be much stronger and much more effective.*
> *Fahim Dashti, ANJU and AJF* "

Mr Karokhel detailed the existing challenges the Afghan media face in trying to access government information and track its transparency initiatives. He emphasized the need for effective and practical regulations to support transparency and accountability, such as government officials complying with access to information regulations. Mr Karokhel talked about the challenges the media face when government

> " *Whenever there is a matter of Government transparency and accountability, most Government spokespersons are either unavailable or do not want to comment about such matters*
>
> *Danish Karokhil (Pajhwak Afghan News)* "

A number of young male and female journalists from across the country participated and took part during the Afghan Media Dialogue conference.

spokespersons or officials lack an understanding of the role of the media and journalists in a democracy. He mentioned the frustration journalists experience often through government officials "stone-walling" the media by blocking, or being unresponsive to, information requests from the media. Mr Karokhel also addressed the need for financial transparency and accountability within the media sector, which he explained to be closely linked to its goals and activities.

4.3. SUSTAINABILITY OF THE AFGHAN MEDIA SECTOR

The panelists for this session included Mr Khpolwak Sapai of Shamshad-TV and Ms Mobina Khairandish of Radio Rabia Balkhi, Balkh Province.

Ms Khairandish talked about the challenges provincial media organizations face. She mentioned the weak economic market in the provinces and the corresponding lack of advertising as well as the lack of coordination among provincial stations in setting standard advertising rates. Ms Khairandish outlined a number of proposals that could ensure fairer distribution of advertising income across media organizations on the way to 2014.

Panelists members Khoplwak Sapai (Shamshad TV) and Mobina Khairandish (Radio Rabia Balkhi) preparing to discuss sustainability of the Afghan media sector.

Next, Mr Sapai talked about the issue of financial sustainability of the media sector, asking how a free and independent media in Afghanistan can be maintained until it is financially sustainable. He also talked about the potential negative impact of the post-2014 decline in donor assistance and how this might negatively affect the media sector in Afghanistan.

> *The international community encouraged plurality of channels across the country … but there was no plan to look beyond ten years.*
> *Mobina Khairandish, Radio Rabia Balkhi*

He noted that some media outlets, which once recruited more than 10 employees, are now being run by only one or two people as they cannot afford to employ any more staff. This is also due to the prolific growth in number of media outlets. He did however claim that the TV sector is growing at the right rate right now. However if TV grows at the same rate as radio, without thought for sustainability, the TV sector many face similar issues.

> *"More than 500 journalists lost their jobs in 2012 alone. We are very concerned that if the same situation continues, half of the people working in the media sector – said to be around 10,000 people - will lose their jobs by the end of 2013."*
> *Khpolwak Sapai, Shamshad-TV*

Mr Sapai mentioned that he is concerned that almost half of the people working in the media sector in Afghanistan might be left jobless by 2014 if the financial sustainability of the media sector is not seriously considered by all relevant stakeholders, including the international community and the Afghan government.

He also claimed that many radio stations have also reduced their broadcasting hours significantly.

4.4. JOURNALISTS' SAFETY AND PROTECTION AND PUBLIC BROADCASTING CONTENT, PRINT MEDIA, CONSORTIUM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The panelists for this session were Mr Abdullah Azada Khenjani of the Afghan Journalists Safety Committee (AJSC), Mr Barry Salaam of Awanama Production, Mr Shah Hussain Murtazavi of Hasht e Subh newspaper, Mr Abdul Salaam Rahimi of Saba TV and Mr Waheed Darwish of Nai.

Mr Khenjani led this session by defining the three primary kinds of security risks that journalists face in Afghanistan: a) physical security; b) psychological protection; and c) job security. He then elaborated on the kind of protection each security threat warranted, and highlighted the safety and security risks that face Afghan journalists in the provinces. Security is one of the primary drivers forcing local journalists to link up with a local power broker, which in turn has a chilling effect on media freedom, discouraging journalists from producing unbiased and independent reporting.

Mr Khenjani also talked about the lack of an effective, functioning mechanism to guarantee journalists' job security, which leaves journalists uncertain psychologically and stressed over their jobs and their family's security. He also discussed the lack of a transparent regulatory framework for employment contracts and job insurance in the Afghan media sector.

> " *"We have to admit, we still need the continued support of the international community for the media sector in Afghanistan; media and freedom of speech should not fall victim to the general political relationships between the Afghan Government and the International community.* "
>
> *Abdullah Azada Khenjani (AJSC)*

Barry Salaam a panel member (Awanama Production) providing feedback and comments from the other panelist members during the conference.

The second panelist, Mr Salaam, announced the sad news of the demise of 'Good Morning Afghanistan' (the first Afghan production house that provided independent and creative public service content) due to financial problems. He then talked about the critical role that RTA can play in leading the Afghan media sector in public service broadcasting, as well as in media innovation and public education. He referred to RTA's huge potential as the largest employer in the Afghan media sector and the one with the most widespread infrastructure. Mr Salaam critiqued the Government for monopolizing RTA and using it only for government-related or political broadcasting. Referring to the Afghan media law, he added that, legally, RTA should already be an independent entity.

Mr Salaam also talked about how RTA can best serve all Afghans as a major and reliable information access point. While arguing that privately-held commercial media outlets can never play the role of a traditional public service broadcaster, he urged private media broadcasters to function in line with universal journalistic standards and to be mindful of national interests even when reporting independently. "We don't have a national broadcaster that serves the Afghan people and which can act as a mirror for all people of Afghanistan, to see themselves in," he noted.

Mr Murtazavi of Hasht e Subh newspaper talked about progress in the media sector over the past eleven years, especially in the area of print media. Then he spoke about the challenges facing print media in Afghanistan, especially the ever-increasing competition between the print and electronic media. He said that the print sector faced two major challenges: competition with radio, TV and news agencies in delivering news and the absence of real people in print media. The other challenge print media faces, he claims, is the low literacy level in the country, which has been compounded by the culture of 'free-readership,' whereby government officials from the President to government ministers expect to receive their newspapers regularly for free.

> "As the media broadcaster with the largest infrastructure and as the biggest employer in the Afghan media sector, unfortunately RTA has been taken hostage by the Government and some powerful officials, whereas it could have been much more useful and inclusive.
>
> Barry Salaam (Awanama Production)

> "The Government should subsidize to the print media so we can stay competitive with the electronic media; it should also have a transparent mechanism in place for balanced distribution of commercial advertisement both to the print and electronic media.
>
> Shah Hussain Murtazavi (Hasht e Subh)

Murtazavi called for unity among print media players to agree to strop free distribution. Acquiring advertising he claims has become a 'mafia-like' practice requiring media jump through too many hoops to secure advertising. He also discussed different ways to keep the print media competitive and in circulation as a reliable news source for the Afghan people. Print media should know its audiences so it can design its content accordingly. Government ministries that cannot spend their development budget should subscribe to newspapers in multiple copies.

Mr Abdul Salaam Rahimi of Saba TV started off by noting that donor dependency is not limited to the media sector, but is a national trend followed by the government as well. To illustrate the dependency of government institutions on foreign funding he said 'a disagreement between political parties in the US can be felt in Kabul quite quickly.' He then talked about the newly formed Afghan Media Consortium (AMC) providing a brief history, membership criteria, and benefits for the media sector in general. He argued that

Interactive participation by delegates made the conference a beneficial experience for many, such as this young journalist from Kunduz province.

it is critical for all Afghan media organizations to foster cooperation through an agency like the consortium. Mr Rahimi emphasized that one of the key solutions for the Afghan media sector to survive post 2014 is to stand together. He then talked about the Government's role and responsibilities in facilitating a financial ecosystem in the country from which the media sector can also benefit.

The final speaker of the panel, Mr Waheed Darwish of Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, talked in detail about the emerging and important role of social media in the world, and especially Afghanistan. He also discussed the convergence between traditional and modern media, urging Afghan media organizations to stay up to date with technological developments in the media sector. He recommended Afghan media leaders to seriously consider integrating social media technologies and services in their broadcast and reporting activities, as a means to efficiency and quality improvements.

> "
> *"We can extend and strengthen our survival by standing together; our survival should not be at the cost of killing each other.*
> *Abdul Salaam Rahimi,*
> *Saba TV*
> "

> "
> *"The convergence of media and technology is inevitable. Social media is used as a very effective and efficient medium of reporting and communication by the international media; it is also one of the most convenient tools for citizen journalism.*
> *Waheed Darwish,*
> *Nai*
> "

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There was a strong endorsement by all participants that an inclusive and Afghan-led media dialogue was long overdue, and should be the first of many. Participants recommended that future events involve more provincial media, additional international organizations and donor agencies, as well as key government ministries.

It was noted this first dialogue was important and brought Afghan media leaders together and onto the same page. To ensure better and broader understanding in future events, all key stakeholders should be involved.

The dialogue concluded with a series of Q&A sessions and opinion-sharing involving all.

Final remarks from the panelists on the media code of conduct, regulations and public broadcasters discussion.

Key recommendations emerging from this were:

1. We appreciate and support the establishment of the Afghan Media Consortium and Afghanistan Journalists Federation and urge all media organizations and entities in the country to become active and participating members of these or similar institutions. The consortium and the federation should try to include media organizations and entities from all provinces and should not limit itself only to media in Kabul.

2. The Afghan media represented through the media consortium and the federation should have regular dialogue and discussion with the relevant Government authorities, to encourage support and protect freedom of speech and free press in Afghanistan. They should persuade the Government that media is not necessarily a rival, but rather a mirror to reflect the Government's performance and the people's needs and expectations from the Government.

3. While the legitimate legal rights and freedoms of the Afghan media should be preserved and protected, there is a need for an open and transparent framework to regulate the conduct of the media sector. We therefore support and endorse the drafting of the code of conduct for the media and encourage its implementation and observance by all media organizations in the country.

4. It is strongly recommended that as a legal requirement and as per the Media Law of Afghanistan, the Government should facilitate the independence of RTA as a national public service broadcaster.

5. The Government of Afghanistan, in close coordination with the media sector and all relevant stakeholders - especially the Afghan Media Consortium and Afghanistan

Journalists Federation - should develop and implement a transparent and representative mechanism through which to identify and regulate funding sources, for all media organizations. This practice is essential in securing an independent media, that is not biased or influenced through different political funding sources.

6. We/The Afghan media sector under the leadership of the Afghanistan Journalists Federation and Afghan Media Consortium should focus first and foremost on resolving any existing disagreements and rivalries that exist among us, through dialogue and mutual respect. Once we are all on the same page, we must then prioritize our external questions and concerns and try to resolve them together, in close collaboration with each other. The Afghanistan Journalists Federation and Afghan Media Consortium should draft and develop a mechanism for this.

7. The Ministry of Information and Culture (MoIC) as a key sector ministry, should not consider the media sector as a rival and try to limit its activity, but should instead see itself as an agent of the Afghan media sector, guaranteeing the freedom of speech and protecting our rights and liberties.

8. There should be more similar gatherings and dialogue in the future, including active participation and involvement by representatives of the international community and donor organizations, together with representatives of key Government agencies. Such events and gatherings should also especially involve more representation from the provincial media organizations and entities.

Ministers Closing Speech:

H.E Din Mohammad Mobarez Rashedi concluded by acknowledging the challenges the future holds for the Afghan media sector in two key areas: a) financial sustainability, and b) the quality of content. He said that he intended to bring together a group of stakeholders in a future meeting (including donors) and that he would try to convene such a gathering in the new Afghan year.

Rashedi confirmed that the discussion about regulation was very timely and acknowledged that it is time to pay more attention to media regulation. He also thought that financial independence underpinned editorial independence for media organizations. Going forward, he assured media practitioners that he would work with sympathy and friendship with them, to resolve as many of their concerns as possible.

END