Afghan Media in 2010

Community Case Studies

September 15, 2010

Contents

Introduction

As part of the "Afghan Media, 8 Years Later" study undertaken by Altai Consulting on behalf of the USAID-DG/OTI, a series of ten community case studies were undertaken in various locations across Afghanistan in order to more comprehensively understand the current, perceived, expected, and potential role of the media in Afghan communities.

The community case studies targeted concepts that were too broad to be dealt with sufficiently by the quantitative research, namely preferences, trust, impact, opinions and behavior, thereby adding breadth to the scope of the study. They narrowed in on information sources in communities and their impact on the members of that community, within coherent communities, and with a particular focus on the impact on opinions and behavior. Unlike the other tools of the study, the emphasis was at the level of the community rather than at the individual level, and thus focused on traits and habits that were shared by the majority of those that constitute the community. An ancillary aim was to also obtain an understanding of the issues and characteristics that were unique to the community at hand and that characterised it from other communities in the country, in order to highlight particular issues of import relevant to the study.

A. Methodology

A team of national researchers were trained and supervised by an international Dari speaking project manager. The main premise of the methodology was for the research team to become a part of the community, and of the community life, and thereby understand many of these issues by way of integration. To avoid an often-observed habit of over emphasising responses when the topic of research is disclosed, the research teams never revealed that their purpose was to undertake research on media in Afghanistan. A more general explanation, of undertaking research on Afghan culture and traditions, was provided. This allowed responses about the media to be given more spontaneously, thereby giving researchers are more natural and realistic understanding of the role of the media. In interviews in the communities, the topic of the media was rarely raised by researchers. Rather, they would wait for it to be announced by interviewees, allowing them to then prompt further.

A team of researchers, usually composed of an international Dari speaking researcher and one or more national researchers, travelled to purposively selected communities, spending between 2-5 days in each. In three out of ten case studies, because the communities were located in Kandahar province, a national researcher was sent alone due to security concerns, but after intensive training and while in constant communication with the project manager.

The main tools adopted in the communities included:

- In-depth and unstructured interviews with different profiles of media users and non-users.
- Observation of different forms of media, meetings, communal events, and places of informal gathering in each location (Mosques, *chaikhana* (tea houses), public baths, bazaars, community centers, schools, homes, and other informal gathering places).
- Debates with local elders, mullahs and *shura* (local council) members.

Guidelines were produced to guide the research and to provide a blueprint for the days spent in the community. While it was challenging to create specific guidelines for an undertaking that involved

mainly observations and unstructured interviews, after a number of initial drafts the team eventually settled on a set of guidelines that outlined the essential research questions to be answered and a framework for its achievement, while allowing enough flexibility for local specifics.

The main topics addressed by the guidelines included:
- The 'story' of the village/community (geography, history, economics, population) and other contextual information
- Feelings and perceptions of the community towards government, the development/reconstruction process, and the international community
- Sources and flow of information and opinions
- Perceptions and impact of the media
- Consumption of media and the dynamics surrounding it
- Other location specific topics, as outlined in the 'locations' section below

B. Locations

Ten community case study locations were purposively selected across five provinces in the North, South, West of the country, as well as in Kabul and its surrounds, with a mix of urban, peri-urban, and rural locations.

'Hamkari' in Kandahar
In Kandahar province the specific focus was to understand how the media portrays the reconstruction effort and the international community and how people are formulating their opinions of the international community, within the context of operation 'Hamkari'. Three locations were selected:

1. **Kart-e-Maloomin** in Kandahar city represented the urban location;
2. **Shurandan** the peri-urban location;
3. **Mand-Ab** village was the rural location.

The same specific focus was explored in each location and contrasted.

Returnees in Herat
In Herat province, the research team spent three days in **Sharak-e-Jibrail**, a peri-urban community of Afghan returnees from Iran situated along the Iranian border, some 30km from Herat city. The specific focus in this area was to understand how time spent abroad affects the consumption of media, opinions, and the formulation of opinions of returning Afghans.

Balkh
In Balkh province two case studies were conducted:

1. **Mazar e Sharif University** (urban) – focused on the educative role of media, as seen by the academic community;
2. **Haji Kot** (peri-urban), focused on the circulation of information in a privileged rural environment; the use of media by the local power structure.

Farmers and mobile media in Parwan
A rural community of farmers was selected in ***Parwan*** province, in **Dasht-e-Orfian**, with a specific focus on mobile media (within the context of the 'Maloomat' project, formerly known as 'TradeNet) in order to explore the potential reach of new media in communities.

In two of the case studies communities were selected according to social groups rather than specific locations:

Youth and Identity

The youth community of Herat city was selected to specifically explore concepts of identity amongst youth, and how the media helps shape this.

Youth and New Media

A second case study on youth focused on University students in Kabul (from a variety of universities) and focused on the engagement with new media, and generally looked at how sophisticated engagement with media can be amongst this group.

1 The Kabul youth community

"Youth and New Media"

It was assumed that the most sophisticated engagement with media in Afghanistan would belong to the youth community. In order to explore this assumption this case study focused on the Kabul youth community and its engagement with new media. For the purposes of this case study, new media refers to any engagement with Internet as well as content received from mobile phones. The case study focused mainly on university students but looked at both students from Kabul University and private universities in Kabul. This case study did not follow the conventional pattern of case studies in that instead of focusing on a particular location, it centered on a particular social group.

A. Contextual Information

A significant difference was observed between the youth from Kabul University and those from private universities. The typical profile of the youth that attended private universities was young Afghans who were working with foreign organizations (NGOs, aid agencies, governments, etc), had a good level of English, were earning a good salary, and attended university in the evenings after they finished work. Such youth also typically had high levels of Internet usage as full access was given to them at work and email was utilized as a primary communication tool in their offices. Rather than representing the majority of youth in Afghanistan, this group signified more of an exception. The youth at Kabul University, however, were generally much less connected to the international community and to outside influence. Their engagement with the Internet was more limited, and many of them were not actually from Kabul but had rather moved to Kabul once they had been accepted for admittance into Kabul University. They usually attended university full time during the day and few of them had jobs on the side. Some of them lived in student housing which was typically a dormitory with shared facilities, and the rest of them lived with their families, either in Kabul or on its outskirts, and commuted to and from university daily.

At Kardan University, one of the most popular private universities in Afghanistan, with particular strengths in business and business administration courses, it was observed that almost half of the student body was in possession of laptop computers which they carried to class with them and utilized confidently. The university provides the students with wireless internet access free of charge and professors often refer to internet sites for students to do further study through. In general, there is also a strong usage of technology at the university. Professors present their classes via PowerPoint slides on laptops, with projectors. All the professors at the university are foreigners; mainly Pakistani but some westerners also, and all classes are taught in English. Students need to pass an English exam to gain admittance into the university to prove that they have a level of English high enough to allow them to follow their courses.

On the contrary, there was very little technology or computer use on campus at Kabul University. Computer and Internet facilities were available in some common areas, such as the library and cafeteria, however the majority of students had never used them, unless they were computer science majors. During the period of time when the research team was on campus, the computers were reportedly not working, and no one was allowed access. While it was presented as a temporary problem, it was not clear how often this actually occurred. Most of the girls that were spoken to, who were not computer science majors, had never used a computer in their lives. Of the boys that were spoken to, the non-computer science majors who were accessing the internet, were doing so at internet cafes, not on campus; and for a very small minority, in their homes.

Gender Relations

A noticeable difference existed in gender relations amongst the private and public university students. In Kabul University, while classes were co-educational, very little interaction existed amongst the students. Some said to us "we simply sit in the same classroom, that's the extent of our interaction" and observations revealed that even within the classroom, there was a lot of giggling and joking that indicated very unnatural interactions.

The private university students, however, had surprisingly well developed friendships with the opposite sex. Beyond their classes together, some of the students also socialized together in mixed gender groups (in activities such as picnics and meals in hotel restaurants) and organized study groups and study dates that included female classmates too. The more relaxed gender relations can be attributed to impact from the media to some extent, but are also a product of high levels of exposure to foreigners, and to the example that they provide of more natural gender relations. This exposure is via their workplaces, but is of course, also coming from the media to some extent.

B. Perceptions and Feelings

In general, the view of foreigners was quite different also. The private school students who were working for international organizations and had high levels of engagement with foreigners, and while they felt that their interference in internal politics was misguided, they also saw much benefit in their presence in Afghanistan. Namely, the fact that they provided employment and the fact that they ensured security. Most of them stated that the foreign troops were necessary in order to fight the Taliban and that if the foreign troops left then some kind of war would ensue. Foreign aid money also ensured employment and financial security for many of these youth, however, it extended further to providing a sense of optimism. Many of them would make statements such as "The internationals are investing in Afghanistan, in the future, why would they do that if things weren't going to improve?" For the majority of the youth at Kabul University, however, there was very little exposure to foreigners which naturally affects perceptions. Most of them felt that the foreign presence was a detrimental one and saw it as a threat to Islam. Initially, almost all of them would say that the foreigners need to get out. However, when prompted about any positive effects of the foreign presence, many quoted examples such as an improvement in education levels since the foreigners arrived. Many also admitted that if the foreign troops left it was likely that some kind of war would break out. The exchange on foreigners made it clear that with more positive information about improvements, and about the future in general, would likely affect the view of foreigners too.

C. Media

Access to New Media

Internet access at home was limited to a small minority who had a better economic position. It was common amongst the day-time employed, private university male students, but less common amongst the Kabul University students. Internet usage amongst female youth was surprisingly low, to almost non-existent, unless they had access at their place of employment. it was almost seen as a "boys activity;" as it was inappropriate for girls to attend internet cafes, and often if internet was available at home, girls were not in the habit of utilizing it. If they did want some information from the internet, they would ask their brothers to find it for them. The only place where this trend seemed to differ, was amongst returnees from Iran where their girls were much more computer savvy and had developed the habit of internet usage in Iran.

The private university students most definitely represented the group with the most sophisticated media consumption in Afghanistan. Most of them were connected to the Internet for almost the entire day; all day at the office, at university in the evenings, and at home at night. Many of them

also owned sophisticated mobile phones that gave them access to the Internet. While it was rare for them to access the Internet from their phones, some of them were receiving emails via their mobiles. This, however, was the extent of their media consumption via mobiles. The only other content that was being exchanged via this medium was music and short clips through Bluetooth exchange, which is common across all demographics in the country.

Engagement with New Media

Although their Internet usage was much more sophisticated than other groups in the country, it generally only revolved around email, chatting services, some social networking, and the acquisition of news and information from specific sites.

Chatting Services

Chatting was hugely popular, and most of these youth were connected to some form of chatting service for most of the day. The most popular were Yahoo Messanger, Google Talk, Skype, Facebook chat and MSN Messenger, with many of them being logged into a few, if not all of them, simultaneously. Usually, chatting services are used to keep in touch with local friends throughout the day, however, it is not uncommon to try and meet new people in this way. Those that have family overseas also said that they chatted to their family online. Some youth reported using Yahoo chat rooms (via the chat room option on the Yahoo Messenger service) to enter discussion on topics they enjoyed and make new friends from other parts of the world. These youth seemed to have a great interest in meeting other youth overseas and getting a sense of their lives. In fact, this was common amongst most youth in the country, expect that that this subgroup of youth were actually able to do so via internet and chatting. Interestingly, it seemed that some real-life relationships were altered online. That is, that when talking via a chatting service, many youth lost their inhibitions and, for example, had very in depth conversations with classmates of the opposite gender, when they found it difficult to do so in reality.

'Facebook' and Social Networking

Social networking has started to become popular, almost exclusively through Facebook, for a little over a year now. While some youth are utilizing the Hi-5 network, it seems to be a dying trend. Interestingly, while Facebook is available in Farsi, many youth are using the English version of the site, generally as a means to improve their English. Observations proved however, that while they are utilizing the service in English, many of their posts are in fact, still in Dari. While Facebook is still predominately used for entertainment purposes (posting pictures, keeping connected) there seems to be a new trend developing of youth utilizing it as a means for self-expression and to share opinions about the world. While this is still embryonic, it is definitely on an upward trend. It was observed that Facebook also tends to have an effect of causing youth to shed their inhibitions and express themselves in a way that they would not feel comfortable doing so in reality. Some youth were posting news articles which friends commented on; or using the 'notes' function on Facebook to share stories and observations of everyday life type things in Afghanistan, which also attracted comments from other Afghan friends. One computer science major at Herat University said that around 80% of his classmates were using Facebook.

'Wikipedia' and Research on the Internet

Wikipedia was very popular amongst both types of students. While the predominance of chatting, and the high use of Facebook, was much more common amongst private school students, Wikipedia was one site that was equally as popular amongst both groups. Most youth saw Wikipedia as an information source and often used it as a means of supplementing what they were taught at university. A common attitude amongst all types of university students was that the standard of their education was low, and most saw the Internet as the only way to change that, as the textbooks that were available to them were all of a low standard. One youth said, "We are using the same textbooks

my Father used 30 years ago." Most youth also believed that connecting with other youth round the world via the Internet would help them learn more about the world and increase their learning and understanding. One Kardan University student stated, "Young people want Afghanistan to be like Pakistan and Iran. Someday like Europe too, but for now, let's take it step by step." The Farsi version of Wikipedia is quite well developed, mainly due to the Iranian engagement with the site, and is partly responsible for the high usage. Some of the private school students, however, were using the English version too.

Other Internet Uses and Websites

Other Internet uses included reading the news, with the main sites being BBC and pajwak.com (a conglomerate of Farsi/Dari news sites). However, this use of the Internet was only common amongst those who had daily access to the net, and this was restricted generally to those who were working and had Internet access at the office. Many youth also reported using the Internet to keep abreast sport's news and to learn about their favorite sporting personalities.

It is interesting to note that while this was uncommon amongst the youth in Kabul, many youth in Herat were using the internet to keep abreast latest trends in terms of fashion and hairstyles. This was managed via a number of ways, including blogs, fashion sites, and pictures of celebrities. For most Heratis this was via Iranian sites and Iranian celebrities, and some American ones. Amongst the Hazara community it was surprising to find that many of the youth were following Korean trends and Korean celebrities and often told me that "the Koreans looks just like us Hazaras." It was found that some youth in Herat would go to internet cafes to search for such pictures, and save them on flash disks to take them home and save them on their own computers. Many youth reported searching terms such as "Model" and "fashion" on Google. Some other sites that were very popular amongst Herati youth include "Bia2.com" which was an Iranian music site created by the Iranian diaspora. Many youth said they referred to this site for music but also for hairstyles and fashion trends. "Afghan123.com" was popular for Afghan music, however most youth reported that they preferred American and Iranian music over Afghan music. "Afg-info.com" was also mentioned quite commonly; it is a site that conglomerates all Persian language sites in one place.

Blogging

Blogging in general was extremely low, and close to non-existent. The research team did not come across any bloggers, not in Kabul nor Herat. Where youth were found to be using blogging sites, it seemed predominately limited to searching for fashion pictures. When the idea of blogging was discussed with youth, most didn't see a point in starting blogs as most felt that it would have little readership and little effect. In fact, one group of young male university students in Herat explained that they had started their own website which was meant to be a forum to encourage debate amongst youth on topical issues relevant to the Afghan youth community, and to encourage a sense of political and social consciousness. However, they reported that they stopped working on the site after a few months because "nobody was interested."

D. Conclusion

The Kabul youth community is not a homogenous group. Various socio-economic backgrounds, levels of education, migration patterns, and so forth, influence their levels of engagement with new media. Students at public universities rarely have access to the internet, and while private school students tend to be more connected, despite sites such as Wikipedia and Facebook becoming hugely popular, their engagement with new media is still quite limited and unsophisticated.

2 Qala-e-Mullah village, Dasht-e-Orfian, Parwan province.

"Farmers and information via mobile phones"

Dasht-e-Ofian is an area of Parwan province approximately 3km from the provincial centre, Charikar. It is comprised of ten villages with each village accommodating approximately 60 homes. The area is predominately composed of farmers and more than 90% of the families have maintained farms for generations. Qala-e-Mullah, the village which is the focus of this case study, is one of the ten villages that comprises Dasht-e-Ofian. The focus of this case study is new media, specifically mobile media, or content received by mobile phones. Qala-e-Mullah was selected because a large proportion of its farmers have been involved in the 'Maloomat' initiative, a initiative whereby farmers receive market prices via mobile phones.

Qala-e-Mullah is a small village of approximately 60 homes and an average level of development. There is a good supply of water throughout the village and one generator that services the whole village for a few hours every evening. There are two schools in the village, one of which is a girl's school that was established by BRAC. Most girls attend school until 4th grade, after which they are withdrawn from classes to stay at home with the women, or to be married. There is no clinic or hospital in the village and the inhabitants tend to travel to the provincial center, Charikar, when they require medical services or even just health information.

The only development projects that the villagers recalled and spoke of were a school that had been developed by BRAC, and the 'maloomat' project implemented by Mercy Corps and Roshan (and funded by USAID, via DAI).

Media Consumption and its dynamics

Most of the inhabitants of the village had a television set in the home that was viewed communally by the entire family in the evenings when the generator was switched on. The prevalence of television has minimized the use of radio in the village, even though radio could potentially be used during the day when there is no electricity. Most villagers said "we are too busy going about our day to be listening to radio" and saw their nightly television viewing as a recreational activity at the end of a hard day's work. It was, however, common for some women to listen to radio during the day while going about their daily chores.

The main television viewing time is between 6pm and 9pm and the main channels viewed are Tolo, Ariana, RTA, and Shamshad, which are all broadcast from Kabul. The only local TV channel in the area is Parwan TV, but it had very little viewership relative to the other channels mainly because it did not broadcast 24 hours per day, and because most of the inhabitants didn't see any added benefit in a 'local' TV channel. There was no general sense of local TV better understanding or representing the villagers, and if anything, it was seen as broadcasting shows of poorer quality and less interest.

In general people followed the news avidly via both TV and radio and watched serials. It was common for families in the village to gather around the television every evening as they ate dinner, and when the village generator was switched on, to watch TV together. Families generally viewed the serials together, but mainly because there was not much else on offer during this time slot. Most villagers expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of variety on nighttime television and criticised the serials by saying "all we do is watch other people's business instead of something that will educate us".

The villagers did not feel that the media could adequately inform them about health issues, saying that there are no health shows on television. Observations implied that rather than there being a

lack of health shows, the issue was more in the fact that viewers were restricted in when they could watch television due to electricity constraints, and so were not exposed to any programming relating to health in their viewing time slot. Almost everyone complained about wanting more agricultural information via the media.

The farmers of Qala-e-Mullah

As mentioned previously, the livelihood of the people of Qala-e-Mullah is reliant upon farming. The main crops harvested in Qala-e-Mullah include wheat, beans, potatoes, onions, tomatoes, and grapes. Grapes are the most valuable crop for the farmers, with some farmers selling up to 5000kg/year. Farmers explained that grapes are always sold on to traders or wholesalers, whereas the sale of other commodities depends on market conditions.

The greatest stated issue for the farmers is finding markets for their products. Generally, farmers sell on to traders who act as intermediaries between them and the wholesalers. It became clear that most farmers rely on traders to act as their intermediaries simply because of a lack of disposable income to fund the cost of transportation directly to wholesalers. This means that they are generally at the whim of traders and compelled to sell produce at whatever price traders set. In the few instances where farmers sell their commodities directly to wholesalers, it is usually when they are bartering their commodities for other goods (such as pesticide, for example), or where they only have small quantities. When demand for a commodity is high, traders will come to the farmers, but when demand is low, farmers are forced to go to the market themselves, usually in the urban centre of Charikar. In limited instances, when demand is low, farmers combine their produce with other farmers' produce and try to sell to a better market (such as Kabul, for example). This occurs rarely because most farmers felt that they spent a lot of extra time and money on transporting their commodities over large distances for very little, or no, extra return.

Sources of Agricultural Information

In general, farmers have found themselves unable to respond to market pressures, in terms of deciding what to grow, what to sell and how much to price their goods, due to a lack of information. At present, the main ways in which farmers receive agricultural information is through the Ministry of Agriculture and its provincial offices; from other farmers who come back from market and relay information to the rest of the village; through NGOs and other international agencies who hold training programs in their villages; and through the Maloomat service.

Farmers often turned to the Ministry of Agriculture for information but were seldom satisfied with the assistance that was rendered. Many of them recalled stories of situations where they had gone to the Ministry to ask for help with their diseased crops and the Ministry had given them some kind of pesticide that had killed their entire crop.

The 'Maloomat' Service – Information through Mobile Phones

Maloomat is a service (funded by USAID and implemented by Mercy Corp/Roshan/DAI) that disseminates market-pricing information via mobile phones. A number of commodities are included and each one is given a specific code. Users can either SMS the code of the commodity they are interested in to a specific number and they will receive an SMS response with the pricing information they have requested. Alternatively, there is an IVR service where users follow voice prompts and enter the code of the commodity they are interested in to receive immediate feedback. Farmers who were utilising the system reported having been trained by MercyCorp on how to use the system and were given a brochure with coding information. It was observed that many of them kept this brochure on their person.

The service was being utilized by a large proportion of villagers and, on average, two types of users could be identified: those who were literate and already mobile phone users; and those that were illiterate and not very comfortable using mobile phones. Commonly, illiterate users received help from other family members who were literate and mobile phone savvy. It was also found that some farmers, who were particularly happy with the system, were promoting it and teaching others how to use it. Generally, the SMS version of the system was problematic because a large proportion of farmers were illiterate and also because SMS was sent in Dari but in roman characters, which was not accessible by all. The IVR version was much more user friendly. Most villagers claimed that they were using the system once per week.

Usually, farmers claimed that they had no problems using the service, and observations proved that the technology was not a huge issue for farmers (especially when they were using the IVR service). However, where they experienced difficulty was in their interpretation of the information and the level of trust they placed in it. Often farmers did not understand what unit of measurement was used for pricing (kilograms vs. the "seer", the traditional unit) and thus misunderstood pricing information. Interestingly, these misunderstandings were often cleared up via debate with other farmers and other users.

The level of trust placed in the information varied. Most farmers seemed to use the service as a secondary source of information to verify the pricing information they received from other sources, and those that used it as a primary source largely still verified it through other sources before acting on it. This was mainly because farmers felt that the prices provided by Maloomat were not accurate, due to experiences where traders had offered them significantly less when they took their commodities to market.

In general, farmers still felt like they wanted information via traditional sources of media, like radio and television. Many farmers expressed the opinion that TV channels needed to stop broadcasting dramas and serials and rather create more useful shows that taught the population something, particularly agricultural shows. It seemed that this was partly due to unfamiliarity with the new technology causing a strong reliance on traditional forms of media and partly because of cost. The maloomat service would cost them the charge of an sms or phone call (depending on which form of the service they adopted) and this proved to be a problem for most farmers who said they would stop using the service if they had to continue paying for it.

Another interesting observation that arose is that some farmers felt that agricultural information should be available to all farmers without discrimination. Some farmers said "via the telephone, only some of us can access agricultural information, but if you put it on the television, then all farmers will have access to it. We need to help the whole country develop, not just parts of the country." However, in general, it seems that mobile phones were a good medium to distribute information on demand, whereas other traditional media were ideal for distributing general information. Some farmers indicated that they would like to receive more information on their mobile phones about weather, transportation of crops, and some specific agricultural issues. They were not, however, interested in receiving general content, like news, via their mobile phones largely because the gathering together to watch/listen to news was seen as a social activity integral to their everyday lives and thus there would be no interest in listening to it by yourself over your phone.

Conclusion

This case study in some ways may be deemed representative of a large proportion of the Afghan populace for the fact that it showcases the needs and wants of Afghan farmers in rural settings. The key significance of this case study, however, lies in the lessons it presents in terms of providing content via mobile phones. In general, it became apparent that for most of those involved in the

study, traditional forms of media were much better received, but a niche may exists for certain types of on-demand information to be made available via mobile phones.

3 Bakhtarian Village, Deh Sabz

"A Comparison of two communities within 30km of Kabul city"

This case study and the next one focus on two separate communities in Kabul province, both of which are located within close proximity to Kabul city. The purpose of the case study is to explore how this proximity affects access to media and consumption patterns, as well as standards of living and levels of development, and to contrast the two locations in that respect. The first location of the case study is Bakhtarian village, a rural location situated 30km Northeast of Kabul city, and the second is Kololan village, a peri-urban location in Istalif, some 30km Northwest of Kabul city.

Bakhtarian village is located approximately 30km from Kabul city, in Deh Sabz district, Kabul province. The village is comprised of about 1200 families who belong to one of six tribes: the Saeed, Noorzai, Ekhtiyar-khil, Araban, Esmail-khil, or Delawar-khil tribe. All tribes are composed of Dari speaking ethnic Tajiks. The village is slightly off the main road, meaning that most of the journey between Bakhtarian and Kabul is along well-paved roads, except for the last few kilometres where the road veers off the main artery. This facilitates much travel back and forth between Kabul city and Bakhtarian.

A. Contextual Information

Standards of living are extremely low in the village, and the inhabitants lack the economic means, and education, to lift themselves out of their poverty. There is not running water in the village and an almost absolute lack of electricity. These, coupled with high levels of unemployment, represent the biggest issues currently facing the community. Most of the men in the village were daily labourers who managed to find work only sporadically. They travelled to Kabul daily for this purpose and returned in the evenings. Many of the women made comments such as "My husband has work one day and not the next." Such families, which constitute the majority of the village, rarely had enough money to cover their day-to-day expenses and would often buy groceries from the local shop on loan. This was the only way they could manage to eat every day. Their diets were simple and consisted simply of bread and potatoes or bread and beans. They could not afford fruit, or rice, or vegetables. The villagers were very conscious of their abject situation and often made statements that revealed an almost self-defeating attitude, such as "We are the people that are at the very bottom of the country," and "we are tired of these lives." Most of the inhabitants also said that if they had enough money they would leave Baktarian and move to Kabul, but they only stayed because of their lack of economic means. There is no female engagement with society, and other than a small group of young girls below the age of 9 who attend school until they reach the age of puberty, women in the village do not leave their homes.

Education

70% of the population is illiterate but two years ago two schools were built. One was a boy's school that had simply been renovated, and the second was a girl's school that had been built for the first time. Currently only 10% of the village sends their daughters to school, and if they are being educated, they are only attending till grade four, after which they are married or it becomes inappropriate for them to have an involved life outside of the home. As the school is newly built, and as most of the girls in the village are beyond the age of fourth grade, not many are attending school.

B. Feelings and Perceptions

Reconstruction
The villagers had no running water and absolutely no electricity. Most households had a well on their premises from which they acquired water. No generators were observed in the village, however, some families did watch TV via a car battery for extremely limited periods of time. Other than this, there was absolutely no electricity in the village. The only development project that the villagers spoke of was the paving of the road that connects their village to the main road, approximately three years ago. However, the road has already returned back to its previous state, only three years after its renovation, and the villagers were expressly displeased.

Foreigners
There is almost no contact with foreigners. The men who travel to Kabul for work are sometimes exposed to foreign troops or aid workers in the city, although only superficially, no relationships are formed. Some of the villages did report, however, that one of the *maleks* of the village was sent to the United States last year 'by the Americans' and returned to tell the rest of the villagers stories about his time there. His stories were positive.

C. Media

Media Consumption
Many of the villagers owned a radio but few of them ever turned them on. The limiting factor was the lack of economics means to be able to afford batteries that ran the radio. Television was also almost non-existent because of the lack of electricity. Only a handful of families owned television sets but none of them were able to turn them on, except for the few who every once in a while used a car battery to run their TVs for extremely short periods of time. However, this was so infrequent that it can hardly constitute consumption of the media.

Most of the villagers, even the illiterate stay-at-home women, when asked about the media, stated that they would like to have access to TV and radio so that they can learn more about what is happening in the world and feel connected to other people in other places.

Sources of Information
In light of the lack of media consumption, news and information is usually spread by word of mouth, and usually comes from the men who travel daily to Kabul for labouring work. Other individuals who travel between Kabul and Bakhtarian also play this role within the community. For example, there is one clinic in the village that is attended by two doctors (one female doctor for the women and a second general doctor) who travel to Bakhtarian daily, for a few hours in the morning to attend to the villagers, before returning to Kabul to practice there for the rest of the day. These doctors also act as sources of information for the villagers. During my time in the village many of the women also approached me (as the 'educated woman' who had come from the city) to ask a whole array of questions that they evidently could not ask anyone else in the village (things ranging from marital relations to childcare to questions about religion).

The mullah is also an extremely prominent figure in the village and a main source of information for the villagers. The lack of education contributes to the unquestioning adherence to the words of the mullah, and his influence permeates almost all aspects of life in the village. For example, every child in the village has been, and is, named by the mullah. The villagers explained that the mullah chants the call to prayer in the ear of the newborn and then opens the Quran, and whatever name his eye falls upon first becomes the name of the child.

4 Kololan Village, Istalif.

"A Comparison of two communities within 30km of Kabul city" (continued)

Istalif is a district of Kabul province situated some 30km Northwest of Kabul city along the Shomali road. Its strategic location led to it being almost entirely destroyed during the fighting between the Northern Alliance and the Taleban. During the last 8 years, it has been going through a process of reconstruction. Kololan village, in Istalif, is comprised of about 100 homes and two mosques. There is one main tribe in the village, the Kololan, as well as a community of Siyyids (the title given to those who are descendants of the Prophet- usually a title that brings with it much prestige.)

A. Contextual Information

During the Taleban regime, and the fighting which was particularly bad in this area, the village was almost entirely emptied out as a result of migration to Kabul, Iran, or Pakistan. Most of these migrants returned post 2001, although some are still displaced and slowly moving back. As families started to move back to Istalif, and to Kololan specifically, they started to rebuild their homes and their villages. More recently, however, there has been a second wave of movement out of Istalif, with families moving to Kabul in search of better economic positions. One villager said "When the Talebs left people were hopeful and came back to Kololan to rebuild their lives, now they are leaving again because there is nothing for them here."

The main sources of income for the men in the village include pottery businesses and daily labouring. Like all parts of the country, the main issue for this community was the lack of employment opportunities. The economic situation was directly linked to many other issues in the community. For example, some Fathers would comment that they cant send their daughters to school because other members of the community will then talk negatively about them. That when people are uneducated and unemployed, they talk about others. Other members of the community also felt that Istalif wasn't developing at the rate that it should be because people keep leaving their villages to move to Kabul in search of work, taking manpower with them and preventing reconstruction.

B. Feelings and Perceptions

Reconstruction

A wide variety of foreign organizations are present in the area, implementing a variety of development projects. The abundance of aid money in this part of the country is a product of a number of factors some of which include the relative security in the area, its proximity to Kabul, and the good condition of the roads that connect it to Kabul. The kinds of projects that inhabitants commonly cited include bridges and running water for households; electricity, which is organised at the district level through funding from the people of Korea (who were often specifically cited by the villagers); and assistance to the potters of the region (the pottery of Istalif is renown all over the country and is an art that has been practiced for generations by men in the area) by the Turquoise Mountain Foundation.

There was, however, a widespread feeling of discontent with the projects and the aid money that had been poured into their area, and mainly because the inhabitants did not feel like they had benefited as they should. For example, while Korean money had been poured into establishing 24 hour electricity at the district level, electricity was not constant and usually only available every second day. Most villagers attributed the discrepancy to corruption, or the government 'eating the money.' One member of the shura articulated the commonly held view by saying that "with all the money that's poured into Afghanistan, the place should have been perfect by now, but its not,

thanks to government corruption." It seems that such an opinion is one that is circulating via word of mouth throughout the community. It was also observed that the mullah would at times address the issue of governmental corruption, contributing to the theories already in existence.

Government

Some members of the shura openly expressed their discontent with Karzai and his government, saying that he makes many good promises but rarely follows through on the commitments he makes. Many of the older members of the community, and some of the shura members, would compare Karzai to previous Afghan leaders saying that in the past rulers would follow through on what they promised and could be trusted. Many of the inhabitants felt that Karzai played two roles, one locally and one for the Americans.

Foreigners

Feelings about foreigners are somewhat more complex, however. There seems to exist a generational gap in this regard where the youth think well of them and believe that they are doing good things, whereas the older generation feels that it would be best for them to leave the country. For the older generation, this feeling is intimately linked to their feelings about the development effort. As they have been disappointed and feel like their lives are not improving, they don't see a need for the foreigners to remain in the country. Some more progressive members of the community felt that it was not an issue with foreigners per se but an issue of conservatism, of people not wanting their lives to change. One member of the shura, when describing this phenomenon, sated "they react in the same way to the fact that my eldest daughter goes to school."

However, there were other members of the community who looked to foreigners for alternative examples. For example, some members of the community would make statements such as "We watch TV to see how foreigners can solve their problems without going to war. We need to learn from this." It seemed common for individuals who had interaction with foreign aid workers, or received assistance from foreign aid organizations, to look to the foreign presence with a posture of learning. Another phenomena that contributes to the creation of this posture of learning is the fact that a small group of potters from the village were taken overseas by the Turquoise Mountain Foundation to learn pottery skills there for a short period of time. These people returned with positive feelings about the west and shared their newfound respect with other members of the community. One man went as far as to say "I wish I hadn't gone to Japan because when I saw how organized and well-functioning their country is I felt upset that our country isn't the same." Another stated "In Japan, no one judged us or asked us what we were doing. We were free. We should treat foreigners in the same way when they come here, and each other."

C. Media

Media Consumption

The people of Kololan are avid media users. 80% of homes in the village had a television set and about 10-15 TV channels had coverage in the area. It was not uncommon for more affluent members of the community to own two TV sets, one being placed in the main house and one in the guestroom. Such a set-up ensured that women had access to the TV as well as men. Although, surprisingly, in many homes that only owned one TV set, it was placed in the family quarters and not the guest quarters and the whole family would view it together in the evenings.

For most of the villagers, TV was the main way in which they obtained news from the rest of the country, and sometimes the only way. For example, at the time of research the Kabul conference (July 2010) had just been concluded and when the villagers were asked if they heard about the

conference they all answered affirmatively, however when asked about the conclusions of the conference none of them had any information. They explained "We saw that the conference commenced and heard about it, but then the electricity cut out for a few days so we weren't able to watch the news so we don't know what came out of it." When probed further it seemed that no one else in the village had any news about the conference, indicating that in many instances television news was their only source of information.

While radio sets were common also, they were rarely turned on. Radio was almost seen as a second to TV; only turned it on when there was no electricity available for the TV set. Many villagers stated "When there is electricity, we only turn on the TV."

Impact of Media

It became apparent that while the television was exposing people to other systems and ways of life, it was encouraging people to learn by exposing how little they understood about the world. Many villagers felt that, for example, the fact that so many more families were now sending their daughters to school was a result of the impact of the media. They would say "We have had electricity for two years in this area and in that time the TV has led to many changes, such as the fact that people are now sending their girls to school. Before, the foreigners came and told people to send their daughters to school and no one listened. Things have changed now because the media has shown people how little they understand about the world." While this is definitely a plausible reason for increased access to girls' education, it seems that it is not the only factor. It was also observed that for many of the villagers, their time living abroad, in Iran or Pakistan, had a similar effect on their opinions. It was also often cited that people in the village were far more peaceful and consultative in the face of conflict, because of being exposed to alternative examples of conflict resolution through the example of other countries on the media.

Other sources of Information

The mullah and the mosque also play an integral role in the village and act as a hub of information flow. It is common for villagers to pose questions to the mullah, after he has finished his sermon, and in front of the whole congregation, so that the answer is available to all. Many women also reported that if they had a question of religious import, they would ask their husbands or brothers to take it to the mullah. He would subsequently ask the question in front of the whole congregation and the answer would become knowledge for all. It was observed that some ministries, such as the Ministry of Public Health, would also use the mosque, and Friday prayer congregations particularly, to spread information throughout the village. The mullah has traditionally been relatively silent on the topic of the media, but it was observed that at the time of the evening prayer, when electricity was available, families would be so caught up in the serials that they would forget to attend prayer, which was causing some agitation on the part of the religious clergy and causing them to speak out more on the topic.

D. Conclusion

While both villages are located within 30km of Kabul city, and both communities experience regular movement between the national capital and their place of residence, significant discrepancies existed in terms of levels of development and standards of living, which was directly connected to access to media, and the impacts of media consumption. What becomes apparent is that while greater reconstruction efforts in Kololan, as compared to Bakhtarian, have led to some improvements in standards of living (such as running water and occasional electricity) the inhabitants of Kololan still suffer from unemployment and still experience high levels of disillusionment with the current administration. However, a significant finding of this case study is that the impact of the

media on the Kololan village has been to encourage open-mindedness and progressive practices, especially in relation to peaceful conflict resolution and girls access to education.

5 Kandahar: Kart-e-Maloomin

Three case studies were conducted in the province of Kandahar with the express aim of exploring how the media portrays the reconstruction effort and the international community and how people are formulating their opinions of these things and of the government, within the context of 'Operation *Hamkari*.' Three locations were selected in order to explore the issue from an urban, peri-urban, and rural perspective and to be able to explore how opinions may differ in these different settings. This case study centers on the community residing in Kart-e-Maloomin, a suburb of Kandahar city located on the eastern side of the city.

Kart-e-Maloomin is comprised of approximately 400 families, with an average of five people per family. It consists of 12 main roads and three off streets. It is bordered by the area of Aino-Mina to the east, Manzel e Bagh to the West, Gach Khana to the north, and the road from Kabul to Kandahar lines its southern side. The language and ethnicity of the people is Pashtun with 80% of the families belonging to the Popalzai tribe and 20% to the Hotak tribe.

A. Contextual Information

There are three mosques in the area, meaning that each mosque caters for just over 100 families. There are two middle schools in the area, one for boys and one for girls, and a high school that caters to girls in the morning and boys in the afternoon. It is common for girls to be educated, not only in the elementary grades of school like other parts of the country, but all the way to grade 12. It is also common for girls from this area to progress on to university. Unemployment and lack of security are clearly the main issues for the people of Kart-e-Maloomin. The main sources of income are small business and some of the inhabitants are also civil servants.

Migration Patterns

Kart-e-Maloomin was created in 1975 when Kandaharis ventured to the eastern corners of the city and started to create a settlement there. Soon after, in 1979, roughly 60% of the settlers sought refuge from the Russian invasion in neighboring Pakistan and left their newly built homes in Kart-e-Maloomin. Most of these refugees settled in the Pakistani city of Quetta, which is situated along the Kandahari border. It seems that the large majority of them had enjoyed good economic status during their time in neighboring Pakistan, working in import/export where they would import afghan goods to sell to the Afghan refugee community, or other small businesses. They started to return to Kart-e-Maloomin only in 1993 finding that most of their homes had been destroyed in the war or because of abandonment. As they had returned to Kandahar with full pockets, they proceeded to rebuild their destroyed homes in a more elaborate and Pakistani fashion.

While the vast majority of the refugees returned to Maloomin, some families continue to live in Quetta. Of those that did return, most of them still have ties to Quetta including frequent travel over the border usually for business, medical needs, or to visit family still based there. It seems that the time abroad and frequent exposure to the foreign culture has effects on traditional ways of thinking. For example, the construction of schools in Maloomin began upon the return of the refugees from Pakistan and was attributed by many to a change in thinking that occurred during their time abroad. Women also enjoy relative freedoms in Kart-e-Maloomin today. It is common for girls and women to engage with society through study or work and women are visibly walking in the streets and bazaars during the day. While they are always in Burka, they are not always accompanied by a *mahram*. As mentioned above, it is common for girls not only to finish high school in Maloomin, but to also progress on to University. There was only a small minority of girls that did not attend school, roughly about 5% of the population, and this seemed to be mainly because of security issues or concerns.

Power structures

The power structures in the community, and problem solving mechanisms are divided between the traditional elders; The shura, and the *wakil* (or governor). Generally, within each family there will be an elder who will keep the respect of all members of the family and will act as a guardian and authority within the family. Usually this person will be the eldest person in the family, and often a grand-parent or great uncle or something of this nature. As four or five families are often connected through marriage, there will usually be one family elder between a few families. When problems occur between the people of Kart-e-Maloomin it is common for them to approach their family elder first, and if this person is unable to solve it, then it will proceed to the shura, which is comprised of all the family elders in the area. If the shura cannot solve the problem, it is then forwarded to the formal judicial system, unless it's a tribal issue, in which case it will be forwarded to the tribal shura. When the shura adjudicates a matter, the elders will take the decision back to their families, even if it did not involve their family, and in this way information is spread throughout the community. If the matter is a private family affair, then it will not be taken to the shura.

Generally, only a small percentage of cases, perhaps 1-2%, are forwarded to the courts. The traditional system has a lot more legitimacy than the formal justice system and is trusted to a much greater extent. It is believed to be quicker, closer to the ground, and cheaper. Taking a process through the formal justice system involves many steps and bribes needing to be offered at each step of the way.

Religion

The mullahs in Kart-e-Maloomin are particularly apolitical; their statements were never connected to the government or the Taliban, nor did they give opinions or comment on issues related to governance or the state of the country. Unlike many other mullahs observed in other communities in the country, they kept their words confined to strictly Quranic issues (e.g., Zakat, fasting, prayer, etc.) One mullah retold a story about a time when he had spoken about suicide bombing in one of his sermons, and explained to the gathering that in the eyes of Islam any type of suicide is haram and that the Muslim notion of Jihad is about killing infidels, not oneself. However, he was reproached by the Taliban for his statements and so no longer ventures into the bounds of controversial topics like these.

B. Feelings and Perceptions

Reconstruction

In terms of reconstruction, Kart-e-Maloomin displays evidence of positive advancement. All roads in the area are paved and electricity is available for most of the day, though not for the full 24 hours yet. Pipes have been installed and all homes enjoy running water. A sewerage system has also been established where sewerage is routinely drained from the canals that line the streets, and most inhabitants cited this as the greatest development project that has occurred in their area. In addition to all this, Kart-e-Maloomin has the aura of a normal city, fitted with hotels, shops, billboards that advertise telecommunications companies (sometimes including the pictures of women) as well as music shops and TVs in most public places (*chai kahana*, hotels).

Foreigners

Despite relatively good levels of development in the area, most of the inhabitants did not have a positive feeling about the reconstruction effort and the work of the foreign community. Current development efforts were viewed as tokenistic and inadequate to ameliorate the suffering of their community. People often made statements like "they build streets but destroy villages," and by 'they' they meant the American forces – a common phenomenon where all foreigners and

international agencies were viewed simply as 'Americans'. There were some residents, however, that did express that learning about foreign countries on the media made them want their country to develop in the same way, and felt like there were many things to emulate from the foreigners. They were, however, a small minority.

Government

In general, people did not easily open up about their thoughts on the government or the Taliban, predominately because of concerns for safety. However, researchers were able to glean that while no specific Taliban media outlets were mentioned, the Taliban was communicating with the people mainly via direct contact in the form of *shabnama* and other forms of intimidation.

In general, it was obvious that the people are tired of war, and above most things else, would like to find a way out of the current state of unrest. Most people felt that the only way out of the current situation is for the current government and the Taliban to enter into 'peace talks' or negotiations. It became apparent that for many of the people of Maloomin, and unlike many other parts of the country, they did not feel like their lives changed greatly under the Taliban, the only real difference was that their women were not allowed education under the Taliban, otherwise, they were already living in quite conservative ways. As a consequence, the prospect of negotiating a way forward with the Taliban was not an unsettling thought. Naturally, high levels of disillusionment with the current government also contributed to this. Many inhabitants told me "we are still having problems with security and unemployment – if the government can't contribute to these things then what are they doing for us?"

C. Flows of Information and the Media

Almost every household in Kart-e-Maloomin has a television set, as well as a satellite dish. Radio is also common and consumption follows the usual pattern of watching television when electricity is available and turning to radio if it is not. Most inhabitants stated that they had developed their patterns of media consumption in Pakistan as prior to their relocation there, there had been very little media in Kandahar, except for one local radio station. Most people stated that their main reason for watching TV/listening to radio was to listen to the news, yet on observation it was revealed that there was a large viewership of serials and films also.

In general, most people felt that not enough broadcasting is done in Pashtun, and thereby felt marginalized by the media. This affected trust a great deal as there was a general feeling of the media being created by 'others' and not representing them and their needs. Local media outlets were often better received because they would broadcast in Pashtun. There was also a feeling of the media being vacuous and shy of its responsibility to educate the people- most people felt that it offered nothing outside of news or entertainment, especially television. While this is not entirely true of the television channels that people had access to, people's consumption of TV was limited to specific times of the day, and largely dictated by the availability of electricity, which meant that they had no concept of what was being broadcast outside of their hours of consumption. There was no habit of noting when particular shows were broadcast in order to watch TV at those times, and little way of obtaining scheduling information. People expressed sentiments such as " when we need health information, we don't know when the health shows are on, so we're not going to sit there waiting till the TV has a show on health"

Residents were also critical of the quality of news reporting, and felt like they weren't learning enough. One resident told us "If we watch the news for 30 minutes, its 20 minutes of killing and suffering, and the other 10 minutes is about meetings that have occurred between ministers and politicians. There is no news on development, or economics, the value of our commodities, the value

of our currency, things like that. For example, does anybody know anything about our progress this year? How many students went to university this year? How many graduated from high school? I don't know…"

The lack of trust in media, even in news broadcast by the media, became evident by the fact that residents were receiving most of their information from other sources. For example, most of the inhabitants' information about security, or news about the rest of the country, was coming from discussions with other residents, conversations with family members in other parts of the country, or the general 'word on the street.' Broadcast news was clearly not a primary source of information, and if it was a primary source for some, it was definitely cross-checked with the informal sources.

D. Conclusion

In general Kart-e-Maloomin is a well-developed area with an educated population and a well-integrated female population. While the residents had a fairly regular consumption of media, and almost constant electricity and enough monetary means to facilitate it, their trust in what the media was broadcasting was fairly low. The main drivers of this lack of trust were a language issue causing people to feel as though the media did not represent them, and theories of conspiracy and propaganda. The inhabitants were, on average, tired of war and wanted to find a way out. This feeling, naturally made them disappointed with the current administration and the foreign presence for its inability to create the peace they longed for. Most of the inhabitants favored a partnership between the government and the Taliban as a way to move forward. Their feelings toward the Taliban were not as strong as other communities in the country as the only thing that had really changed in their lives during the Taliban regime was the status of women, otherwise they had quite similar lifestyles to what the Taliban propagates. Moreover, a large majority of the inhabitants had strong ties to the Taliban, either through family members or neighbors who were Taliban, or through contact from members of the Taliban.

6 Kandahar: Shurandan

Three case studies were conducted in the province of Kandahar with the express aim of exploring how the media portrays the reconstruction effort and the international community and how people are formulating their opinions of these things and of the government, within the context of 'Operation Hamkari.' Three locations were selected in order to explore the issue from an urban, peri-urban, and rural perspective and to be able to explore how opinions may differ in these different settings. The peri-urban case study was conducted in Shurandan, a community in Daman district of Kandahar province.

Shurandan is located 15km from Kandahar city, along the road from Kandahar to Quetta, which is a well-paved road facilitating easy travel to the provincial center. There are approximately 700 families in the area all of which are Pashtuns that belong to the Popalzai tribe. The residents are predominately farmers who grow pomegranate and grape crops, with a small percentage engaged in the import of goods from Pakistan, and some shopkeepers. It could be said that roughly half the village is literate. There are three local mosques in the village and one major mosque where the whole village gathers for Friday prayers and during religious holidays.

A. Contextual Information

Migration Patterns
The majority of the inhabitants, about 80% of them, migrated to Pakistan during the Russian invasion and didn't return until the reign of the Mujaheds. During their time in Pakistan many of them were educated, and most of them were able to enjoy a good economic situation there. When they returned to Shurandan, they found that their crops and land had been destroyed and they had to spend much time rebuilding.

Education
There is one high school in Shurandan that was built by the Ministry of Education in 2008. Currently, 200 girls and 700 boys study there but the girls are only admitted till ninth grade. There is a small group of girls that travel to Kandahar city daily in order to continue onto grades ten through to twelve, but this is a very small portion of the community, roughly about fifteen girls in total. The average age for marriage is about 15 for girls, which explains why education usually ceases at ninth grade. Most of the residents don't believe that it is necessary for a girl to be educated beyond ninth grade, the age at which she enters puberty.

B. Feelings and Perceptions

Reconstruction
Before the migration to Pakistan, the people built mud houses and explained that they couldn't use wood for their roofs because of a termite problem. However, on return, UNHCR provided them with all the raw materials needed to build a house, as well as a sum of money enough to cover the labor costs, allowing them to build more modern homes with iron roofing. Many people spoke highly of the UNHCR, not just because of their help in relocation, but also because of the assistance they rendered to them in Pakistan, including food, and also transportation back to Kandahar when they returned. It seems that it is this long standing assistance from UNHCR, from their Pakistan days, that has paved the way for positive feelings towards foreigners in general.

Other major development projects cited by the residents in the area include the creation of solar energy, which had been implemented by the shura through the National Solidarity Program.

Although the village was now receiving electricity via the Kajaki dam, the solar energy was still being utilized when electricity was cut. An irrigation system had also been established via the National Solidarity Program, for the farmers' crops. Both projects could be viewed as a success; in general villagers were pleased and appreciative for the ways that they had improved their lives.

Perceptions of Foreigners

Outside of aid and assistance from international agencies, the inhabitants had no personal contact with foreigners. In fact, when they spoke of 'foreigners' there was no distinction between different nationalities or types of foreigners. Except for Iranians, Pakistanis, and Russians (a term which applied to all former Soviet states), who were not termed 'foreigners,' all other nationalities were lumped together in one group. Even when they were exposed to foreign troops, they could not recognise the flags on their uniforms to identify their country of origin. However, in general, the perception of foreigners was a good one wrapped in a great deal of optimism.

The inhabitants attributed any reconstruction in Afghanistan to foreign money and often made statements like "Where there is security, the foreigners have done good reconstruction work, but in Kandahar they haven't been able to do good work because of the lack of security here." The general mood of the community was that peace was unattainable without the foreign presence. This optimistic view was largely at odds with the mentalities that existed in Kandahar city, and was thus quite surprising.

The positive feeling towards the foreign community was definitely contributed to by the media and the reporting that was done about their efforts. As they were receiving information about foreign aid budgets via the media, they assumed that whatever reconstruction projects they heard about on the news was a product of these big budgets and contributions. In general, there didn't seem to be as much analysis of the news that they heard, as compared to say, the residents of Kandahar city, and much of the reconstruction updates were taken at face value. Perhaps the lack of analysis, or lack of mistrust, was a result of a lower level of education, and less exposure to 'travellers' from other provinces. In the city, it was more common for people to travel to other cities, and to be exposed to other Afghans, so there was a lot more bad word of mouth spreading about 'mistakes' in other provinces. For example, many residents made statements such as "if it wasn't true, why would the media report it," which contrasted greatly against the propaganda allegations of the city dwellers.

Perceptions of Government and insurgents

In general, it seemed that most of the inhabitants didn't take sides between the government and the Taliban, they were simply interested in peace and security and nation building and in whoever could deliver it. However, it is hard to be certain as most people were not ready to talk about this issue openly from fear of consequences. What is definite is the fact that people did blame the instability on the government, or rather, saw it to be the government's role to create stability. There was also little connection made between the government and the reconstruction effort, or the government and foreign aid. There was little by way of formal communication by the Taliban, but the village was connected to them through the fact that almost every family knew at least one family member or close friend who was a member of the Taliban.

Village elders explained that usually people joined the Taliban for one of two reasons. There are those that are unemployed and join for economic reasons, and there are those who are, in a sense, fugitives of the law. One elder explained that the time of the Mujahidin was one of essential lawlessness, and there are villagers who committed crimes in that time, such as kidnapping a girl to force her to become one's wife, or stealing money from other villagers, who now feel unable to return to their village. These individuals are more inclined to join the Taliban.

A number of inhabitants expressed the view that the path to peace and security was for families who had Taliban amongst them to convince these family members to work for peace. It was felt that this involved the cooperation of the government in granting amnesty to those that did repent. Many villagers felt that people would leave the Taliban if the government granted such an amnesty.

C. Flow of Information and the media

Exchange of Information

In a day to day sense, the greatest topics of conversation were always security, and people were generally updating each other on any recent security incidents they had heard about. People listened to news avidly for this reason, but anything close-by was reported to them by friends or family, by phone, or in person, before they heard about it on the news. Discussion generally ensued for the verification of exact facts and figures. That is, how many people were injured, how many casualties, and other such things. One community elder explained that people believe that the media reports honestly but that individuals exaggerate or misrepresent the facts depending on their allegiances- almost like a "Chinese whispers" effect. For example, supporters of the Taliban retell the story in favor of the Taliban by exaggerating the number of police officers that were killed, and vice versa.

Local announcements were usually made via the loudspeakers on mosques. For example, when someone passed away, their funeral was announced via the mosque loudspeaker. "Clean-up days" where the whole village would gather to clean out the canals together, would also be announced in this way, as were any local emergencies. The mosque in general was a forum for the exchange of information and at the time of this case study, it was observed that parliamentary candidates would attend Friday prayer at the mosque and use it as an occasion to distribute information about their campaigns.

While the mullah is a prominent figure in the community and well respected, his authority was limited to issues if Islamic importance. When it came to day-to-day advice about their lives, the inhabitants more commonly turned to the village elders. For example, it was observed that farmers who were experiencing some kind of problem with their crops would approach an elder in the village who had been a farmer and ask him if he had experienced anything like this in the past. If he had some advice, it was followed, but if he did not have any information on the matter, people would then turn to the Ministry of Agriculture's Provincial Office, or approach a shop that sold agricultural products. As information spread rapidly throughout the area, whenever someone else faced a similar problem in the future, they would turn to this farmer like some sort of authority on the topic. The same phenomenon was observed in relation to health issues. Once someone had visited a doctor for a particular sickness and the doctor had prescribed a particular kind of drug to them, they would keep the empty packaging so that they could take it back to the pharmacy and buy the same thing again if they ever experienced the same problem, instead of having to go back to the doctor. It would also be recommended to others if they experienced the same problem.

No one felt particularly informed by the media about topics like health or agriculture, but mainly due to a phenomenon that was perceived in other areas of the country also; limited hours of consumption being dictated by availability of electricity or free time, and a lack of knowledge of scheduling. Farmers were particularly eager to receive more information from the media (television specifically) and felt that local media should educate them on their local needs, that is, information about pomegranate and grape crops specifically.

It was also observed that the father of a family was the patriarch who other family members turned to as an authority on most topics. It was common for most younger men to discuss opinions that they had learnt from their fathers in debates with others.

Media Consumption and Dynamics

Almost every family in the village owned a radio, and as their economic position was not too desperate, they could afford the batteries to regularly listen to it. Approximately 25% of the inhabitants owned television sets. They were almost always placed in the men's quarters of the house (which also doubled as the guests quarters) meaning that women had absolutely no access to television. This was propagated by the mullah, who openly and regularly condemned women's consumption of the media on the premise that they were easily led astray. He was, however, silent on the topic of men's consumption of media. It was common for friends to gather at the home of the man who owned a television in the evenings.

A small handful of families, however, roughly three or four of them, had two television sets; one placed in the men's/guest's quarters and one placed in the women's quarters. These families tended to be economically more prosperous than the others and somewhat more progressive in thinking, They were surprisingly less interested in what the mullah had to say.

When TV was available, radio was rarely switched on. However, for the majority that did not own a television, the radio was switched on in the evenings when they returned home from their day's work and left on for the entire night. Most of the farmers were working the land during the day and not exposed to media. Shopkeepers would commonly leave the radio on all day in their shops.

Residents were commonly listening to BBC Pashtun and it was observed that often the radio was left fixed on this station. Outside of this, except for music, the residents weren't listening to much else. The main reason for this was apparently the language divide and the lack of coverage of many other Pashtun language services, but the residents of Shurandan did not seem as offended, or marginalized, by this as the city dwellers had.

D. Conclusion

Shurandan case study represents the views of peri-urban Kandahar. In general it shows that the feelings of the residents of this area towards foreigners and the government, and the reconstruction effort are much more positive than those that were expressed by the inhabitants of Kandahar city. This can be attributed to a lower level of education creating a less critical population, but mainly to a long history of good relations with aid organizations. The residents have received good aid from UNHCR from their Pakistan days till now, and the few projects that have been implemented in their village in the last 8 years through the National Solidarity Program have been successful and well received. Unlike Kandahar city, the residents did not see agreement with the Taliban as a way forward, but rather accepted the legitimacy of the government and saw 'surrender' by the Taliban as the solution.

7 Kandahar : Mand Ab

Three case studies were conducted in the province of Kandahar with the express aim of exploring how the media portrays the reconstruction effort and the international community and how people are formulating their opinions of these things and of the government, within the context of 'Operation *Hamkari*.' Three locations were selected in order to explore the issue from an urban, peri-urban, and rural perspective and to be able to explore how opinions may differ in these different settings. The rural location selected was Mand Ab village, of Daman district. It is located to the south of the Kandahar airport, and approximately 32km from Kandahar city.

A. Contextual Information

Mand Ab village is located along the road that runs from Kandahar to Quetta. While officially it is known as Mand Ab, it is referred to colloquially as Hakimjan village as Hakim Jan is the name of the *malek* of the village. There are 286 families in the village, all of which are Pashtuns of the Atsikzai tribe. All the villagers migrated to Pakistan during the Russian invasion and started to return during the reign of the Mujahidin.

The village is predominately composed of farmers who deal mainly with grape, pomegranate, watermelon and honeydew crops. There is a small proportion of the community who work as daily laborers, and travel daily to Kandahar city. The major issue for the farmers tends to be drought. They have a lot of land and good soil, but not always enough water. They often mentioned that under the Taliban they could travel the country freely for work when their crops were bad, but now the security problems prohibit it.

Education

Only 3% of the village is literate. Before migration to Pakistan there had been no schools in the area and, unlike other Afghan migrants to Pakistan, their economic situation had been too poor to focus on education while they were there. The 3% that are literate were educated in Pakistan mainly because they belonged to families that had 4 or 5 men that could work and bring in enough money for the entire family, so they had the liberty to concentrate on their education. Currently, there is one middle school in the village that until last year was conducted within a tent, but is now housed in a four-room building that was built by the Ministry of Education. There are about 90 girls and 230 boys currently studying at the school, but there is no high school within the village for them to progress onto. The nearest high school is about 30mins walk from Mand Ab and only a very small percentage of boys attend.

Local Power Structures

The power structures in the village include the Malek, the shura, and the religious clerics. The most important person in the village is clearly the Malek, this seems to be because of a combination of people's trust in him and what he has to say, and an affinity created by acts of good-will such as the fact that he often provides dinner for the men that gather in his house to watch TV nightly, and the mere fact that he provides this entertainment for others. While the Malek himself is illiterate, he is much sharper than the other villagers, which seems to be a result of his travels and the fact that he interacts with a large cross section of society. He definitely has an aura of superiority about him. Professionally, he is a butcher who provides the Afghan National Army with its daily meat requirements, which means he works mainly in the city and returns to the village in the evenings.

There are four mosques in the village that cater to approximately 60 or 70 families each. Four elders represent each mosque within the shura, making a total of 16 shura members, with the Malek heading the shura as its 17th member. The meetings are held in the Malek's house. When villagers have disputes that they would like the shura to adjudicate, they take it to their elder who in turn asks the Malek to call a shura meeting. The shura deliberates on the issue, usually based on what they know about the village and those involved, and the specifics of the dispute, but sometimes by gathering more information in the form of discussions with the opposing sides. A decision is made and all the shura members take it back to their constituencies, even if the dispute did not involve them. In this way, the whole village very quickly becomes aware of disputes that occur in the village, and it is for this reason why very private matters are usually not taken to the shura, and are instead handled by the elder alone. Outside of conflict resolution, the villagers rarely go to the elders for general advice. For this purpose, the Malek is far more respected. The mullahs are seen as authority on Islamic teachings, but not on general life issues or questions.

B. Feelings and Perceptions

Reconstruction

There have been two development projects in the area over the last eight years, both implemented through the National Solidarity Program (NSP). Eight hand pumps were installed for the purpose of drinking water, and one generator was installed in the village, to bring electricity to all of the inhabitants. While the generator proved useful for the first six months, the diesel eventually ran out and the inhabitants did not have enough money to replace it, thus, the generator has been sitting idle for the last few years and the villagers live completely without electricity.

The villagers themselves also built an irrigation system, of their own accord. It is functioning well, but is heavily dependent on rainfall to fill up the lake and allow water to be transported along the canals. There also seems to be a problem with flooding during times of heavy rainfall, and the villagers reported that they needed to build protection walls along the lake to prevent this from happening. They requested funding for this project from the National Solidarity program but were refused assistance. This experience, coupled with the poor planning of the generator situation, has caused much disillusionment amongst the villagers in relation to the government and the foreign presence. Villagers told me "The foreigners didn't help our village. Not the foreigners and not the government."

Government and the Insurgents

In general, the villagers did not have a preference for the Taliban or the government along ideological lines, they were simply in favor of whoever could bring them security and employment. There seemed to be very little, or close to no, contact with the Taliban as there were no shabnama, no Taliban media, and from what could be gauged, no Taliban family connections (as had been the case in Shurandan, Kandahar). However, the *malek's* choice of employment, providing meat to the ANA, was clearly a choice that could open him up to risk. When he was questioned about this, he responded with "Why should I be worried about the Taliban, the Taliban are from this place," implying that there was perhaps more of a connection than people were willing to talk about.

There was also very little contact with the government as the villagers rarely engaged with government apparatus (be it police officers, courts of law, or ministries), but the government was judged on how their lives changed or improved and how the security situation panned out, and basically whatever news they received from the media about the achievements or shortcomings of the government. Often this news was conveyed to them by someone else, for example by the Malek who had greater access to media and information than they did, or by other villagers who had been to the city and talked to others. This of course meant that often news was not given to them in a raw

form, it was packaged in the bias of whoever was delivering it to them, and often exposed to the 'Chinese whispers effect'.

Foreigners

The engagement with, and perception of foreigners was also convoluted. As most people have no exposure to foreigners, their understanding of their culture and lives comes from other Afghans. The Atsikzai tribe is predominately made up of traders, many of which travel internationally, or work with foreigners, so many of the villagers reported that when they made trips to Kandahar city and stayed with other tribesman, they heard stories about the lives of the foreigners. Although the villagers felt let down by the foreigners in the fact that they had not helped their village develop very much, they did express very positive sentiments in relation to the effects of the foreign presence on security. Most people felt that if the foreigners left Afghanistan war would erupt again, especially ethnic fighting between the various ethnic groups in the country. Some made statements such as "In the eight years that the foreigners have been here there has not been as much killing as there was in one month of the fighting of the Taliban against the Northern Alliance"

C. Information Flows and the Media

The Malek has a personal generator that serves his home as well as the four mosques in the area, and is switched on between 7 and 9pm in time for the evening prayer in the mosque. During this time the television in his home is switched on and most of the village men gather in his home to watch TV with him. During this time, the Malek's home becomes a hub of information exchange. Usually the conversation revolves around daily events; if someone had been to the city during the day they will share what they saw or learnt there, other villagers will share local news, talk about who got married, who got sick, and so forth. In this forum the Malek will also share information with the villagers. There is some banter about what is watched on television, but the main topic of conversation is daily news and updates. It is clear that such gatherings could become forums for debate if stimulus was given via the TV. At present, the 7-9pm time slot is predominately serials.

There are four other homes in the village that house television sets. These TVs were purchased at the time when the village generator was functioning, however they have not been switched on since.

Most families have radios which they listen to mainly for news and sometimes for music. There wasn't a habit of switching the radio on when people returned from work and keeping it on until they slept, like other parts of the country, and this seemed to be mainly because of economics and language. As the villagers were financially not very well off, they limited radio usage in order to save money on batteries, and the other limiting factor was language because none of the villagers spoke Dari and many of the women spoke local dialects, or very colloquial village versions of Pashtun, which made understanding the radio difficult. There were no local radio stations, and no broadcasting in the local dialect.

D. Conclusion

The people of Mand Ab are highly uneducated and have been the recipients of far less aid than the other case study locations in Kandahar. Lack of education and extremely basic economic means conduce to very little media consumption. The main way in which residents are exposed to the media is by going to the Malek's house in the evenings to watch TV with him when he switches on his personal generator. At such settings, information is also exchanged between the men that are there. This means that most of the news and information that inhabitants are receiving comes from word of mouth, and is clothed in the bias of the deliverer. There is very little positive feeling about the

reconstruction process and the government and foreign presence because most of the inhabitants feel neglected by it. As in both other Kandahar case study locations, language was an issue in media consumption.

8 Youth and Identity in Herat

The Herat youth community was a diverse group of individuals whose allegiances, aspirations, and perceptions differed according to their specific milieu. In general, the youth of Herat were found to be somewhat brighter, more opinionated, and in some ways more free thinking than their counterparts in other parts of the country. This was apparent even when compared to the youth observed in Kabul and on Kabul University campus. A sizeable proportion of the youth in Herat city were returnees from Iran, many of which had been born there and lived their entire lives there until returning to Afghanistan at some point in the last 8 years. This time abroad also produced significant differences between this sub-group and the wider youth community. This case study explores the topic of youth and identity in Afghanistan and the interplay of the media, focusing specifically on the youth community in Herat.

In terms of culture and identity, the most striking observation that emerged from this group was that there was a general lack of cultural identity. This became apparent in two main ways: in youth returnees who remained attached to Iranian culture because of the perceived cultural void that existed in Afghanistan; and in the general youth community who had a convoluted sense of what constituted Afghan culture, often believing that it was synonymous with Islam.

Among the community of youth returnees there was a definite sense of being happy to be in Afghanistan. This was despite the fact that they had enjoyed a better standard of living when they were in Iran. While there had been a difficult, and expressed, adjustment process to the lower standards of living in Afghanistan when they first returned, the majority of these youth felt relieved to be in a country where they were accepted and where they belonged. While in Iran, most of them experienced sometimes direct, and sometimes subtle, forms of racism and marginalisation for the fact that they were Afghans even despite the fact that most of them had been born in, and spent their entire lives in Iran. However, the irony of this situation is that the majority of them were still somewhat, if not entirely, defined by Iranian culture, traditions, and ways of life.

Most of the youth returnees would explain, “When we talk about cultural identity we talk about Iranian culture because in our minds there is no Afghan culture.” One young man stated “I don’t have a sense of Afghan identity because there is no culture – sometimes I wear shalwar but that’s not even really afghan, its more Indian.” While for many this sentiment was an express one, it also manifested itself in more subtle ways too. For example, many of the youth would joke around and make statements such as “You’re such an Afghan; you are ‘bi-farhang’ (or ‘without culture’).”

The cultural void is especially apparent on comparison with Iran because of an almost overemphasized sense of culture and cultural identity in Iran. Culture and national identity is something that has been emphasized for centuries by Iranian poets, philosophers, writers, and historians, and now by its media. While Iranian media is well developed and encompasses a vast variety of programming, there is a large proportion that is devoted to cultural programming.

Many youth in Herat were using the Internet to keep abreast latest trends in terms of fashion and hairstyles. This was managed via a number of ways, including blogs, fashion sites, and pictures of celebrities. For most Heratis this was via Iranian sites and Iranian celebrities, and some American ones. Amongst the Hazara community it was surprising to find that many of the youth were following Korean trends and Korean celebrities and often told me that “the Koreans look just like us Hazaras.” It was found that some youth in Herat would go to internet cafes to search for such pictures, and save them on flash disks to take them home and save them on their own computers. Many youth reported searching terms such as “Model” and “fashion” on Google. Some other sites that were very popular amongst Herati youth include “Bia2.com” which was an Iranian music site created by the

Iranian Diaspora. Many youth said they referred to this site for music but also for hairstyles and fashion trends.

On observation it was also clear that hairstyles and fashion were modelled on Western trends. Even when young men were dressed in the traditional shalwar-chemise, their hairstyles and accessories (watches, jewelry, shoes) were of a Western style. Other influences on dress and fashion came from particular television shows such as Indian idol and other competitive shows like 'Next top model'. Many youth also said that via Facebook they kept abreast with what their cousins and other family members who lived overseas were wearing, from the pictures they were posting.

Some youth, surprisingly, expressed the fact that they wanted to have 'an Arab identity.' They made statements such as "I really like Saudi Arabian life and their culture, I want to live there." However, on further questioning it became apparent that there was little understanding of what 'Saudi Arabian, or Arab, life' actually entailed and there was absolutely no exposure to, or influence from, Saudi Arabian culture. It seemed that for many of these youth, the lack of easily identifiable Afghan cultural traits produced a situation where all they could draw from being Afghan was being Muslim. In their minds Saudi Arabia was the heartland of Islam, thus it could be suggested that to them an Afghan identity implied a Muslim one modeled on Arabs. However, on observation, their likes, dislikes, and expectations did not actually fit into this Muslim model. They dressed in tight jeans and western style clothing, had very modern haircuts, listening to artists like 'Shakira,' and watched HBO and other foreign TV channels and shows. So in fact, such statements were simply testaments to the cultural void in their lives.

Many of the elders in Herat also attested to a need for Afghan cultural identity amongst the youth through statements such as "The influence from Iran is a good thing because it encourages education, but we need to build our own culture so that our youth don't attach to foreign cultures." However, most of them had the same sentiments towards Iranian culture and would say "we feel comfortable when our children watch Iranian media. We don't need to supervise them because Iranian media is controlled by the government and censored appropriately."

Another observation that emerged from this community was a lack of aspiration and a lack of role models for young Afghans. The returnee youth would often talk about the lack of aspiration. They would explain that when you asked an Iranian youth what they wanted to do with their lives they had big dreams and would talk about, for example, wanting to be a pilot or an astronaut, or a professor. When you asked Afghan youth the same question their responses were comparatively much simpler. They would say things such as "I want to have a job that allows me to support my family" or nothing at all. There was an apparent lack of purpose and lack of examples in their lives to inspire them, or lack of role models for them to emulate. While the media is an ideal tool for propagating role models for youth and helping young people create a sense of purpose, Afghan media is, for the most part, silent in this regard. Some youth were modeling their identities on Iranian academics whose lectures for youth were broadcast on Iranian television or on YouTube, because of the lack of local examples.

Perhaps one could assume that the desire for role models and exemplars explains the surprising interest in sports and sporting personalities. A large proportion of the youth community said that they wanted to see more sports on local media. They also explained that often, when they had access to the Internet, they would search their favorite sporting personalities and try to find out more about their lives. Their interest was not so much in game scores or game schedules, but in the personal lives of the sporting personalities. It also seemed that following a competitive sport provided some kind of purpose and identity for these youth in the vacuum that existed, but and in a non-threatening way. That is, following a sport did not pose any threats to their Islamic way of life.

What became apparent through a case study on the youth of Herat and their sense of identity is the lack of identity and the silence of Afghan media in this regard. For the youth in Herat who had spent some of their lives as refugees in Iran, this cultural vacuum was easily identifiable for them because of the benefit of comparison with Iran. The cultural void led to either youth attaching themselves to Iranian, or Western culture, or a combination of both; or an exaggerated attachment to religious identity (as it became synonymous with Afghan identity). What became apparent is the need for the media to create purpose for youth, to create a sense of Afghan culture which is separate to religion, and to provide role models that youth can emulate.

9 Shahrak-e-Jibrail, Herat Province.

"Afghan returnee communities and engagement with local media"

Shahrak-e-Jibrail (named after the angel Gabriel and sometimes referred to simply as Jibrail), a peri-urban township situated not far from the Iranian border, some 30km from Herat city, is a community comprised predominately of returning Afghan refugees from Iran. This community was selected as an arena to explore the habits and preferences of Afghan returnees, with respect to the media, in order to explore whether time spent abroad affects consumption habits and expectations of the media.

A. Contextual Information

The people of Jibrail are Shia Hazaras, 80% of which are returning refugees from Iran. The remaining 20% are Hazaras that migrated from 'Kohistan', or internal migrants. Most inhabitants spent between 5-35 years in Iran, and most of the youth and children were born in Iran. Migration back to Afghanistan, and to Jibrail specifically, began about 15 years ago, but the big influx of migrants occurred closer to seven years ago.

In general, the people are progressive and educated and live well-developed lives. Their homes typically comprise of a number of rooms – separate sleeping quarters for the girls and boys and the parents, and a living room, as well as a kitchen and outside bathroom - and are generally much more spacious than the average Afghan home. Their homes are usually stocked with fridges, televisions, and other basic 'luxury items'. Hygiene standards are high and there is a strong focus on educating and disciplining the children.

The township is well developed and organised into a number of suburbs. The roads are paved and there is a large number of shops and services available locally including grocery stores, convenience stores, internet cafes, salons, electronics stores, and markets. Basically, the inhabitants have access to everything they need within their village and reported only travelling to Herat city (or across the border into Iran) for very specific shopping or health needs.

There is a strong sense of identity amongst the community, particularly in terms of their ethnic identity as Hazara. This identity separates them from the rest of Afghanistan as they see their customs, expectations, and ideas as being fundamentally different to other ethnic groups in the country. They also tend to feel marginalised and discriminated against by the government and by other Afghans, which then strengthens their sense of Hazara identity as opposed to a more general 'Afghan' identity. On a number of occasions, various members of the community complained about the fact that heavily unstable provinces like those in the South become recipients of large development projects and budgets, whereas stable areas like Herat and Bamiyan were never invested in, dismissing it as a problem of ethnic loyalties in government. Many of the shura members also expressed their disappointment in the fact that Hazaras are not well represented in government and stated that "our distance from the government is becoming greater which poses a great risk for our community."

Beyond this, there is a strong Iranian cultural influence on the lives of the community members. Most of the community identified with Iranian culture and traditions much more than afghan ones. This was demonstrated in a number of ways. At weddings, Iranian wedding customs were adhered to, Iranian music was played, and people danced Iranian dances; many families ate Iranian food in their homes; Iranian media was consumed and trusted much more than Afghan media; (some parents explained "we feel comfortable when our children watch Iranian media. We don't need to supervise them because Iranian media is controlled by the government and censored appropriately,

whereas Afghan media outlets are commercially motivated so their content is not always appropriate") and many of the inhabitants often jokingly referred to Afghans as 'without culture' and made statements such as "we retain our Iranian cultural traits because there is not much for us to pick up from Afghan culture"

Education

Education is valued and promoted, both for boys and girls. All ages attend school, and the young children (below the age of five) also attend pre-school. There are approximately 10 to 12 elementary, middle, and high schools in the area and some vocational institutions that teach English language and computer skills. Most students were enrolled in vocational classes outside of their normal classes during the high school years, including girls. It was also common for the majority of high school graduates to progress on to university in Herat city, with no distinction being made between boys and girls. At the time of writing there were approximately 100 youth from Jibrail enrolled in Herat University.

The emphasis on education was clearly an inherited attitude from time spent in Iran, but it was also partly a response to the historic marginalisation of the Hazara community. For much of the community, the only perceived solution to improving the status of the community was through education. In fact, many of the inhabitants themselves attested to the fact that education is very important for the Hazara, and expressed the opinion that other Afghans were jealous of their achievements in the realm of education. There was also a strong sense of education being the means for progress and enlightenment in general. Often, inhabitants made statements such as "Iranians are more open [compared to Afghans] because they are educated," or "My Father is a very open man because he is educated. He meets a lot of people and learns about different ways of life."

Status of women

In addition to good access to education, the girls of Jibrail enjoy other relative freedoms too. Although they dress very conservatively (always in Iranian style 'chador' – a type of over garment that is akin to a large loose-fitting sheet that covers the woman's head and drapes down to the floor. Her face is uncovered), they move around the village quite freely, without *mahrams* (a type of male 'chaperone' as required in Islam). They go to school and enjoy social activities too. Their social life consists mainly of studying with other female classmates, getting together with other female friends to go to the salon or go shopping, and attending events at the local mosque.

In general, the girls of Jibrail were intelligent and assertive with opinions that they were not afraid to voice and debate openly, and possessed high aspirations. The high school students talked largely about their plans for university, about wanting to move to Kabul for university in order to live in a more cosmopolitan society, as well as their hopes to eventually travel abroad. Aspirations that seemed foreign to most other girls in the country.

Girls were also wed at a much later age in Jibrail, the common age being about 18-20. Education was favoured over marriage and most girls completed high school before being wed. Where in many parts of the country it was common for marriage to occur between cousins and to be arranged by the elder family members, in Jibrail this was not always the pattern of behaviour. Girls had somewhat of a say in their marriage too; if a suitor came to the family home to ask for the girl's hand in marriage, the girl was asked how she felt about the idea first.

The better social position of these girls can be attributed to a number of factors. The Hazara communities are generally more progressive in this regard to begin with, but in addition to this many inhabitants attributed this relative freedom for girls to their time in Iran. Some girls told me "the families that lived in Iran have a higher way of thinking. Our parents are more free with us because

they saw how girls lived in Iran and now emulate that." It became apparent that in many arenas of social behaviour, the returnees of Jibrail emulated Iranian society. Iran provided a strong example for this community because of the fact that in many ways it was a much more progressive society than Afghanistan, yet it was an Islamic one, meaning that people did not feel defensive or uncomfortable about reflecting its progressive nature.

Religion

The people of Jibrail are strongly religious and the mosque plays an integral part in their lives. It is the centre of their community and the mullah could be said to be one of the most influential people in the village. People demonstrated little regard for the elders amongst them, unlike most other parts of the country, but followed the words of the mullah vehemently.

The Hazara are Shia Muslims, which separates them from the majority of Afghans who belong to the Sunni branch of Islam. While the Shia constitute a minority in Afghanistan, in Iran they are the majority, and the Islamic government of Iran is a Shia government, which may partly explain the migration to Iran and the high regard for Iran and Iranians. The Shia clergy in Jibrail tend to be relatively quite progressive and have a progressive influence on the population. This is confirmed by statements made by the inhabitants themselves about their clergy, as well as observations made at the mosque.

During a funeral held at the local mosque at the time of research, the mullah addressed the congregation after the funeral rites had been performed. In the context of a sermon about the responsibilities of man on Earth and the importance of a good character, he addressed the topic of the relationship between man and wife. He spoke of the standard of respect by which a wife should be treated, making statements such as "Your wife is not your servant, she should be treated with respect." In relation to marriage, he advised that a man should not take the decision to wed unless he in a financial position to do so, as the woman that becomes his wife should not be made to suffer. He also spoke of child rearing and said that although God likes it when you have a lot of children, you should only give birth to the number of children that you can afford to feed. Many inhabitants also reported the mullah advising that "if someone wants to marry your daughter, ask her if she would like to marry him too, before you give her away."

Moreover, unlike the Sunni mosques in the country, the Shia mosques of Jibrail allowed for the attendance of women. At the above-mentioned funeral approximately 100 women were in attendance. While the women were sectioned off in a separate area to the men and the mullah was not visible to them, they were able to listen to his sermon via a PA system.

It is also common for families in the village to put their money together to invite an Iranian mullah to cross the border and come to their community as a guest for a few days to give sermons and special services at the mosque. The inhabitants trusted and respected Iranian mullahs much more than their own as they were generally more educated and gave greater guidance and prescriptions for living that allowed them to progress in their everyday lives. As these mullahs often presented more progressive interpretations of religious text, this practise also had strong impact on the life of the community.

Health

There is one government clinic and one private clinic and a number of pharmacies in the town itself, with most people going to the pharmacy for advice on minor illnesses and to the clinic for more serious matters. When asked about health facilities, the inhabitants expressed positive feelings about the doctor in their town, but lamented the fact that they lacked specialists for more complex matters. This statement itself indicated a higher level of understanding about health and well being.

For serious health matters, it is common for inhabitants to travel to Iran for diagnosis. While much health information is distributed via the media, it seemed that this was not a common way for people to become informed. Health practitioners in the village complained that the health information distributed via the media is not useful because it is in a language too complex for the common person to understand.

Economics

One of the major issues for the community is unemployment. The majority of the inhabitants earn their living through small businesses (akin to a kind of 'convenience store' that sells basic everyday needs) which does not generally bring in enough income. There are small pockets of more educated inhabitants finding employment in Herat city and commuting on a daily basis, and for some more prominent and affluent members of the village to have economic ties with Iran (such as small import/export operations). However, in general, unemployment is high, as is underemployment.

A member of the shura expressed the opinion that despite the fact that the youth of the community are being educated, they would remain unemployed after graduation because of corruption and nepotism. He related the story of travelling to Engil district a few days earlier and meeting an 85 year old, uneducated police officer and he asked "why doesn't the government give the job to an educated youth?" implying that the problem was nepotism. Many members of the community also expressed the view that the government ran on ethnic lines with each civil servant only being interested in serving his own tribe rather than the interests of the entire nation; "when we go to a ministry for a particular task, we know that we wont achieve anything unless the person behind the desk is also Hazara."

B. Feelings and Perceptions

Government

Other than representation, the other two criteria upon which the community judged the government were security and unemployment, and there was a common feeling that neither had improved, causing further disappointment in the current administration. While most of their feelings on the government were being formed on personal experience, or the experience of other community members as relayed to them, the information that inhabitants were receiving from news broadcast on TV and radio was also contributing to this, especially in relation to security.

Other members of the community, who were more affluent and educated, had a much deeper analysis of the situation and were somewhat more objective in their judgments. They supported the argument that Afghans needed to start focusing on the positive improvements that were occurring in their lives, rather than always magnifying the shortcomings of the government. This view was often supported through a comparison of Karzai with previous rulers who had struggled with the same issues but had also been unable to solve them. One member of the shura expressed the opinion that, corruption, one of the main concerns for Afghan society, has its roots in the tribal nature of Afghanistan, which is an issue that far precedes Karzai.

Observations and discussions in the town also revealed that the suggested approach of being more balanced in one's judgement of the government and acknowledging positive achievements as well as failures, was necessary for the morale of the community. Continual bad press about the government made people feel hopeless about the future and somewhat disempowered, and was not conducive to encouraging citizens to want to rally behind their elected representatives. While it was important for them to also have a picture of the shortcomings of the government, more encouraging news about progress and achievements was required but in a way that showed the community that they had played a role in the progress. That it wasn't simply the foreigners that came in and achieved it.

Reconstruction

The pace of reconstruction in Jibrail contributes to a sense of frustration with the government. As most of the inhabitants had spent a large bulk of their lives in Iran, they were accustomed to a much higher standard of living than that which they returned to in Afghanistan. As the government had not made any efforts to build roads, provide plumbing for water, or organize the supply of electricity, the town decided to take things into their own hands. For the building of roads, the shura asked each family to contribute a specified sum of money and the combined amount was given to the local administration for the express purpose of paving the roads in the town. The town also organized a piping system for running water by asking a private company to install a meter system whereby each family pays for what they use on a monthly basis. The shura also organized for each family in the village to contribute a small amount every month for a system of garbage collection. The combined effect of all of the above achievements is that Jibrail is a well-functioning town that provides a good standard of living for its residents.

The people reported a very small number of development projects having been initiated through the international community, including one school being constructed by the PRT. In general people had little faith in the international community but mainly because of a lack of information on their efforts and its specifics. People felt that there was just as much corruption in the international community as there was in the local government and often repeated that they would like to receive more information about budgets, progress reports, obstacles and reasons for them, and other such information, via the media. Shura members stated “In some places, the internationals give the money to the local shura to implement the project. This is the best way to build the future” and proceeded to explain that in the current set up, the money passed through 15 different hands before it was actually put to use on the ground, giving 15 people the opportunity to take a share.

The shura was much more involved in reconstruction than the government or international agencies, and generally had a strong stature in society because people believed that they were serving the interests of the people, in a way that no one else did. Beyond reconstruction, the shura was also involved in conflict resolution amongst inhabitants. The majority of civil cases within the community went before the shura mainly because inhabitants did not trust the formal justice system and its officials and saw the shura as a quicker, more efficient, more reliable, and cheaper means of obtaining justice.

C. Media

Media Consumption

There are 12 terrestrial television channels available in Jibrail, and many more are accessed via satellite. In general, people trust Iranian media much more than they do Afghan media because they believe that Iranian government censorship ensures that the content will always be in line with their religious beliefs, whereas the Afghan channels are commercially motivated and only care about increasing profits. There was also a great regard for the variety of Iranian shows and the quality of its programming.

The inhabitants were particularly critical of TV channels such as ‘Tolo’ and ‘Lemar’ and made statements such as, “they are only interested in distracting the population but do no good for our society,” implying that they are entertaining but not informative. The elders in the community were particularly critical of shows like Afghan Star (“instead of trying to uplift our youth through a real sense of culture, they just encourage them to focus on superficial things like their appearance”) and saw it as almost a prostitution of the arts.

Another object of criticism was the unbiased nature of the presenters. People felt that each presenter had a particular agenda, and served a particular community, and so couldn't be trusted. People were generally critical of anything that seems sensationalized or dramatic and quoted the Noorin TV channel as an example. They felt that the 'current affairs' type shows that are critical of the government, were too exaggerated and so people didn't buy into what they were saying. The majority of the people believed that one of the roles of the media should be to monitor the government, but that it should be done in a more factual and objective way. In general, it became clear that character was an integral element of trust and that people judged TV and radio outlets on the character of its presenters and its staff.

The average person, and especially the youth in the village, were regular watchers of the serials, both Indian and Iranian. Many people, including youth, expressed the opinion that the Indian serials were just entertaining, but the Iranian ones were informative. The village elders, and the mullahs, also share this opinion and were trying to encourage the population to consume Iranian serials over Indian ones. This seems to be largely derived from the fact that Iranian serials represent a culture and lifestyle much closer to their own. For example, the Indian serials seem intrusive to many Afghans in the fact that they present an intimate view of people's lives, both in terms of the private family matters that we become privy to through the characters, and the intimate way in which we become familiar with their homes. That is, following a woman into her bedroom, her kitchen, and other places that we would never normally gain admittance into. On top of all this, of course, there is also the fact that the women are unveiled and scantily dressed by Islamic standards, and the fact that they have cultural and religious practices that are at odds with the Afghan/Islamic way of life. The Iranian serials, on the other hand, are much more conservative in terms of how people are dressed, how much exposure we have to their homes (in fact, most of the Iranian serials spend very little time in the house, and if they do, they are usually mainly in the common areas) and how much we are exposed to the private family matters of the characters, as being too intimately involved is almost 'shameful' and embarrassing.

Tamaddon and Noor TV channels were highly regarded because they broadcast educational shows and aim to do more than just entertain the population. Tamadon is also particularly popular because of its link to Iran. It seems that the mullah had also been encouraging people to watch Tamadon which was significant because of the influence of the mullah.

Dynamics of Media Consumption

Almost every home had a television set that was usually located in a common area of the house. As most homes had a number of rooms, some of these were designated as 'sleeping rooms' where the family members would retire in the evenings, with one designated as a guest room. Then there was also a sitting room, where all the family interaction would take place during the day, and this is where the television was usually located. It was common for the TV to remain switched on for almost the entire day, and as family members went on about their daily business, coming and going from the house, there was usually bound to be a couple of people, or at least the children, at home at any given time. These individuals would almost inevitably be sitting in front of the TV, or keeping it on in the background as they did other things. In the evenings, it was common for the entire family to gather in front of the TV together.

During the day the children watched TV unsupervised and while they followed some serials or watched entire films, there was also a lot of 'channel surfing'. In general, they favored music videos, serials, and American action movies dubbed in Dari (eg. Rocky, Rambo). However, it was not uncommon for them to be watching documentary-type/informative programs also. They were eager to practice their English via the TV, as most of them were attending English classes. As the women and children of Jibrail were quite educated there wasn't any sense of needing to supervise their

consumption of television. In the evening, it was common for a lot of arguing to occur about which channel to watch which was usually settled by the Father making an 'executive decision'.

Expectations of Media

The main criticism of the community is the lack of variety on Afghan TV. The community felt that the majority of the channels were only broadcasting news or political shows, or entertainment, but nothing in the way of education, culture, kids shows, sports, and so forth. Most inhabitants attributed this to the fact that the majority of the channels were private channels and that their main priority is profit, rather than education of the masses. It seems that the opinions of the inhabitants in this regard, as like in most other things, is formed from a comparison to what they experienced in Iran. In Iran the variety of media, and the extent of informative and educational shows was great, and the government utilized the media as its tool to propagate its messages to the population.

However, people were positive about the fact that the media connected them to the rest of the country and to the rest of the world. One inhabitant stated "ten years ago the President would say something and we wouldn't know about it. Today, we have live coverage."

Amongst parents, school teachers, and shura members there was a lot of discussion about ***culture building*** and many of them saw this as one of the roles the media should play. It was expected that the government invest in cultural shows, and the general promotion of Afghan culture, via the media, and some even felt that a mullah should be asked to present such a show on TV. One shura member, who was also the principal of a private school, stated "The influence from Iran is a good thing because it encourages education, but we need to build our own culture so that our youth don't attach to foreign cultures." Culture building was seen as the primary means for creating a national Afghan unity that superseded any tribal/ethnic loyalties, which is something clearly important to the Hazara community, and also as a response to extreme attachments to religious identity. The same man stated "The Taliban have done so much in the way of propaganda that people are now prepared to die for them because they believe that they will go to heaven for it. The Afghan police and army need to invest in culture building and advertising so that people feel just as passionately about defending their country."

It is not implausible to imagine that this idea has come from their time in Iran, as culture building is something that the Iranian government and media invest greatly in. Iranians have a strong sense of culture and pride in their culture that stems from an understanding of great achievements to civilization made by their predecessors, which their media is constantly reminding them of. This conduces to a strong sense of identity and purpose and creates national unity and a desire to contribute to the nation's "greatness". As the people of Jibrail spent a very large portion of their lives in Iran, they felt a large cultural void in their lives upon their return to Afghanistan, because of the relative vacuum that exists in this regard. On many occasions it seemed as though people's strong sense of Islamic identity stemmed from the fact that they had no cultural identity, that being Afghan had become synonymous with being Muslim.

D. Conclusion

The case of Jibrail is by no means representative of the generality of Afghan society, but instead presents an educated community's engagement with media. The most significant characteristic of this community case study, however, is that it highlights the differences in perceptions, preferences, expectations, and trust that exists amongst returnees, particularly those that relocated to Iran, when compared to the general Afghan populace. Another significance of this community case study lies in the fact that it paints a picture of the Hazara community's feelings about the current and future state of Afghanistan and feelings and perceptions.

10 Balkh : Mazar-e-Sharif University

Focus: To document the educational role of media as perceived by the academic community.
Methodology: Two and a half days of immersion and observation on campuses, book shops, internet clubs, and libraries supplemented by focus groups and individual interviews with students, professors, administrative staff, and librarians.

A. Contextual Information

An academic center for the North, a social institution in Mazar-e-Sharif
Balkh University was chosen as case study because it functions, both, as an academic hub in the northern Afghanistan and an important social institution for the city of Mazar-i-Sharif. Founded in 1988, it currently enrolls over 6000 students, of which 25% are women. The university has nine departments: Engineering, Literature Economy, Agriculture, Medicine, Islamic Law, Law, and Teacher Training. As elsewhere in Afghanistan, the Medicine and Engineering faculties are considered the most prestigious. Balkh University is the main meeting point for the local intelligentsia and educated youth. It is also an important academic hub for the region as it attracts students from other Northern provinces and the rest of Afghanistan through the national entrance examination.

The university is spilt between two campuses. The original campus is located on the airport road and houses seven of the nine departments. The department of Medicine and Teacher Training are located on a newer campus in the city center

Alumni of Balkh University form the intellectual backbone of Mazar-i-Sharif and, to some extent, the surrounding provinces. A significant proportion of journalists working in local media outlets and as local reporters for national and international networks are graduates of Balkh University. Nearly all doctors working in hospitals or running private clinics in the area have been trained in Balkh University. Government employees in the various branches of the local administration are Balkh University graduates. Most of the teachers in the area have also been trained at the university.

Despite their notable presence within the community, Balk University alumni do not necessarily dominate the economy in the region. Affluent local businessmen are more likely to have amassed their fortunes through political ties and trade with neighboring countries. In fact, most of the local barons are not educated beyond secondary school. A good example is TV Arezu. Owned by a local businessman, Kamal Nabizade, who realized at the beginning of 2010 that professional management was key to improving the organization and programming. The network organized a competitive recruitment process and finally appointed as Executive Director Najib Peikan, a Professor of Anatomy from the Medical faculty of Balkh University and the founder of Radio Nehad.

Social life and circulation of information on campuses
On both campuses, popular meeting points are the gardens, cafeterias, libraries, and dormitories, which are not co-ed and mostly cater to students from outside the province. . Students often stay on after classes or exams and socialize, most often, through discussions, playing card games, group study, or reading the news.

Female students tend not to stay on campus outside of academic activities. Non-academic interactions or socializing between male and female peers is rare. Generally, social interactions predominantly remain within gender lines.

A wide range of associations dealing mostly with culture and sports have been set up by students and regularly hold events on and off campus. Some examples mentioned include poetry reading and combat sports training. Within the student body, students from outside Balkh province tend to form

tight knit communities in comparison to day scholars from Mazar city. Reasons for this camaraderie range from sharing living space in dormitories to sometimes having known each other through family or local ties from back home.

B. Interactions with the media

Interactions between Balkh University, at the institutional level, and the media are manifold. Messages on registration procedures, exams, university events, etc., are broadcasted, for free, through local media outlets. In addition, a program on Balkh RTA, called Ma wa Pohantun-e-Ma (Our University and Us), broadcasted university activities, students' opinions, etc., until it was closed in early 2010 due to financial constraints. Some students also recalled a quiz competition organized on campus in cooperation with the television channel Tamaddon.

At the individual level, students, when compared to other segments of the population, are particularly interested in interacting with the media through calls, SMSs, letters, and emails. Further, boxes for suggestions and messages have been installed by local media outlets at the entrances of the campuses.

If only media could educate and enlighten

Answers on the educational role of media were predominantly two-fold, expressing both what is useful for academic communities and for rural and uneducated audiences. In both cases, interviewees stated that media, and especially broadcast media, can play a crucial role in raising the level of awareness among Afghans. The academic community as a whole tended to respond to our questions both as individuals and as members of an elite educated class that had the interests of the general public in mind.

Students' answers regarding their own use of media were quite consistent. Almost all quoted Tamaddon television as the best, if not the only, channel offering useful educational programming. They mentioned specifically the program Hamsinfi (classmate), which covers the high school curriculum and was watched by a significant number of respondents to prepare for the university's entrance exam. Others also mentioned Khabarha-e-elmi wa farhangi (scientific and cultural news).
It is of interest to note that, although created by an ayatollah and associated with the Hazara-Shia community, Tamaddon was praised beyond its targeted clientele. The second most quoted outlet was One TV for two of its programs: Gadget, which showcases new technologies (cars, computers, energy, etc.) and Kar-o-Bar (Business) on the economy. Only one of the interviewees, a native of Kabul, was aware ERTV. Generally, respondents showed interest in establishing a public channel dedicated to educational programs. They insisted, however, that the format should avoid recasting the classroom setting on air but should instead offer up to date content through creative forms of visual instruction.

On health programs more specifically, both students and professors of the medical faculty believed that broadcast media is crucial in fostering preventive health behavior. Some examples that arose were programming on hygiene, family planning, and prophylaxis against contagious diseases. They emphasized that most of the population, in rural areas and economically underprivileged, could not always afford drugs or visit the doctor. Therefore, programs on radio and television were of utmost importance along with posters and outreach activities conducted by local clinics. The students highly recommended Dabestan Bu Ali (At the school of Ibn Sina), a program on Tolo T.V. that invites doctors to discuss particular health topics and conducts investigative reporting on health facilities and policies. However, they cautioned that the program was far too sophisticated and used too many specialized words, some of them English. to be understood by the general audiences. They advised that programs targeting the rural population should keep to using the vernacular and rely as much as

possible, for television, on visual explanations, for example videos, sketches, etc. USAID's short spots were mentioned as a good example of such programming.

The intelligentsia's critical stance

Critiques on the media industry emerged primarily along two lines: the suitability of the content and effect of its commercialization. The criticism of the academic community in many ways mirrored those of traditional rural elders, as in the case of Haji Kot residents (See Haji Kot case study). While both groups were concerned with the superficial, unproductive, and divisive nature of programming, they did so from different points of view, one religious and the other more secular or, rather, academic.

Contents

Criticism among students and professors was notably targeted at serials, especially foreign serials, which are extensively aired in Afghanistan. They argued that it weakens Afghanistan's culture and national identity. Indian serials were the most disliked. However, nuanced judgment was expressed for Iranian and Turkish programs, such as the Turkish Dunya-e-Asrar (World of secrets) aired by Tolo T.V. Iranian and Turkish programs are considered better both in terms of acting and plot and as being more in tune with Afghan Muslim culture. Respondents insisted that they do not reject serials on the whole but would like to see more meaningful stories from which common people could draw moral lessons rather than "repetitive stories leaving the brain empty when you turn off the television" (female economy student). A Professor of Neurology went so far as to say that "those serials and all those stupid programs on Afghan channels are probably financed by foreign powers in order to make the Afghans dumb and dominate us better".

The Afghan Star contest, organized by Tolo, was also heavily criticized for distracting youth from pursuing intellectual improvement and academia. They argued that in a country that urgently needs to emphasize the value of work and education in order to achieve long-term development such void and corruptive content was counter-productive. Many of the students interviewed said that it would be more helpful to organize Student Star, Pupil Star, or University Star programs instead.

Privatization of the media

Superficiality was often related to private ownership. The common opinion was that much self-restraint cannot be expected from private media which is solely profit driven . Moreover, they mentioned the prevalence of biased information, insult, and defamation in cases where stations are owned by particular groups and personalities or are funded by foreign governments. Some examples offered included Pakistan's support for Shamshad, Iran's for Rah-e-Farda, and Tajikistan's for Arezu. A solution suggested was government intervention in cases where the media was involved in attacking specific segments of Afghan society. A vast majority of interviewees, for instance, supported the closure of Emrooz, which was in fact banned by the Afghan government on July 27th, 2010, for "fomenting religious differences and disrupting national unity".

A significant point of difference between the academic community and conservative members of rural Afghan society lay in their prescription for promoting public programming. Unlike the rural society (see Haji Kot case study), the academic community of Balk University did not prefer government channels as an alternative to the free market crisis in Afghan media. They found government programming of poor quality and in alignment with the government agenda, therefore making the shows unappealing to audiences. Ideally, most interviewees favored channels that are both independent, neither partisan nor fully pro-government, and air meaningful programs, neither dry informative content nor void of entertainment.

Primary sources of information for the academic community

Libraries

Both campuses have libraries for students. The books are predominantly in English. They are good quality recent volumes corresponding to the first or second years of the college curriculum. They cover various subjects ranging from popularization of sciences to history, literature, and politics. According to the librarians and students, the language barrier with regard to English remains a major problem. The rest of the collection, in Persian, tends to focus more on classical literature and religion and mostly comprises of older poor quality volumes. Some of these books are also translations of Western works, especially on history and sciences.

Another off-campus library of interest is the Ferdowsi Library, which is financed by the Iranian consulate in Mazar-e-Sharif. The library was established in June 2010 and flaunts the calligraphic inscription of a famous hadith: "Seek knowledge, from the cradle to the grave". It houses 20,000 books, in Persian and English, on various subjects ranging across humanities, sciences, and religion. It also has a modern outlook and is considered the best library in town. It targets school going and university students and was already popular at the time of the field visit in August 2010. In addition, weekly cultural activities are planned for the near future. The promotion of Iranian books and culture is part of a deliberate policy. Further emphasizing this agenda are the pictures of Khomeini and Iranian flags lining the hallways.

University Circulations

Balkh University publishes a yearly journal, which gathers articles by professors across a range of fields. The articles are in Dari with abstracts in English. They rely mostly on Western academic sources and present accounts on technology, sciences, and humanities. Some examples of articles include a presentation on thermodynamics theory, a comparison of different kinds of concrete, and an essay on the excellence of Islamic sciences in the Middle Ages.

Bookstores

University and school going students are the primary customers of bookstores. Mostly, they buy academic manuals pertaining to their field of study. Twelfth grade pupils particularly seek out records of the previous years' university exams. Other popular genres include Persian literature, language methods, and psychology. Translated versions of self-help books by Anthony Robins are especially popular. Iranian books constitute, according to bookstore managers, around 70 to 80% of their sales. Virtually all translations of Western works, including the only quality textbooks on sciences at the college level and many textbooks for primary and secondary education, come from Iran. There are two main reasons: First, Iranian books are cheap because of subsidies and copyright violations. Second, the quality of books in terms of paper, ink, layout, colors, and content is good.

Internet

Students and professors are regular users of the internet. Besides messaging services and chat services, a number a sites were mentioned as useful for academic work. Among them were Wikipedia Farsi in all fields, kankor.com, an Afghan blog used to prepare for university entrance exams, daneshnameh.roshd.ir, an Iranian website providing information on humanities, Islamic studies, experimental sciences, Mathematics, etc., and other specialized websites in Persian and English. Most students and professors need better access to the internet since scientific publications hardly reach them through other mediums. However, there is a significant economic barrier to internet usage. On the one hand, the connection is very slow in private internet clubs, a few tens of KBs at most, forcing users to pay high fees for limited access. The usual price is 50Afs or 1 USD per hour. On the other hand, the internet access point available on the campus is small, slow, and limits users to 10 minute sessions.

Newspapers

A few students were seen reading Mandegar, Kabul Weekly, and Afghanistan. Most of them were keen on reading newspapers regularly but the distribution was irregular and titles often reached Mazar-e-Sharif with a delay. The feeling was that the dominance of broadcast media and the absence of one or two good quality dailies with an efficient distribution system were, unfortunately, preventing further development of readership in Afghanistan.

11 Balkh: Haji Kot

Focus: To document the circulation of information and the perception and utilization of media in the privileged rural setting of Haji Kot,
Methodology: Two and a half days of immersion and observation supplemented with focus groups and individual interviews with shura members, farmers, and teachers. A final component consisted of a visit to Shuha Madrasa as a mini case study of a media vacuum,

A. Contextual Information

A mixed village
Haji Kot is a big village located 2kms away from Balkh town and approximately 25kms from Mazar-e-Sharif city. It lies 2kms away from the highway linking Mazar-e-Sharif to Sheberghan, an important axis of communication at the national level.

Haji Kot has a total population of 3000 residents, which comprises of around 400 households. Up to three generations usually reside within the same household. The first generation includes the elders of the family such as the active father and his wife or possibly wives. Unmarried daughters and sons, if married their wives, make up the second generation. The third generation includes the children of married sons of the household.

The house itself is often a large one or two-storey structure constructed of mud and surrounded by orchards and fields. Part of the house is reserved only for women. It also contains a large sitting-room used to entertain guests. In some cases, another house is built within the same complex to accommodate all the family members.

Like in many other villages in the Northern region, the population of Haji Kot is mixed. The majority is Pashtun. They are also the dominant group in the village and are aware of it. The Pashtuns primarily speak Pashto among themselves. However, they predominantly tend to know Persian. The Hazaras and Uzbeks make up the minority groups in the village. As a result, the village consists of both Sunnis, Pashtun and Uzbeks, and Shias, primarily Hazaras. This ethnic and religious mixing is a product of Emir Abdur Rahman Khan's resettlement policy initiated in the 19th century. Pashtun communities were resettled in the region north of the Hindukush then known as "Turkestan". The policy was intended to foster national unity and extend his control over various regions incorporated into Afghanistan.

Relative affluence
With the construction of big new houses underway, the bustle of motorbikes and occasionally cars, and the availability of grid electricity, imported from Uzbekistan through Mazar-e-Sharif, the general outlook of Haji Kot is promising. Virtually all families own a television set, if not several. Only a handful of houses own satellite antennas. The low ownership in satellite antennas is mainly due to a lack of interest, and not budget constraints, since around 10 channels are already available on terrestrial antennas. The economy is largely driven by agricultural activities, which employ 80% of the dwellers. Cotton and wheat are the main crops. Cows, bred for their milk and meat, make up the most common livestock of the village.

Various factors have allowed this village to reach relative abundance. The fertile soil and flat terrain, supplemented by easy access to water, make farming efficient and productive. Moreover, its proximity to Balkh and Mazar-e-Sharif facilitates trade in products at good rates and also allows some inhabitants to hold jobs outside the village, in Mazar-e-Sharif or elsewhere in Balkh, as teachers, policemen, and shopkeepers.

Haji Kot has also been well served in terms of development projects, but it does not depend on them for its economy. Project examples include a 60,000 USD grant to the local shura for building a municipal water tank and NGO assistance with renovating the piping grid.

The access to public services is relatively good. Residents have easy access to the police station, clinics, and the district office in nearby Balkh. There are three schools in all, two elementary, two intermediate (upto 9th grade), and one high school. As a result, the young generation is almost completely literate. A lot of girls, who had to discontinue their education during the civil war or Taliban regime, returned to school after 2001 and usually continued until their mid-20s or marriage. The older generation has a literacy rate of around 60%, according to shura members, which is higher than the national average.

A typical power structure

The local power structure takes the form of a shura (شورا), or council, comprising around 20 members, primarily male heads of the richest families who are usually over 50. The shura interacts with the local government at the district and provincial levels through a representative (ندهٔ نمایی) chosen for an indefinite period. He is, according to shura members, the equivalent of the village head formerly addressed as the malek (ملک, literally "king") or village chief (دار قریه).

Most of the shura members are Pashtun, reflecting their majority in the village population. However, the members interviewed insisted that ethnic unity and tolerance are exemplary in Haji Kot. They cited protecting the other ethnic groups through the vicissitudes of the 90s and being reciprocally protected by their fellow villagers when the area fell under the control of the Uzbek Jumbesh-e-Milli or Hazara Wahdat-e-Milli militias.

A village well integrated in the political scene

Haji Kot is represented in the national level politics. One of the Members of Parliament, Mrs. Gulalay Safi, originates from Haji Kot. Further, at the time of the field work in August 2010, three of the candidates running for legislative elections in Balkh province were from Haji Kot, although not permanent residents. However, opinions recorded showed the dissatisfaction of several shura members with Mrs. Gulalay Safi. They complained that she fell short of bringing tangible benefits to the village during her term. In their view, the function of a Member of Parliament is primarily to serve his or her constituency, rather than getting engulfed in political debates. On the other hand, the three candidates were also viewed cautiously by the local shura, as their dedication to Haji Kot was yet to be proved despite the possible window of opportunity.

At the local level, through its representative, the village actively interacts with district authorities, the provincial governorate, and government branches, primarily the MRRD, Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Agriculture, located in the near-by center of Mazar-e-Sharif.

Concerning issues of stability and security, the majority of Haji Kot's residents expressed enjoying stability and relatively good standards of living. They did not express being in favor of the insurgency. However, shura members reported that rebels of various affiliations were not far, with some individuals and groups at large in neighboring districts, particularly Chimtal. The presence of foreigners in that area was scarce. It included, approximately, one or two visits a year by mostly Afghan staff of NGOs, intermittent work by archeologists, and ISAF patrols on the highway. The latter's presence in the area was deemed insufficient to ensure full security and eliminate common banditry. The general feeling was of overall satisfaction with the current political situation coupled with a rather confident belief that, should the power fall back in hands of the Taliban, little would change in Haji Kot. On ideological grounds, the most progressive elements of the Shura, however,

stated that girls' education and the possibility to hear music were two examples of irreversible progress associated with the new post 2001 regime.

B. Media, their use and the other sources of information

Haji Kot is well covered by broadcast media, which is in turn incorporated into the local political machine. Local power brokers often use them to get their message out. For instance, the shura representative speaks from time to time on the local radio station, Now Bahar, which broadcasts from Balkh or Mazar-e-Sharif, to give his opinions on the current situation or to draw the attention of local authorities to a particular issue. Similarly, when media reporters visit the village, they prioritize interviews with shura members. In general, local media outlets are perceived as a useful tool benefiting the village.

The role of media in fostering national unity and tolerance featured significantly in conversations with shura members. Due to the diversity of Haji Kot, inter-ethnic cohesion and peace was of utmost importance to the shura. The members explicitly discussed, with the research team, the responsibility of media outlets in fostering unity and preventing ethnic conflicts. While they thought media outlets were generally faring well in this regard, some controversial episodes or series were cited as potentially harmful to the peaceful coexistence of various ethnic and religious groups in Afghanistan. Specifically, they recalled the broadcasts by former presidential candidate Latif Pedram, whom they felt expressed overly pro-Tajik and anti-Pasto views. An indication of the shura's openness was evident in their limited criticism of Pedram's program, which they agreed rightfully spoke out again polygamy. In response to the episode, the shura held a session to publicly condemn Pedram's views on ethnicity on behalf of the village.

On the whole, the widespread use of broadcast media has limited the role of traditional sources of information. Mullahs, for instance, tend not to comment or contribute to news. This is significantly different from some Shia communities in which imams exert an important influence on political issues in addition to religious and social matters (see case studies conducted in Shahrake-e-Jebrail and Dasht-e-Barchi).

Another informal source of information involves news brought back by the MP and shura representative from Kabul and the provincial center respectively. Acting as an intermediary between the center and the village shura, the MP, directly or through her family members, informs her constituents about the political situation at the center At the local level, the representative also brings back information from his dealings with the provincial administration.

One last source of information and influence that arose during the study was a local landed proprietor (زمیندار). He was said to play a significant, feudal-style, role in helping poorer members of the community out of his own pocket, through either direct aid or by intervening on their behalf with local administrations. In return he enjoys a relatively wide influence on local opinions.

Are media suitable for a rural environment?

Adaptability of broadcast media to the village environment is a significant factor in assessing the effectiveness of the medium. Across interviews with village elders, there was a notable preference for the programs of Radio Azadi and Radio Ashna-VOA. Reasons for the preference included the educational value and presentation style of the programs. For example, particular health topics were explored in appealing formats, like pedagogical dramas. Medical concepts and recommendations were delivered in simple everyday vocabulary. The general sense was that programs from these stations were well adapted to local tastes and efficient in communicating the message. Interviewees found them a good complement to the outreach sessions organized by local government institutions,

in this case sessions held twice a week by the local clinic in Balkh. Of particular interest: some interviewees compared these local programs with national level productions like Dabestan Bu Ali, a health program broadcasted by Tolo TV. They found that despite its good quality the usage of sophisticated vocabulary rendered the programs inaccessible or unappealing.

With regard to ethnic and linguistic preferences, the research team found that Pashtun interviewees did not complain about a lack of programs in their native language. This is significant as only channel Lemar, among all those accessible, broadcasts a majority of Pashto programs. The lack of dissatisfaction could be attributed to the prevalence of bilingualism among Northern Pashtun communities. Interestingly, a significant proportion of Sunni Pashtuns mentioned Tamaddon, a pro-Shia network (see Synthesis Report), as a good television channel. This may suggest that even networks primarily promoting particular political agendas can reach audiences beyond their own clientele –in the case of Tamaddon, it is due to programming on religion and education.

A Strong but Conservative Critique

Critiques on the media industry emerged primarily along two lines: the suitability of the content and effect of its commercialization.

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Condemnation of serials was nuanced yet almost universal. There were two sources of dissatisfaction. The first was concerning the influx of dubbed foreign shows for the Afghan market. The second had to do with the messages being conveyed by the shows.

Foreign shows, especially those produced in non-Islamic countries, were considered unsuitable for Afghans as they showed disregard for the conservative values of their audience. Elders found them to be a corrupting influence on the younger generation especially. A former Jihad fighter and important local figure, referred to as “commandant”, stated for instance that he had a much higher opinion of Razha-e-In Khana (“The Secrets of this House”), aired on Tolo, because it was produced within Afghanistan and addressed real Afghan issues, through an approach compatible with Afghan Islamic culture.

The former Jihad fighter and other shura members were also of the opinion that works of fiction, serials in particular, should convey a message, a moral lesson, in order to be useful. Otherwise, they were a waste of time, especially in the villages where during certain seasons of the year residents are largely unemployed. The same critique applied to music. They mentioned that there was no reason to reject music as a whole, like the Taliban had done. However, they insisted that poor quality singers making up for their lack of talent by surrounding themselves with immodestly clad dancing girls could not be respected as artists. Instead, they favored the broadcasting of music and songs, preferably Afghan, with meaningful lyrics. Interviews with residents, apart from the shura and influential members of the community, led to similar remarks emphasizing, also, that serials from Muslim countries such as Turkey were better suited to Afghan traditional identity.

Privatization of Media

The second line of critique regarding the commercialization of media also reflected a significant preference for tighter media control. Most interviewees perceived private outlets as greedy and profit driven. To this end, there was a general sense that broadcasting superficial or vulgar programs was the norm in order to profit from advertisements, SMSs, and calls from viewers. Tolo T.V., which epitomizes the free market, was harshly criticized for broadcasting programs like Indian T.V. serials and Afghan Star among others. On the other hand, some of the more interesting programs like Gufteman (Forum) or Gozaresh-e-shish o nim were approved of. Despite the mixed feelings, respondents found that privatization of the media was doing more harm than good and that the industry did not adequately bare the responsibility they were charged with.

A few also mentioned the "media war" resulting from free-market competition as a source of unwanted conflict. One example provided was the on-air dispute between Lemar and One TV over broadcasting rights for the football world cup. Opinions on commercialized local media was even poorer. Businessmen with no experience in the sector were accused of propagating unsuitable programming. Further, the lack of professionalism was also criticized, as these stations were often staffed with relatives and friends. However, the current government run media was not seen as a viable alternative since the quality of programming was poor.

Most interviewees were in favor of a tighter government control on media in order to prevent biased outlets from disrupting national unity, to limit or forbid programs that clashed with Afghan culture or moral codes, and to encourage more educational and constructive content.

The absolute contrast: a media desert, 10kms away

This case study was complemented, as a comparative exercise, with a visit to a madrasa in the neighboring village of Shuhab. The school was chosen because it enjoys a special reputation, not only in Balkh but also in neighboring provinces.

Around fifty students from 11 to 20 years of age reside there for periods ranging from one to eight years. The youth enrolled are completely isolated from the rest of society and visit their families more than twice a year. They are confined to the compound, which is in-turn isolated from the neighboring farms. Daily activities are organized around the five calls to prayer, sermons at the mosque, and the study of the Quran, the hadiths, and a few other books of interpretation. The students are taught by a single instructor, who also acts as the mullah of the mosque. According to the mullah, the school graduates students who have a better command over the Shari'a than Shari'a faculty graduates themselves.

This madrasa is probably the only place visited for this survey where media consumption is nil. No newspapers come to it. Radio and television are forbidden because, according to the mullah-headmaster, the programs would distract pupils from their studies. Exchanges with the pupils actually showed that they had virtually no information on the current events affecting Afghanistan and the world. The American presidential election, and for most of them even Afghan parliamentary elections, were unheard of. Although direct questions on insurgency were avoided, the madrasa did not seem very likely to have links with the Taliban, at least according to a former student interviewed in Mazar-e-Sharif. One possible reason is that it is primarily non-Pashtun.

After years in such ascetic isolation, the alumni most probably face difficulties adapting to and integrating into society, which in turn could lead to radical attitudes.