Global Media Journal
German Edition

BerlinUP Journals

Media Practice & Research Reports

"Priorities Were Chosen by Donors" A Critical Review of International Media Assistance in Afghanistan (2001-2021)

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Abstract: This study presents findings from research on international media development strategies and practices in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021. Based on qualitative interviews with 35 Afghan journalists in Afghanistan, the research offers a retroactive assessment of key patterns in International Media Assistance. The findings indicate that prevailing media assistance strategies, as perceived by interviewees, were largely aimed at changing attitudes and behaviors through media programs. This reflects a media-centric paradigm in which people are viewed as passive recipients of information rather than active agents of change. Interviewees also noted that the international community underestimated the divide between liberal urban communities and conservative rural communities. Media programs often targeted liberal, urban youth, further jeopardizing social cohesion in Afghanistan. Future programs should prioritize citizen engagement in public affairs through the media to help counter the widespread perception that decisions are made elsewhere. Participatory approaches should also include conservative communities, as a sole focus on liberal urban elites has been seen as deepening social divisions.

Keywords: International Media Development, Afghanistan, Media Assistance, Media for Development, Donor-Driven Agendas

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Global Media Journal – German Edition
Vol. 15 No. 1 2025
ISSN 2196-4807
DOI: 10.60678/gmj-de.v15i1.353

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To cite this article: Bahar, Hazrat & Wollenberg, Anja. (2025). "Priorities Were Chosen by Donors" - A Critical Review of International Media Assistance in Afghanistan (2001-2021). *Global Media Journal – German Edition*, *15*(1), DOI: 10.60678/gmj-de.v15i1.353

In August 2021, a year and a half after a peace agreement was signed in Doha between the United States and the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan,' the Taliban captured Kabul and took control of the government with little resistance from state forces. Despite the Taliban's slow but steady rise to power across much of the country in the preceding years, the international community did not anticipate the coup, nor did it expect the Afghan army to surrender immediately. This miscalculation led to subsequent failures in protecting local staff, organizing their evacuations, and managing the political fallout.

Before the coup, Afghanistan's economy and livelihoods depended largely on international aid, with about USD 47.2 billion spent on development assistance between 2002 and 2021, peaking between 2009 and 2012. About half of this budget was spent on good governance and civil society, with the rest spent on education, agriculture, health, and humanitarian aid (Zürcher, 2020). However, international aid programs—and the strong influence of the U.S State Department on Afghan government policy—have been widely criticized by researchers and international observers as ineffective or even harmful. "Afghanistan, more than any other country, exemplifies the shattered dreams of externally led state-building. After nearly two decades of massive international engagement, Afghanistan today remains one of the poorest countries in the world and is again ruled by the Taliban," concludes a report about the impact of aid in highly fragile states (Zürcher, 2022, p. 8; see also Osman, 2020).

In an effort to learn from past mistakes, many Western governments have reviewed their diplomatic strategies to promote peace and democracy in Afghanistan (Blohm et al., 2024). This research contributes to that reflection by critically examining media development practices between 2001 and 2021. It is guided by the search for key patterns in international media assistance and of how these were perceived and assessed by different stakeholders. The article presents findings from 35 interviews with Afghan journalists regarding their perceptions and evaluations of international media support programs.

We begin by providing an overview of Afghanistan's emerging media landscape and the role of media development funding between 2001 and 2021. This section also introduces the theoretical framework used to assess media support. Detailed categories were derived from the analysis of interviews and are presented in the Findings chapter, followed by a discussion of the results and concluding remarks.

Media Development and Key Features of the Emerging Media Landscape in Afghanistan Before 2021

After the collapse of authoritarian regimes, the subsequent liberation of media systems commonly follows a transitional pattern that begins with savage deregulation, the proliferation of media outlets, and euphoria surrounding unrestrained freedom of speech and open access to mass media. Previously repressed groups, minorities,

and political movements quickly enter the public arena, often resulting in a public sphere shaped by both joyful anarchy and fierce competition between newly emerging political parties (Richter et al., 2023; Voltmer, 2013; Voltmer & Sorensen, 2019). Overwhelmed by the uncontrolled mushrooming of media, new authorities often turn to foreign governments and the international aid industry for support in their struggle to establish regulatory frameworks. Media support organizations—primarily from Europe and the USA, but increasingly also from Russia and China—are invited to assist in drafting media laws and regulations, or to provide training for journalists and government officials. They also provide funding for independent media outlets and support the establishment of journalists' unions or press agencies (Drefs, 2022; Harris, 2018). As a result, media structures emerge that typically comprise sub-systems such as state media, independent media, community media, and party-affiliated media. Following the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, Afghanistan's media system experienced all of these stages of transition.

In the first decade of transition, broadcasting licenses were issued on demand with minimal scrutiny, leading to a rapid expansion of the media landscape. This growth was evident in the increasing number of TV stations in Kabul and the proliferation of small local media outlets across the provinces. According to Reporters without Borders, 543 media outlets were operative in early August 2021, employing 10,790 media workers (RSF, 2021). The Afghan media system was widely praised as one of the most liberal in the region, supported by a constitution that guaranteed freedom of expression and the right to access information, as well as a media law that encouraged private broadcasting and endorsed a generally liberal approach to regulation: "Afghanistan hosts a vibrant media sector, with multiple outlets in print, radio, and television that collectively carry a wide range of views and are generally uncensored" (Freedom House, 2017; see also Bajraktari & Parajon, 2008; Hamidi, 2015).

Foreign funding from the United States, Iran, Turkey, Japan, and EU countries played a significant role in shaping Afghanistan's media landscape (Osman, 2020; Page & Siddiqi, 2012). Some of this funding was openly driven by political interest, while other contributions were part of broader efforts to promote democratic governance and peacebuilding. This article focuses on the latter. Accordingly, the overview of media development in Afghanistan in the subsequent sections will be presented through the lens of conceptual approaches commonly used in international media assistance as one branch of the aid industry. Following Manyozo's (2012) framework, we distinguish between (1) media development, (2) media for development, and (3) a participatory (or empowerment) approach to media (see also Drefs & Thomass, 2019; Hamidi & Mielke Möglich, 2021; Manyozo, 2012; Servaes, 2012). As foreign media funding in Afghanistan came from a range of donors with diverse backgrounds and agendas, all three approaches played a role—albeit to varying degrees (Osman, 2020; Page & Siddiqi, 2012).

Media Development

Media development can be defined as an organized effort to strengthen the capacity of media and journalists—including infrastructure, institutions, skills, and resources—particularly in contexts challenged by transition, crisis, or other forms of distress (GFMD, 2024; Manyozo, 2012). In this sense, media development is "adopting a holistic and systemic approach towards the media and information environment, which considers its legal, political, economic, gender, technological, and societal dimension" (GovNet, 2023). As media development support programs are largely provided by Western countries, their underlying values reflect Western normativity with a pluralistic, independent, and open media system conceived as fertile ground for good governance and democratic transformation. Critics view this approach as in line with the paradigm of modernization, namely the proclaimed supremacy of the Western liberal media model, with its emphasis on political neutrality, market competition and independent media as ideals (Harris, 2021; Drefs & Thomass, 2019; Hamidi & Mielke Möglich, 2021).

In Afghanistan, international assistance for media development was largely directed toward building infrastructure for the production and dissemination of journalistic content—most notably radio stations, news agencies, TV stations, and media-oriented NGOs. Radio networks such as the Killid Group and Salam Watandar (both funded by the United States) facilitated the allocation of international funding through their networks of small local radio stations. The latter type of media was prioritized in media assistance as they reached citizens in both urban centers and rural areas (Hamidi, 2015; Page & Siddiqi, 2012).

Capacity-building initiatives and resources were also extended to private television channels, such as Tolo TV, a privately-owned commercial broadcaster known for its liberal entertainment content and government-critical political programming. Established by the Moby Group with initial funding from USAID, Tolo TV continued to receive donor aid until 2021, despite its commercial orientation and economic success (Hatef & Cooke, 2020; Page & Siddiqi, 2012). Other television channels also survived on funding, although their revenue models were often more diversified. Osman (2020) speaks of "over four dozen terrestrial TV stations and counting" (p. 91), that combined funding from foreign governments—primarily Turkey, Iran, and the United States—with contributions from politicians, warlords, and religious leaders, as well as revenues derived from the arms and opium trades and commercial advertising (Osman, 2020; Page & Siddiqi, 2012).

International media development also helped build a network of civil society organizations dedicated to strengthening the journalistic profession and advocating for press freedom. Among the largest of these is the NAI Media Institute, founded with the support of Internews.[1] Another important player is the Afghanistan Journalist

[1] NAI stopped working inside Afghanistan in February 2024.

Safety Committee established in 2009 with funding from International Media Support (IMS), aiming to protect and defend press freedom in Afghanistan. Other organizations include the Afghanistan Journalists Center (AFJC), the Afghan Independent Journalists Association (AIJA), and the Investigative Journalism Center PAYK.

Over the course of two decades, organizations such as Internews, DWA, BBC Media Action, MiCT, IWPR, IMS, Mediathek, and others provided capacity-building and journalist trainings. European organizations generally played a more active role in this domain than their U.S. counterparts. Training initiatives were frequently paired with program production or funding for channels.

Media for Development

The Media-for-Development (M4D) approach targets media audiences with strategic communication geared towards attitude and behavior change. Contrasting the media development approach, mass media is not the subject of intervention but is instead employed as a vehicle to reach target audiences and influence their mindsets in line with development goals, such as poverty reduction or other SDG-related goals (Manyozo, 2012; Servaes, 2012), including disease prevention through vaccination and protective measures (Colle, 2008; Manyozo, 2012). In Afghanistan, M4D activities included campaigns promoting COVID-19 protective measures, girls' school enrollment, and voter participation during elections. The largest share of funding, however, went to "Anti-Terrorism" campaigns aired via radio and TV aimed at discouraging support for the Taliban (Haselock, 2010). These also involved more than 130 radio stations operated by military actors such as ISAF, NATO, and Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) (Page & Siddiqi, 2012; see also Haselock 2010).

The Media-for-Development approach is criticized for its top-down use of strategic communication to enforce specific behaviors (Drefs & Thomass, 2019; Harris, 2021; Servaes & Malikhao, 2008). Reflecting a media-centric paradigm, it views people as passive recipients of treatments rather than active agents of change.

Participation and Empowerment

The empowerment approach promotes the direct involvement of communities in developmental agenda-setting and participating in decision-making processes (Manyozo, 2012). In this framework, media function as a means for "informed, participatory, and inclusive decision-making in relation to the formulation of the development agenda" (Manyozo, 2012, p.155). The participatory approach is critical of external expertise and top-down processes often imposed by Western actors in local contexts, asserting that local knowledge is the only effective pathway to development. The demand for citizen empowerment is particularly strong in emerging democracies with histories of authoritarian rule and state-controlled communication cultures (Voltmer & Sorensen, 2019).

Carpentier et al. (2013) distinguish between participation through and participation in the media:

> Participation through the media deals with the opportunities for mediated participation in public debate and for self-representation in the variety of public spaces that characterize the social. The media sphere serves as a location, where citizens can voice their opinions and experiences and interact with other voices (p. 288).

In contrast, participation in the media involves structural participation in editorial decision-making processes—such as holding executive roles or ownership positions—thereby increasing the impact and influence of participation.

The empowerment approach aims to transform existing power constellations: "The community empowerment approach emphasizes empowerment as constituting emancipation from structures of oppression" (Manyozo, 2012, p. 176). It highlights the importance of recognizing local knowledge for the solution of local issues and encourages citizen engagement in contestations around power and wealth. In this sense, the empowerment approach differs from the more common "systems approach" (Manyozo, 2012, p. 176) to participation, which focuses on strengthening civil society coalitions and their role in improving local services as well as "educating communities about government functions, systems, and bureaucracy" (p.167). While both approaches recognize and value local knowledge, the systems approach does not challenge underlying power relations in which participation is taking place.

In Afghanistan, small local radio stations were funded by international donors, primarily with the intention to improve access to information for rural communities: "The country's 174 radio stations are prime vehicles for conveying messages, information, and entertainment, particularly across rural Afghanistan," states USIP in a peace brief (Procter, 2015), reflecting limited interest in citizen empowerment or participatory media practices. At the same time, ample resources were provided for the operation of radio studios and program production, enabling Afghan media makers to actively participate in the media. However, from the perspective of development critics, this approach prioritized U.S. strategic interests in Afghanistan over genuine empowerment of the population. As Osman (2020) argues:

> Having poured millions of dollars into local television and radio in the Middle East, the US government certainly wants to generate pro-US government content and ideology (...). Afghan television stations are incentivized not to cover civilian casualties or other reports that portray the US war in Afghanistan in a negative light. Clearly, these are examples of US propaganda and media imperialism (Osman, 2020, pp. 88-89).

Also, the prevalence of private commercial media should not be mistaken as a natural companion of democracy; rather, it must be understood as a system deriving from and shaped by policy pressure from Western donors (Harris, 2021). From a historical perspective, this "imperial gaze" (Osman, 2020, p. 130) appears aligned with the modernization paradigm that dominated development cooperation throughout the 20th century—until it was gradually challenged and displaced by

critical approaches such as dependency theory and empowerment, at least within academia.

Modernization is based on a proclaimed dichotomy between the Global North (formerly industrialized nations) as a leading force in economic growth and the Global South (formerly the Third World) as lagging behind (Drefs & Thomass, 2019; Hamidi & Mielke Möglich, 2021). It assumes supremacy of the Western world and presents alignment with Western values as the universal path to development. Modernization is connected to the traditional concept of development: "The leaders of this path, the developed nations, show the struggling countries which way to go (…) all nations seem to advance in the same direction" (Sachs, 2019, p. 12). Although modernization was mostly abandoned—both for pragmatic and ethical reasons—by the turn of the millennium, its logic still underpins many media assistance programs. Concepts such as "behavior and attitude change" remain central in the discourse of powerful international institutions, including those tasked with international cooperation,[2] often without reflection on their developmental implications (Melkote & Steeves, 2015).

Methodology

Qualitative methods were chosen due to the qualitative nature of the research question, which is about Afghan journalists' perceptions and their assessment of media development practices. The aim was to explore their subjective views and the nuances in how they perceive media assistance. To allow for open exploration and let interviewees' perspectives guide the findings, research categories were not *a priori* derived from theory but deduced from the analysis of the interviews (Mayring, 2023). An exploratory approach was necessary, as media assistance in Afghanistan had never been evaluated from the recipients' perspective. Media development theory was applied to interpret the data and to develop a research agenda. The final chapter discusses how the interviewees' assessments relate to three key concepts: media development, media for development, and participation and empowerment (see Chapter "Media Development and Key Features…"). Interviews, lasting 30–45 minutes, were conducted by the authors in Dari, Pashto, or English between March and December 2022. The interviewees' ages ranged from 23 to 45; 12 out of the 35 interviewees were female (see Annex 1).

To capture diverse experiences across Afghanistan, the sample included interviewees from 12 provinces.[3] Most had careers in radio and TV, and fewer were involved in online journalism. They worked mainly as producers, presenters, and field

[2] For example, the 'mind behaviour and development unit' of the World Bank is applying behavioral science to end poverty. Interventions in this tradition are based on the assumption that poverty is best addressed through correcting the wrong behavior of the poor in Africa and elsewhere.
[3] Kabul, Herat, Khost, Paktia, Kunduz, Badakhshan, Baghlan, Bamyan, Takhar, Helmand, and Balkh

reporters; five had owned radio stations before the Taliban takeover in 2021, and two were experts on media.

Interviews followed a semi-structured guide of questions focusing on: (1) personal background and experiences with media assistance and internationally funded media assistance, (2) assessment of program strengths, weaknesses, and the normativity implied in different media support approaches; and (3) overall evaluation of media support in Afghanistan.

A deductive analysis of the English transcripts produced eight categories of critical assessment, discussed in detail in the next chapter. To ensure anonymity, names were removed and replaced with codes during transcription and translation.

The authors acknowledge that most Afghan journalists interviewed at the time were eager to leave the country and get support from foreign governments. This was tangible in the meetings with interviewees who wanted to talk about their situation rather than do the interview. Such situational conditions and the possible impact on the data are considered in the discussion and the conclusion.

Findings

Table 1 below outlines the categories that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the interviews. These categories can be read as a summary of critical aspects discussed by the interviewees.

Table 1: Categories of Critique

Ownership in Agenda Setting	- Priorities and topics defined by donors (or government or warlords) - Priorities and topics proposed by Afghan media outlets
Aid Money as Competitive Business Market	- 'Donor Darlings' monopolizing the market - Some media (journalists) had no access to aid market (for unfair reasons) - Number of media (outlets) excessively high
Waste of Aid Money	- Lack of (impact) control by international organizations - Businessmen enriched themselves with aid money - Funds channeled via personal relations - Money absorbed by (too many) intermediaries
Misconception of Afghan Society and Audiences	- Lack of understanding of Kabul-provinces differences - Content misaligned with Afghan norms and values
Backfire Effects of Media Assistance	- Security threats and damaged media reputation - Media practitioners left or lost their jobs - Journalism undermined state-building - Media contributed to societal polarization of Afghan society - Over-reliance on foreign funding hampered resilience of media system

Throughout 35 conversations, participants mentioned over 44 donors they had worked with. Table 2 highlights the predominance of U.S. actors such as USAID and NED, along with military donors like ISAF and PRTs—each cited at least five times. UN agencies, including UNICEF and UNAMA, were also frequently mentioned. European donors appeared only once or twice. While Afghan government institutions and influential leaders were mentioned, international donors were referenced far more often.

Interestingly, military entities such as ISAF, PRTs, NATO, and the U.S. Army played a significant role in funding media outlets. Desk research confirms that PRTs often operated radio stations within military bases, staffed by Afghan editors.

Table 2: Donors mentioned during interviews

Number of mentions	Donors /International media assistance organizations
Mentioned 5 times or more	USAID, PRTs, UNAMA, ISAF, Internews, UNICEF
Mentioned 3-4 times	National Endowment for Democracy (NED), USA Embassy, European Commission, World Bank, U.S. Army, NATO
Mentioned once or twice	AKBAR, UNDP, Creating Hope International, WHO, The Asia Foundation, Germany, Norway, Canada, France, Japan, War Child, Swedish Committee for Afghans, Reporters Without Borders, USIP, Open Society Foundation, UK (DFID), IWPR, Mediathek, DAI, NAI, Afghan Journalists Safety Committee, IMPACS, GIZ, UNODC, Equal Access, CDI, HRW, Creative, (Iran and India)
Afghan donors mentioned once or twice	Afghan Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Education, IEC

Ownership in Agenda Setting and IMA Practices

Interviewees commonly described media support as funding tied to the promotion of specific topics. Donors and international organizations were largely perceived as extensions of (foreign) governments, aiming to promote specific agendas through small local media outlets in Afghanistan, as illustrated by the following quotes:

> The Swedish Committee for Afghans was interested only in the issue of refugees; a Canadian organization called War Child was only supporting children; a German one, which I forgot its name, was interested in girls' education. (…) Peace reporting was supported by the Norwegian government. (Interview 3)

> UNICEF support was about polio, UNDP, USAID about the election, IEC (independent election commission) also about the election, PSD, War Child from Canada focused on the topic of children. We had a particular person to deal with donors. (Interview 18)

Interviewees sometimes mentioned advertising alongside program support, viewing it as another variation of donor support. This included campaigns on specific issues and promotion of PRTs activities (Interview 9 and 6).

Our findings suggest that donor funded programs on specific topics made up the majority of media production and broadcasting. Larger radio stations commonly had donor relations departments and proposal writers, resulting in donor priorities heavily influencing program content (Interview 1, 4, 8, 9, 16, 18, 25). Table 3 lists topics linked to donor funding, either through media programs or advertising.

Donors aimed to foster public debate and raise awareness on key issues to influence behavior and attitude change among audiences. Women's rights and empowerment were top donor priorities. Assignments in the field of women's empowerment included content production and broadcasting, and the employment of female journalists. This allowed a high number of women to earn income and become a significant part of the media workforce. Interviewees identified women's empowerment as the most successful field and substantial achievement of media development. Other donor priorities included peace promotion and programs about democracy.

Table 3: Prioritized Topics

Number of mentions	Topics
Mentioned 5 times or more	Women's empowerment/women's rights, peace advocacy/ peace reporting, democracy
Mentioned 3-4 times	Youth empowerment, children rights, education, transparency and fighting corruption
Mentioned once or twice	Environment, health, vaccination (Corona, Polio), avoiding or reducing casualties of civilians in conflicts, preservation of cultural heritage and monuments, freedom of expression, freedom of media, refugees, promotion of tax payment, girls' education, human rights, mining sector, reconstruction, sport, agriculture, drugs and addiction, U.S. military operations, promoting achievements of PRTs, election, support for disabled people

While most interviewees supported human rights and education-themed radio programs, many criticized the way donors imposed these topics on Afghanistan's media makers. Critics noted that donors often introduced these topics without consulting local media partners. "Mostly, donors were seeking proposals for the projects and topics they had already chosen and targeted" (Interview 1), and "[I]deas and priorities were chosen and developed by the donors" (Interview 2), and "[D]onors used to announce their projects and seek proposals; later, radios would write proposals, and the ones with the lowest rate would win." (Interview 16)

Despite international donors' strong control exercised over setting the agenda, some flexibility existed at the program implementation level. Some media outlets were free to choose topics as long as they aligned with donor's overarching objectives (Interview 6 and 2). Some interviewees mentioned a few cases where Afghan media makers were able to identify their own needs and priorities, get funding, and

implemented self-designed programs. Three interviewees from Baghlan, Kunduz, and Helmand said they experienced both funding types (Interview 9, 13 and 21).

> Our relations and interactions with donors were mutual; sometimes we took the lead, and sometimes they designed projects. When we noticed opportunities, we would write a proposal; other times, they would contact us to say there was a project or message. After that, we would discuss the details and the rate, and then sign a contract. (Interview 21)

Aid Money as a Competitive Business Market

"Media remained a private possession and was run as a private business." (Interview 14) Many interviewees discussed media development in market terms, where airtime was traded to disseminate donor messages. In this view, donors and aid organizations are perceived as clients, and radio stations as service providers offering airtime and audiences. While radio stations usually produced their own content, some also aired donor-produced programs (Interview 9). Revenue was mostly generated through grants acquired by broadcasters in competitive markets, with even small local radio stations employing experts in proposal writing and donor relations (Interview 19).

One interviewee recounted establishing five radio stations over 20 years with funding from at least five different, mostly U.S.-based, donors (Interview 15). Eight interviewees felt there were too many radio stations in Afghanistan and criticized the poor quality of content. They argued that the high number did not contribute to better-informed audiences, as programs were often produced hastily by people lacking journalistic expertise. A good summary is provided by a male media veteran from Kunduz:

> It was not only Kunduz — many other neighboring provinces (Takhar, Baghlan, Badakhshan) also had too many radios. Establishing a radio station was easy, and there were opportunities to earn money through radio. The international community was supporting radio, and local businesses were willing to pay for commercial ads. Overall, radio became more of a business than a medium for journalism. Many people who had no knowledge of or expertise in journalism established radio stations. Compared to radio, print media did not improve much. (Interview 9)

Such development prioritized expertise in donor agendas over understanding audience needs. Instead of fostering participation and interaction, local media often aired educational programs shaped by Western donor priorities.

> As I said, for the available media, the needs of society were optional; they were only concerned with supporting the political views of their donors. None of these media outlets were working to promote democracy, nationalism, or the strengthening of the central government. They were only focused on collecting funds and spending money on low-quality advertisements. (Interview 25)

In the competitive media market, big players with strong reputations had privileged access to donors. Several interviewees criticized corporate monopolies, such as the

Moby Group, for securing a large share of media development budgets through close ties with major donors (Interview 1, 19, 21, 23).

Waste of Aid Money

Interviewees widely believed that media assistance funds were regularly channeled away from their designated purpose. Many cited corruption and the mismanagement of aid, claiming that significant amounts of aid money were regularly diverted for private profit by dishonest beneficiaries who deceived donors. Various forms of corruption and inefficient practices were described in detail and illustrated by many examples.

Interviewees were particularly upset about media makers and owners who accumulated private wealth through media assistance. They criticized the "lavish" or "luxurious" lifestyles of media owners, with expensive cars and houses (Interview 5, 28, 31). Many felt the aid industry had created a competitive, profit-driven market in what was intended to be a not-for-profit sector (Interview 14, 22).

> Assistance was seasonal and temporary. Media was established and developed as a private entity and business affiliated with particular individuals, where the owner considered the media a private possession and a means of doing business. (Interview 14)

Lack of scrutiny and lack of control on the side of international organizations. International funding was commonly awarded to Afghan entities for specific purposes or programs, but interviewees observed that in many cases, funds were taken without implementing any activities. They used strong language for those who would "take the money and then run away," implying it was theft from a good cause (Interview 28, 26).

According to interviewees, donors, and intermediary organizations did not sufficiently monitor recipients' performance (Interview 11, 23, 28) and suggested that only robust monitoring could prevent such corruption, as illustrated by this quote from Takhar:

> I would say donors may not have achieved their goals because, as I said before, they did not monitor what their media partners were doing. In some cases, the media did not produce programs and did not meet their obligations. (Interview 11)

Other interviewees criticized donors for failing to properly vet funding recipients. They noted that program quality, media owners' integrity, and media reach were often overlooked in the selection process (Interview 13, 19, 25). "There was corruption in the process of awarding projects by donors. For example, the donor had identified specific partners and maintained relationships with such media for a long time (many years) without checking their performance." (Interview 13)

Interviewees described segments of the media landscape as existing solely to absorb aid and exploit public money for private gains (Interview 9, 14, 25). They criticized donors for awarding funding based on the quality of the written proposal without adequate scrutiny. Generally, interviewees distinguished between 'real' media—seen as public-interest-oriented and deserving of support from international donors—and 'fake' media, which focused purely on making a profit, invested little in journalistic work, and often shut down when they were exposed or defunded by donors. Several interviewees asked for stricter donor control mechanisms to exclude dishonest players and strengthen genuine media. However, some statements also sounded like defamation and have possibly been used within a highly competitive environment to denigrate competitors (Interview 4, 14, 28).

> Some media outlets were established for specific reasons and goals; once the goal was achieved, the media shut down and closed. In many cases, media was not the end but a means; that is why it ceased to operate. Capacity was also not adequately developed. (Interview 4)

Three interviewees (Interview 18, 19, 21) explained that they regularly reviewed and monitored their impact themselves, presenting this as a service to donors to consolidate relationships and secure follow-up funding. However, monitoring is costly, and most small media outlets lacked resources to implement it.

Money was swallowed by too many intermediaries. Inefficient spending was also attributed to the high number of intermediary organizations between the donor and local implementer. Critics noted that only a small portion of the initial budget reached media outlets that produced and broadcast media programs (Interview 1, 11, 28), while consultants and intermediaries took much of the funding. One interviewee noticed that U.S. consultants received a large share of U.S. aid (Interview 31). Another pointed out that large Kabul-based corporations and organizations (e.g., Tolo, Pajwok, and Salam Watandar) received funding for province-based media projects but retained most of the money in Kabul (Interview 1). Reducing the number of intermediaries could improve aid efficacy and simplify accountability.

> A project was awarded to three, and sometimes five, different organizations before its implementation. For example, a donor would give a project to organization A, and then A would pass it to person B, B to C, and C to D. This chain of partnerships and stakeholders negatively impacted the quality of the program because each of them had to take some amount of money (profit). I had a capacity-building project for women, and we received USD 700 for providing assistance for one month. Later, I learned that the initial budget was USD 20,000. We were the seventh entity in the chain to receive and implement it. (Interview 11)

Many interviewees criticized what they described as 'favoritism,' where private connections outweighed technical and journalistic criteria in funding decisions. (Interview 11, 21, 23, 24, 26). "I would say that most media outlets were getting funds based on their private relations with the donor." (Interview 30)

Misconception of Afghan Society and Audiences

Some interviewees felt the international community misunderstood the values and traditions shaping life and governance in Afghan society. Misconceptions emerged in part from underestimating the divide between urban centers and rural areas, partly fueled by ignorance of the deeply conservative nature of Afghan society and its internal divisions between liberal and conservative strands.

The difference between the provinces and Kabul was misunderstood. Interviewees from outside Kabul criticized donors for prioritizing media development in the capital while neglecting rural areas of Afghanistan. This focus, they argued, deepened the cultural divide between the urban, educated middle class in Kabul and remote, often illiterate communities (Interview 19, 23, 27, 32). Donors were seen as misinterpreting rural values, traditions, and education as extensions of Kabul's urban culture and lifestyle. Some interviewees discussed this as an efficiency issue: without understanding and analyzing target audiences, the message will fail. One cited a donor-funded anti-drug campaign in Helmand that used written messages on billboards and distributed pens—ineffective tools in this region with literacy rates below 10% (Interview 13). Another from Badakhshan recalled a USD 80 million agriculture project implemented despite local calls to reclassify the budget (Interview 10). This radio veteran from Balkh province described challenges in reaching various provinces with differing language needs:

> We used to receive ready-made messages from our donors for broadcast, but the same message or billboard did not work in all provinces. For example, in Faryab, we had to have messages in the Uzbaki language, and in Saripol, in Dari. I think our donors did not adequately or wisely understand the target groups and their cultures. Accurate identification of the problem and target groups is very important; otherwise, the desired outcome will not be achieved. Donors focused more on central and relatively developed provinces like Kabul and Mazar, but not Helmand, where we did not even have high school students. They did not pay attention to schools in Helmand but instead focused on issues in Kabul and Mazar. Donors allocated funds for issues highlighted by big media, but in many cases, such media did not expose or cover important issues in rural areas of the country. (Interview 15)

This criticism arose from the perception that donors favored liberal, young, urban communities while ignoring Afghanistan's conservativism. This happened either by active denial or by being insulated from it through their tendency to deal only with partners in Kabul. International organizations that had offices and activities in Kabul remained disconnected from conservative segments of Afghanistan and missed opportunities to gain a deeper understanding of Afghan social realities (Interview 8, 15, 19).

> In the past 20 years, the media has misused freedom of expression to some extent. They ignored the local people living in the districts of Afghanistan, who were not accustomed to such abrupt democracy or freedom of expression. In a nutshell, the thoughts of people in remote parts of the country were not taken into consideration. If we want to change society through media, we must do so very carefully and understand every minor detail of that society. For this reason, the gap has widened between cities and villages. (Interview 25)

This perception is not without controversy. One female interviewee from Kabul thought local media in rural areas received the largest share of international funding because they worked in insecure areas (Interview 23).

Women benefit but western values do not align with conservative Afghan values. Most interviewees viewed women's empowerment as a success story of media assistance. Nineteen interviewees stated that women-focused media development programs improved the situation of women in media and/or society. These programs were seen as helping to reduce harassment of women in public (Interview 27) and influence attitudes of family leaders towards female family members, in particular encouraging fathers and brothers to send girls to school and women to college (Interview 23, 5). Some also noted positive impacts on domestic violence awareness through media programs, prompting men to question such behavior (Interview 23). Women's empowerment programs also included capacity building for female journalists and were often described as gateways to the labor market—frequently cited as an indicator of success. If these programs enabled women to secure employment and earn income, interviewees considered them successful (Interview 2, 13).

However, two interviewees felt that donor-funded portrayals of women conflicted with Afghan values and introduced change too rapidly. "Afghanistan is a traditional society and could have been very gradually modernized" (Interview 8), argued one male journalist from Kabul. He continues:

> The media was promoting an extreme version of democracy that did not match or align with Afghan society and values; this negatively impacted and triggered adverse reactions among the public. Armed opponents misused this to propagate and strengthen their causes. Afghanistan is a traditional society and could have been modernized very gradually. However, donors always wanted to give more power and voice to women, who had never experienced such roles due to the traditional nature of society. (Interview 8)

Another young female journalist from Kabul indicts double standards among media makers by saying that: "Media owners would promote women's rights, which they themselves would not be ready to give at home to their daughters and sisters." (Interview 5)

This perception echoes a broader criticism from interviewees that entertainment programs on several channels sponsored by Western donors provoked and upset conservative communities (Interview 8, 12, 22, 23). The most frequently cited example was the talent singing competition *Afghan Star*, which some viewed as promoting Western culture and fueling anti-Western sentiment among traditional audiences. (Interview 10, 16). This was despite the fact that *Afghan Star* was Tolo's most popular show and did not rely on international funding to cover production costs. Turkish soap operas were often mentioned as another source of cultural tension:

> The foreign war propaganda and soap operas from other countries were completely against the traditions of Afghanistan; instead, they promoted Turkish, Indian, and Iranian values

> and traditions. While they were somewhat appreciated in urban areas, they were not at all accepted in rural areas, where the great majority of Afghans live. There were too many entertainment programs. (Interview 8)

Some media outlets deliberately countered donor agendas by inviting conservative guests, including Mullahs and religious leaders, onto talk shows (Interview 18). Several interviewees argued that democracy was introduced too rapidly, without adequate consideration of Afghan society (Interview 3). One newspaper journalist from Herat recalled being required to promote Western models of democracy in their publications (Interview 3).

Backfire Effects of Media Assistance

Perceived misconceptions of Afghan values and conservatism not only undermined the effectiveness of development programs but also created security risks and heightened vulnerability for journalists. Many were killed because of their involvement in Western-funded programs, while others faced harassment that forced them to quit or flee the country.

Security threats and media's reputation. Political advertising by international forces and the Afghan government targeting non-state armed groups—mainly the Taliban—exposed journalists and media outlets to retaliation. The terminology used in these ads was perceived as offensive to both the Taliban and conservative Pashtun communities, potentially increasing local sympathy for the Taliban (Interview 2, 8).

According to a radio manager from Khost, non-state armed groups did not distinguish between types of media but systematically targeted journalists and media suspected of serving foreign interests—even those who deliberately declined to run such ads (Interview 2). Simply being associated with international funding posed risks for all media professionals, regardless of whether their outlets directly received such support. (Interview 2).

In some regions, armed groups, local conservatives, and influential figures—such as supporters of Mullah Ansari in Herat province—threatened media outlets they perceived as promoting inappropriate entertainment (Interview 1, 8, 16). Unsurprisingly, women's empowerment programs also provoked anger and harassment from conservative communities:

> There were thoughts and opinions among certain people—mostly those opposing the government—that international donors were trying to introduce values that go against Afghanistan. I was threatened for the same reason because I was running programs on gender equality and women's rights. (Interview 16)

Amid a worsening security situation, some media workers left their jobs or fled the country—some just before theTaliban takeover (Interview 3).

Journalism weakened state building and fostered polarization. Given the fragile nature of the Afghan government over the past two decades, the media was expected to support the nation-building process. However, interviewees noted that funding media outlets with ethnic or religious affiliations often deepened ethnic divisions along the fault lines of an already fragmented audience. For example, Tolo and Tolo News of Moby Group (MG) were more popular among Tajik, Hazara, and Uzbek communities, while Pashtuns preferred Shamshad TV (Interview 5). A media practitioner from Kabul argued that international donors tended to favor media outlets seen as opposing Pashtun interests:

> Donors were also involved in inciting ethnic conflict. The Pashtun make up about 60-70% of Afghanistan's total population, yet they owned very few media outlets. Meanwhile, others had too many media outlets because international donors eagerly funded them. These media, in turn, politicized and heightened ethnic issues. So, not only Tolo but also BBC Persian was inciting and creating the same problem around ethnicity. (Interview 32)

Several interviewees felt that the government-critical stance of some media outlets—particularly Tolo News—undermined the nation-building process. These channels often portrayed the government as dysfunctional and incompetent, which, in their view, eroded public trust. Some expressed regret over not offering more support to the government, as expressed in this quote by a male journalist from Kabul:

> My colleagues who belong to the media family now say we were wrong and, unfortunately, lost whatever we had. They say we should not have been so harsh on the government. Now they say the government needed us back then, but unfortunately, we did nothing. (Interview 31)

Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter discusses the interview findings through the lens of the theoretical framework outlined in the section about "Media Development and Key Features…", which includes three conceptual approaches to media assistance: media for development, media development, and participatory or empowerment approaches.

This study's findings suggest that our interview partners' perceptions were overwhelmingly shaped by activities and projects aligned with the media-for-development paradigm. Mainstream strategies were perceived as primarily being designed to produce attitude and behavior changes through educative programs on specific topics. Media were viewed mainly as tools for achieving non-media-related goals. Interviewees criticized this paradigm, seeing it as accelerating dysfunctional trends such as the overabundance of small local media, intense competition for funding, and the alignment of media with donors' priorities. These trends further deepened Afghan audiences' suspicion that media served Western donor interests, undermining media credibility in Afghanistan and putting journalists at risk from the Taliban.

One reason for this unhealthy reliance on media-for-development programs could be the dominance of donors with limited expertise in media development. Table 2 indicates that media support was largely provided by organizations outside the media development sector—entities often unfamiliar with the requirements of a healthy media ecosystem. This is especially true for the many military forces acting as donors. A key recommendation from this observation is that military and other organizations with no expertise in media development should consult the media-development sector when conceptualizing and implementing media-related activities.

A related problem is the exclusion of Afghan stakeholders from decisions on strategic priorities. Issues and themes were primarily defined at the headquarters of Western institutions without consulting Afghan media practitioners. This practice undermines the editorial autonomy of local media and prevents the emergence and empowerment of an indigenous, independent media system. Such top-down decision-making reflects the tradition of modernization, which positions the Global North as the holder of privileged knowledge. As Sachs (2019) explains, this perspective assumes that developed nations set the standard for progress and guide other countries to follow the same path toward development. The authors recommend a stronger emphasis on participation in the future.

In the same spirit, the findings of our study suggest that participation through media—where "citizens can voice their opinions and experiences and interact with other voices" (Carpentier et al., 2013, p. 288)—was not a priority for international media assistance programs in Afghanistan. These programs, supported by the international community, were described as primarily educative and offered limited opportunities for audience participation. This lack of participatory formats reinforces broader criticism that donor support followed pre-defined goals rather than responding to the needs and priorities of the Afghan people. It also reflects a media-centric view of media effects as changes driven by exposure to specific content. Audiences are seen as passive recipients of messages, rather than active agents of change. Future programs could offer more opportunities for citizen engagement in public affairs through the media, helping to overcome the widespread feeling that decisions are made elsewhere.

Participatory approaches should pay particular attention to including conservative communities, as media development programs targeting only liberal urban elites have been perceived as contributing to social division.

Finally, participation as empowerment (Manyozo, 2012) was discussed exclusively in relation to women's rights programs and gender-related projects. These media support programs focusing on women's rights were described as success stories, helping to address gender-based power asymmetries in Afghan society by enhancing women's mobility, income, protection, autonomy, and public representation. Future media development programs could examine the success of these initiatives and adapt their strategies accordingly for other, non-gender-specific support programs.

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List of Acronyms

AFJC – Afghanistan Journalists Center
AIJA – Afghan Independent Journalists Association
BBC – British Broadcasting Corporation
DAI – Development Alternatives, Inc.
DFID – Department for International Development (United Kingdom)
DWA – Deutsche Welle Akademie (Germany)
EU – European Union
GFMD – Global Forum for Media Development
GIZ – Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for International Cooperation)
HRW – Human Rights Watch
IEC – Independent Election Commission (Afghanistan)
IMA – International Media Assistance
IMS – International Media Support
IMPACS – Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society
ISAF – International Security Assistance Force (NATO-led mission in Afghanistan)
IWPR – Institute for War & Peace Reporting
M4D – Media for Development
MG – Moby Group (Afghan media company)
MiCT – Media in Cooperation and Transition
NAI – NAI Media Institute (Afghanistan)
NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NED – National Endowment for Democracy
NGO – Non-Governmental Organization
OECD – Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAYK – PAYK Investigative Journalism Center (Afghanistan)
PRTs – Provincial Reconstruction Teams
RSF – Reporters Sans Frontières (Reporters Without Borders)
SDG – Sustainable Development Goals
TLB – Taliban
TV – Television
UK – United Kingdom
UNAMA – United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDP – United Nations Development Program
UNICEF – United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNODC – United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
USA – United States of America
USAID – United States Agency for International Development
USIP – United States Institute of Peace
WHO – World Health Organization

Appendix 1: List of Interviewees

Number	Age	Gender	Occupation	City
1	40s	Female	Manager	Herat
2	40s	Male	Manager, journalist	Khost
3	20s	Female	Journalist	Herat
4	40s	Male	Owner, CEO	Kabul
5	20s	Female	Producer, presenter	Kabul
6	30s	Male	Reporter	Paktia
7	30s	Male	Producer, reporter	Kabul
8	20s	Male	Presenter	Kabul
9	50s	Male	Reporter	Kunduz
10	30s	Male	Owner, manager	Badakhshan
11	30s	Male	Owner, manger	Takhar
12	20s	Male	Owner, manager	Uruzgan
13	30s	Male	Owner, manager	Helmand
14	30s	Male	News Manager, producer	Kabul
15	30s	Male	Owner, manager	Balkh
16	30s	Female	Producer, reporter	Herat
17	20s	Male	Reporter	Herat
18	30s	Female	Producer, HR officer	Kabul
19	20s	Female	Reporter, manager	Kabul
20	20s	Male	IT specialist	Kabul
21	40s	Male	Reporter, director	Baghlan
22	40s	Male	Expert	Kabul
23	20s	Female	Presenter, reporter	Kabul
24	20s	Female	Reporter, media advocate	Bamyan
25	30s	Male	Expert	Kabul
26	20s	Female	Reporter	Kabul
27	30s	Female	Reporter, presenter	Kabul
28	20s	Male	Reporter	Kabul
29	20s	Female	Reporter, presenter	Kabul
30	20s	Male	Presenter, reporter	Kabul
31	30s	Male	Reporter	Kabul
32	30s	Male	Reporter	Kabul
33	30s	Male	Reporter	Nangarhar
34	30s	Female	Radio Producer, Management	Kabul
35	40s	Male	Journalist, Public Relations	Kabul