JX FUND

AN UNBROKEN SPIRIT: AFGHANISTAN EXILED MEDIA SINCE THE TALIBAN TAKEOVER

Research Report | Berlin, July 2024

Purpose and approach of this research

The Taliban takeover in 2021 ended a period of media flourishing and improving freedom of expression in Afghanistan. The collapse of the Afghan government and the resurgence of authoritarian rule have created an environment of fear and uncertainty within the media community. Independent and diverse non-state media are in danger; many journalists have fled their homeland in search of safety and freedom.

Despite these challenges, Afghan journalists in exile continue to demonstrate resilience and dedication to their profession, providing crucial insights and reporting on the ground while navigating the complexities of life far from home. A well-founded overview of the existing Afghan media in exile has been lacking until now.

JX Fund, together with the media researchers from The Fix Research and Advisory, have compiled and continue to maintain the Afghanistan Exiled Media Dashboard an innovative database that allows for the continuous monitoring of both individual media and the sector overall. It currently includes 47 independent media outlets. For this study, we analyzed both data gathered from both open sources and submitted by market stakeholders, including the media themselves.

Independent Afghan media in exile remain highly esteemed by their audiences. Cumulative YouTube views reached an estimated 36 million[1] as of April 2024, while an aggregate 6 million followers on Facebook engage with media.

A notable feature of the Afghan exiled media community is the importance of television (partially due to low internet penetration and high illiteracy rates). 27% of the exiled media covered in this study use television formats. The high costs of TV production should be considered by the donor community when calculating the total support for Afghan exile media. At the same time, cost-intensive production in exile represents a risk if there are no sustainable monetization models. A transformative development of both seems to be essential for a viable future.

We hope that this study and our database can contribute to a productive dialog about a future-oriented, sustainable development of the sector.

Penelope Winterhager, Managing Director, JX Fund

1 Based on data compiled in the JX Fund Dashboard

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1 Executive Summary

An era of media development brought to a painful end

- Two decades (2001-2021) of **relative development for Afghan media and freedom of expression** created unique case of media growth in the region.
- The international community's support for media development and implementing the supportive media law and regulations led to the **emergence of a dynamic and diverse media space**, but also a **long-term donor-dependency.**
- The Afghan media landscape **has been stifled and experienced tragic developments** following the withdrawal of the US troops and its allies and return of the Taliban to power in 2021.

Rebuilding and adapting to exile

- **A large portion of independent media has relocated to United States of America, Canada, and European countries such as Germany, France, UK, Ireland** after the Taliban took over. The teams of many of these outlets operate in a hybrid model with editorial leadership in exile and staff members and freelancers in Afghanistan.
- **Just over half of Afghan exiled media (57%) were founded in Afghanistan** before the Taliban took over, but others (42%) were established in exile after August 15, 2021.
- Exiled media **publish their content in multiple languages**, including both the official languages of Afghanistan: Pashto and Dari (Farsi). Out of 47 media surveyed, 35 also publish their content in English.
- **Afghan women journalists have founded several media outlets** spanning various platforms, including online publications, radio and television channels, social media platforms, and podcasts. Through these outlets, they amplify the voices of Afghan women and shed light on the challenges they face under Taliban rule.
- In exile, **ethnic, religious, linguistic, and political affiliations continue to influence the content and ownership** of some media outlets, with direct consequences on their credibility.

Finding ways to reach audiences despite censorship

- Afghan exiled media mostly aim for **nation-wide coverage (90%).** Only 10% of exiled media focus on regional coverage.
- **Media consumption in Afghanistan has shifted towards exiled media.** In addition, since the Taliban takeover, audiences increasingly relied on the internet, particularly social media platforms, to access information and entertainment programs.
- The study reveals that **Facebook, X, and YouTube are the most popular social media platforms** for exiled media outlets – both for audiences to consume content and interact with publishers.
- **Television still stands as the predominant broadcasting platform in Afghanistan**, with urban areas exhibiting a higher prevalence of household TV ownership compared to rural regions. Television coverage extends to nearly 40 percent of Afghanistan's population. At least 12 Afghan TV exiled projects are accessible via satellite, web, social media, apps and streaming platforms.

Sustaining resilience in exile is a challenge

- **Fact-checking information coming from on-the-ground sources is becoming harder**. The Taliban severely restricted information flows. Most Afghan exiled media rely on **citizen journalism** and **anonymous sources**.
- **Lack of financial sustainability is a major concern**. Afghan exiled media have lost their previous funding opportunities and need to cover budget gaps from international organizations or other philanthropic sources.

2a Background: History of Afghan Media Development

Prior to August 2021, the Afghan media space was relatively diverse and independent in its reporting and programming. The development of such a vibrant media landscape and freedom of expression were doubtlessly a major achievement of the last twenty years in Afghanistan.

By comparison, prior to 2001 under the first period of Taliban rule, independent or "non-state-run" media were almost non-existent[2]. The subsequent transformation was a major success and a unique case in the region[3] (although this experience was not without its own complexities). Even when going back to earlier times in Afghan history (e.g. during the reign of King Mohammad Zaher Shah, 1933-1973), media was primarily a state affair[4].

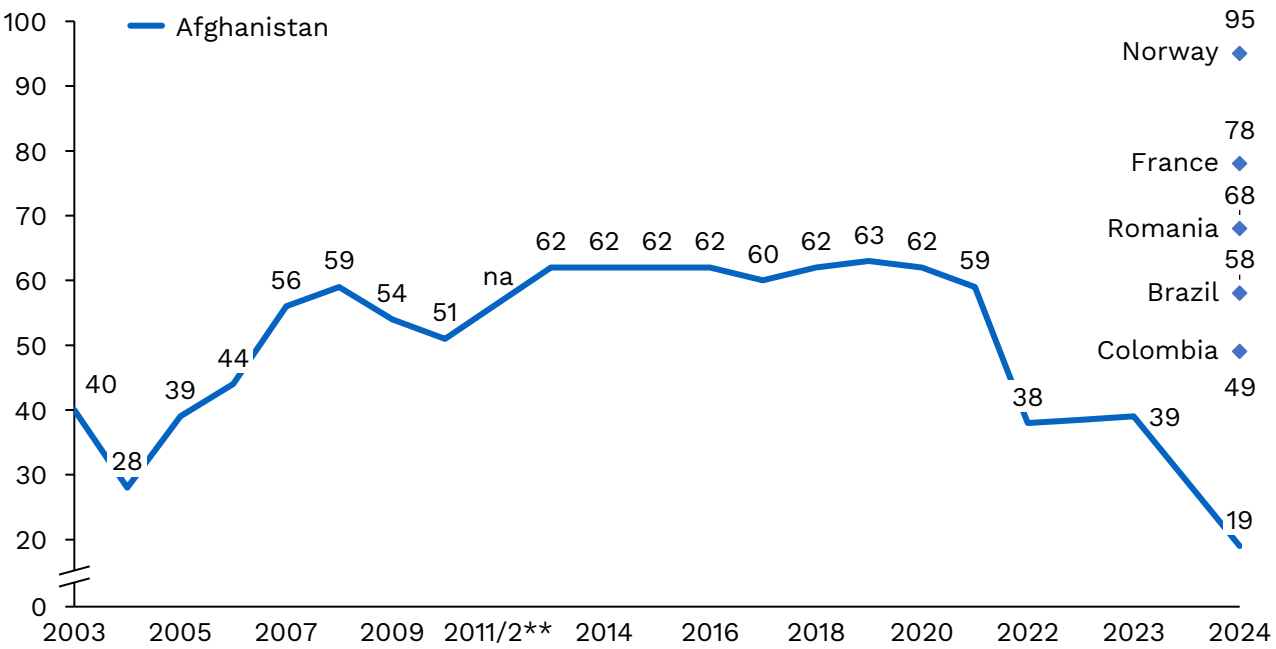
In 2009, for the first time in its history, Afghanistan began to experiment with freedom of expression and media pluralism by passing a Mass Media Law, one of the most progressive such laws in the region[5].

The two decades after the U.S. intervention in 2002 saw large investment by the international community aimed at fostering a free and independent media sector. Millions of dollars were poured into the country, leading to a boom, among others, in private media (often hailed as a key success story).

Exhibit 1

Fluctuating Landscape of Press Freedom

Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index for Afghanistan** from 2003-2024; 0-no press freedom, 100-perfect press freedom



*Additional countries included as benchmarks; **Joint rating for two years (note: due to changes in methodology, the 2011/12 result is incongruous with the general trend – it has a value of 74 – and hence disregarded).

Source: Reporters without borders Press Freedom Index, 2024.

2 USIP (Jan. 2008) https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/46714/sr198.pdf2
3 USIP (Aug. 2015) https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/08/afghanistans-fourth-estate-independent-media
4 CPJ Report https://cpj.org/reports/1999/12/dateline-afghanistan-journalism-under-the-taliban/
5 Media Landscapes https://medialandscapes.org/country/afghanistan/policies/media-legislation

However, media growth was largely contingent upon foreign funding, both direct and indirect[6]. As a result, Afghanistan was the 10th biggest recipient of OECD international media aid in 2010-2019[7].

Despite the considerable support from donors, the health of Afghanistan's media sector remained fragile even prior to the Taliban's takeover in August 2021. Of note, while international support primarily focused on building media institutions and infrastructure, little attention was given to the production and dissemination of socially constructive content[8].

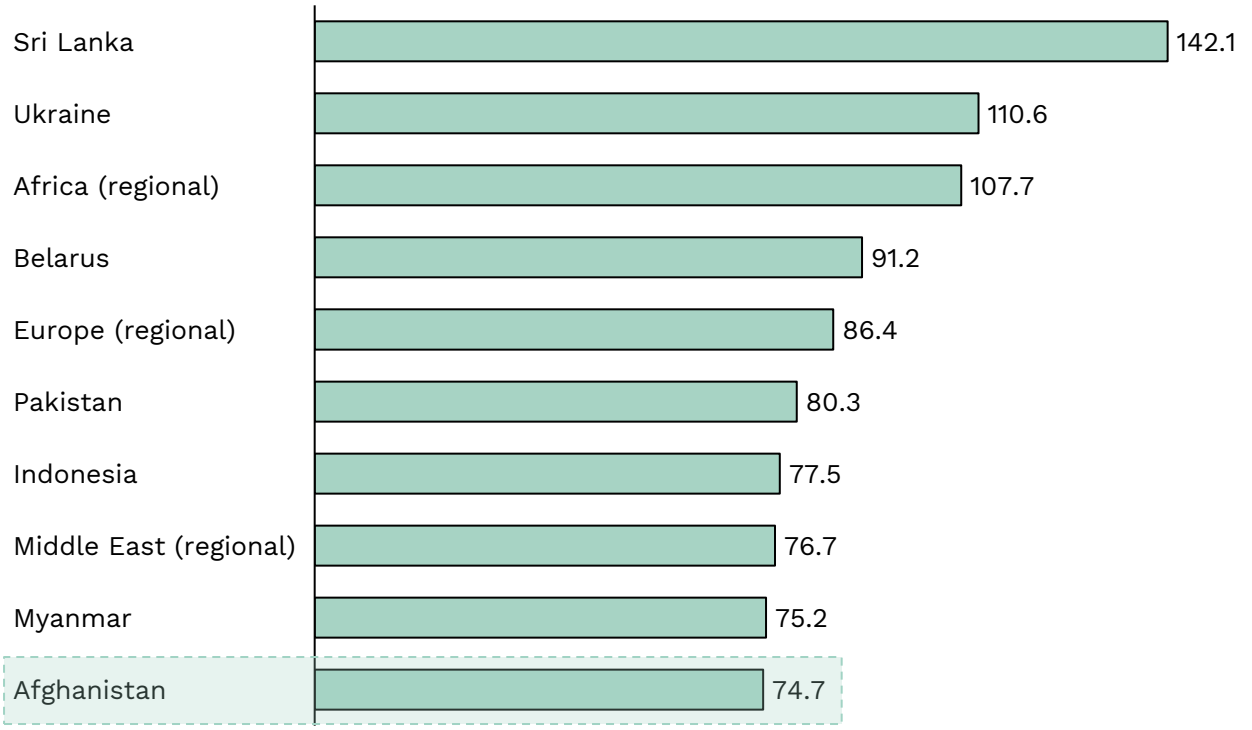
Shaky political and economic conditions in Afghanistan, exacerbated by endemic poverty, hindered the development of a viable advertising market, perpetuating media outlets dependance on foreign assistance. Unfortunately, neither the consumers nor the producers possessed the resources necessary to cultivate a self-sustaining market[9].

Despite two decades of support, many media outlets were still financially unsustainable. Although some claimed to have reached some financial autonomy, prominent media outlets like the Killid Group and Moby Group still relied on foreign donor-sponsored projects and programs commissioned by Western governmental agencies for revenue (ibid.).

Exhibit 2

Afghanistan is in top 10 Global Media Aid Recipients

Biggest recipients of OECD member media aid in 2010-2019 (cumulative values, $ millions)



Source: Data provided to the OECD by Development Assistance Committee members; Statistical analysis by Coral Milburn-Curtis. See full report at https://www.cima.ned.org/publication/are-donors-taking-the-journalism-crisis-seriously/; World Bank (population data).

6 USIP, Afghanistan Media Assessment Report (2010)
https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/PW68_Afghanistan_Media_Assessment1.pdf
7 CIMA (Feb. 7, 2024), https://www.cima.ned.org/publication/are-donors-taking-the-journalism-crisis-seriously/
8 According to the Afghanistan Media Assessment Report (USIP, 2010) Afghans have expressed dissatisfaction with the media content available to them: domestic entertainment is often perceived as uninteresting, while foreign programs are seen as culturally or religiously inappropriate. Disconnect between media content and real-world impact is exacerbated by several factors: financial instability, editorial independence, undeveloped advertising market, social and cultural barriers.
9 USIP, Afghanistan Media Assessment Report (2010)
https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/resources/PW68_Afghanistan_Media_Assessment1.pdf

After the Taliban takeover in August 2021, in addition to other constraints, restrictions and threats, economic instability emerged as a major contributor to media outlet closures, as many lacked the resources to continue operations[10].

The media ecosystem that had developed over the two decades was diverse, with media typically falling into one of five categories: mainstream commercial media (TV stations), local community FM radio stations, interest group media (ethnic, religious, partisan media and media owned by warlords), Taliban media, and government-controlled media[11].

Media fell on a broad spectrum in terms of editorial approach – on the one end, some outlets challenged deep-rooted conservative elements in Afghan culture by importing and promoting foreign cultures from the region and beyond. On the other end, former warlords introduced TV channels and programs to promote their own ethnonationalist and political agendas.

In practice, many media were instrumentalized as tools to pursue a specific agenda, which likely contributed to further worsening of the already existing social divisions in the country[12].

People in charge of state institutions had a similarly instrumental approach towards media. Reporting on issues such as corruption or high-ranked officials' behavior, especially in the provinces, was very sensitive and would almost always lead to threats against the outlets.

In some cases, media were co-opted by various officials. It was widely known amongst the local population that some media workers received prime property and plots for houses from the local government in exchange for favorable reporting (ibid.).

While creating a heightened reflection of societal conflict dynamics, these co-optation dynamics drew some media actors into the fray and sometimes severely limited their ability to take on a more constructive watchdog role vis-à-vis state-society relations as well as the ongoing armed conflict.

However, other media workers were aware of their role and responsibility with regard to social cohesion and accountability. They were very engaged, working to improve the professionalism and standing of their sector within the country.

In a sign of the success of those actors, the significance of the media's role in the peace process was recognized. In July 2019, media representatives were included as participants of the first ever intra-Afghan dialogue in Doha[13]. This was the first time media representatives entered into talks with the Taliban as important stakeholders within Afghanistan's peace process.

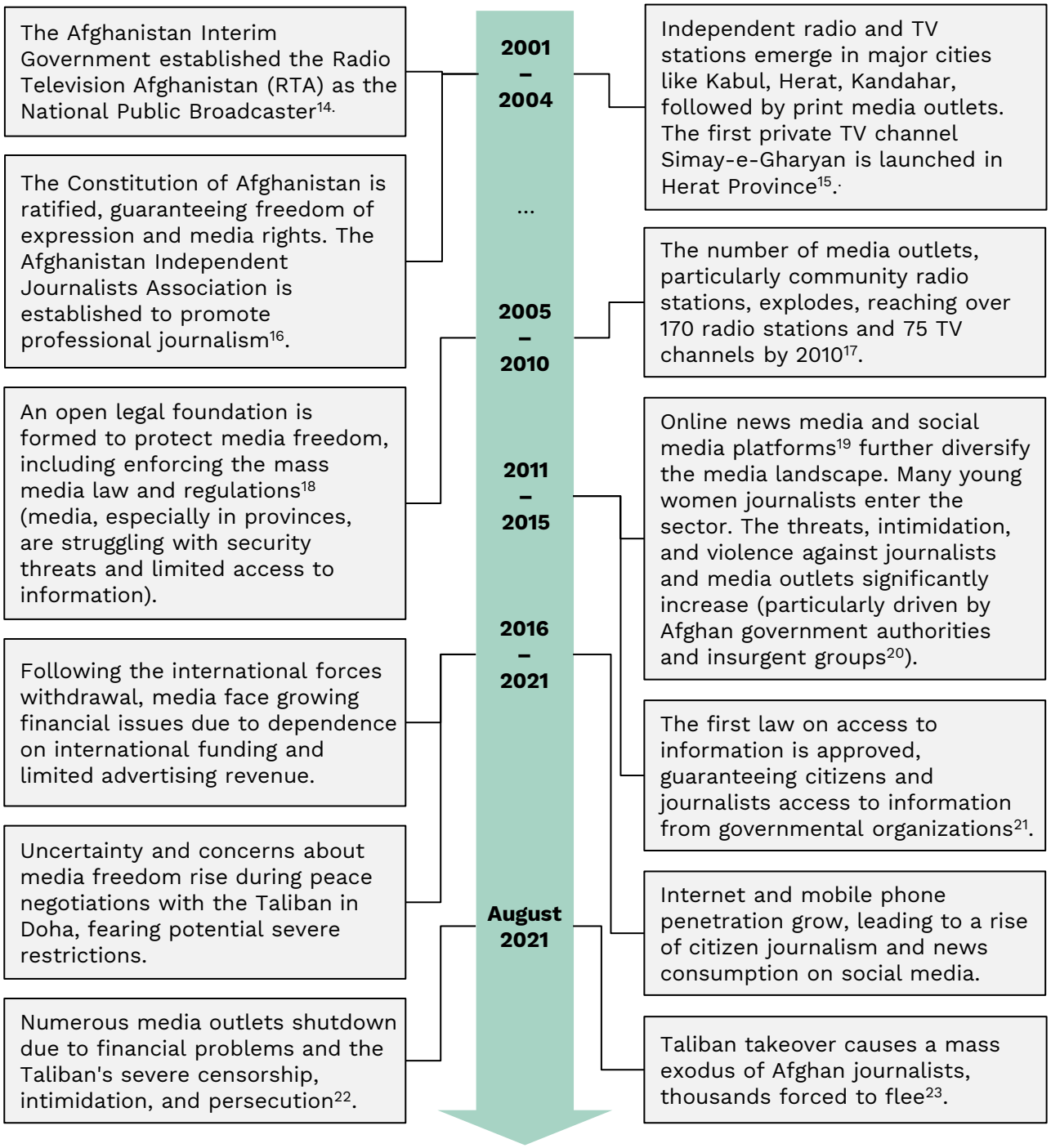
Following the 2021 takeover, the Taliban took a somewhat different approach. The acting government appeared to have understood the power media carries in shaping society (likely including from their own sometimes successful use of local media). A further factor may have been the realization that suppressing an existing media and social media landscape with the ability to reach and influence large groups is not an easy feat to achieve.

10 BBC Media Action (2023) Afghanistan Media Survey 2023 210224 AMWG version (3) - Copy - Copy.pdf
11 BBC Media Action (2012)
https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/policybriefing/bbc_media_action_afghanistan_is_in_transition.pdf
12 USIP (Aug, 2015https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/08/afghanistans-fourth-estate-independent-media
13 Afghanistan Analysts Network (Jul, 2019) https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/war-and-peace/aan-qa-what-came-out-of-the-doha-intra-afghan-conference/

Exhibit 3

Afghanistan Media Development

Key events and milestones for Afghanistan media from the fall of Taliban in 2001 to their return in 2021



14 Cary, Peter (February 13, 2012), https://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/CIMA-Afghanistan-03-01-12.pdf
15 Anwari, Ramin, (June, 2005), https://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan/story/2005/06/050619_v-afghan-privet-tv
16 U.S. State Department (2011), https://2009-2017.state.gov/documents/organization/193129.pdf
17 BBC Media Action (March 5, 2012), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08a8de5274a31e0000672/bbc_
18 Procter, Ann (August 10, 2015), https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/08/afghanistans-fourth-estate-independent-media
19 United Nation (October 23, 2022), https://afghanistan.un.org/en/204483-brief-no-1-media-restrictions-and-implications-gender-equality-afghanistan
20 HRW (January 21, 2015), https://www.hrw.org/report/2015/01/21/stop-reporting-or-well-kill-your-family/threats-media-freedom-afghanistan
21 IFJ (2024), https://samsn.ifj.org/SAPFR23-24/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Afghanistan-SAPFR-23-24.pdf
22 AJSO (May 2, 2024), https://ajso.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/ENGLISH-REP-2024.pdf
23 Romero, Laura Dulce (March 27, 2024), https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/hundreds-journalists-go-exile-every-year-these-are-problems-they-face-and-how-tackle-them

In his first press conference, day after the Taliban took over, spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid assured media the group was committed to freedom of the press “within cultural frameworks”. He went on to say that private media could remain free and independent as long as their coverage was in line with “national interests, Islamic values, and national unity” and that they played a constructive role in promoting national unity and peaceful coexistence[24].

Audiovisual programming has undergone vast changes, with educational, health, and religious content replacing music and entertainment shows. In September 2022, the Taliban issued new media regulations for journalists, prohibiting them from printing or broadcasting reports that are “contrary to Islam”, “insult national figures”, or distort news; instead, media were required to conduct “balanced reporting”, refrain from covering unverified reports or issues that have a negative impact on public opinion, and share detailed reports with the new governmental regulatory body prior to publication[25].

The Taliban also imposed severe restrictions on female journalists, including a decree issued by the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice in May 2022 ordering all female television anchors and broadcast journalists to cover their faces while on air (some 72% of female journalists are assessed as unable to work this to this and other restrictions[26]).

A significant change has also been seen in the media content. It is no longer possible to conduct critical reporting, which is the fundamental role of journalism protected by the Afghanistan media law (still applicable under the Taliban rule from a legal point of view).

Taliban reportedly made it clear to media that if they do not abide by the de-facto government’s explicit and implied policies, their activities will be restricted[27]. Authorities actively monitor publications and require outlets to share the content of reports prior to publication. The de facto authorities also prohibit media organizations from covering security incidents (such as attacks by armed opposition or Islamic State). Instead, they are only permitted to publish the information they receive from the provincial spokesperson (the governor's office or chief of police) when such an incident occurs.

The media are very explicitly warned not to report on the seriousness of problems and victims of attacks or other incidents. The impact of this policy is limited as incidents continue to be reported on social media by citizen journalists. Officially issued information and numbers is now often contradicted by what is reported on social media (and believed to be true by the population), a dynamic that undermines media credibility and accountability.

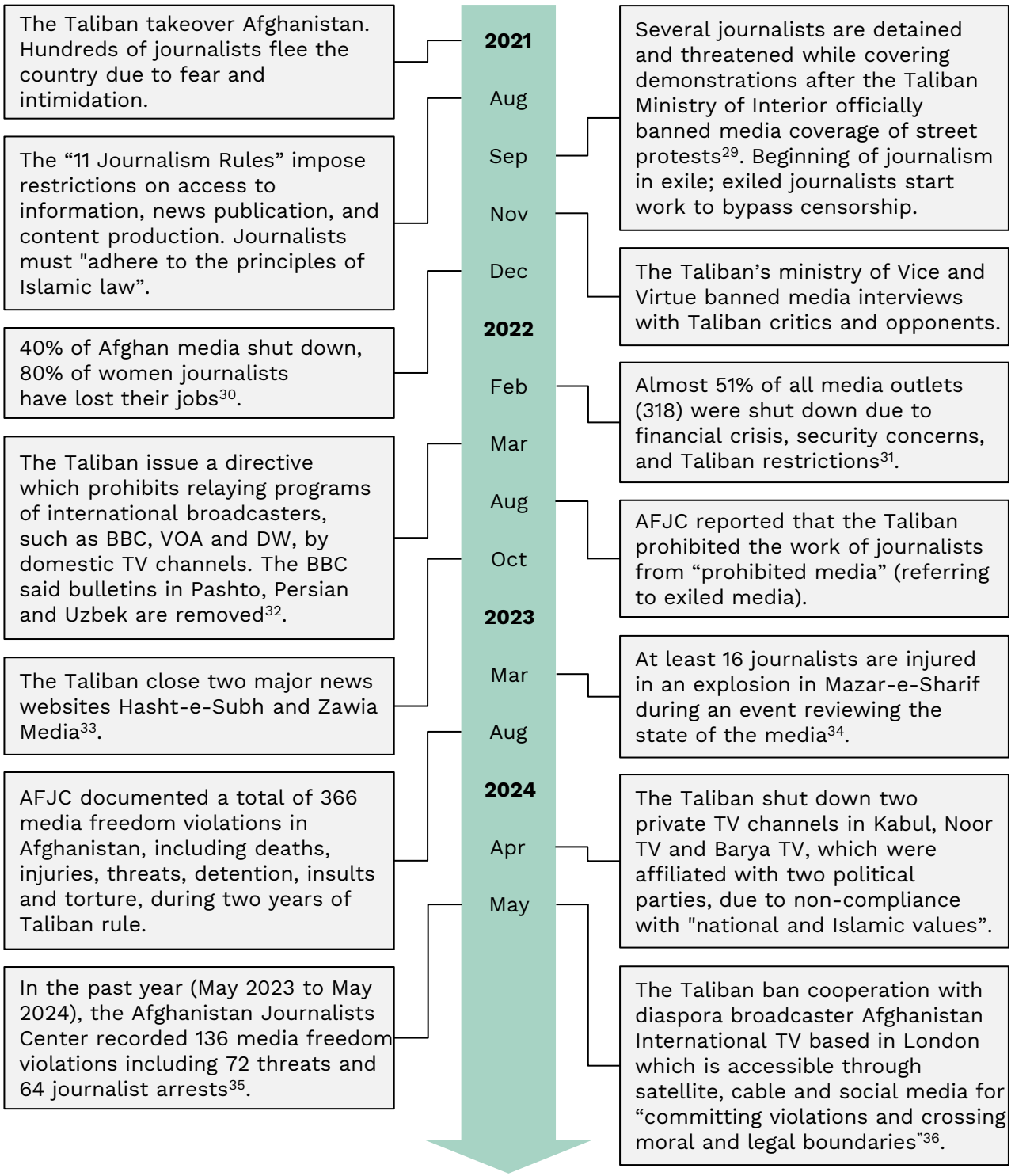
Another major challenge is the lack of a constitution or a regulatory system, which makes determining what is legal or illegal difficult[28]. The Taliban have not yet introduced a new media law, stating the current one is still in effect – something that is contradicted by frequent new restrictions that clearly deviate from the law. Further, many new restrictions are not formally communicated, adding a layer of opacity to an already unpredictable regulatory environment.

24 Al Jazeera, 2021 https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/transcript-of-talibans-first-press-conference-in-kabul
25 HRW, 2021 https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/01/afghanistan-taliban-severely-restrict-media
26 IFJ. 2022 https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/afghanistan-taliban-introduce-new-restrictions-for-women-broadcasters.html.
27 Human Rights Watch (Mar, 2022) https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/03/07/afghanistan-taliban-threatening-provincial-media
28 AFJC (Sep, 2023) https://afjc.media/english/events/annual-report/taliban-s-directives-undermine-media-laws-and-press-freedom-in-afghanistan

Exhibit 4

Timeline of Media Repressions under Taliban rule

Recent events for Afghan media under Taliban rule 2021-2024



29 AFJC, (September 28, 2023), https://afjc.media/english/killed/the-taliban-s-13-directives-on-freedom-of-media-and-access-to-information
30 RSF (December 21, 2021), https://rsf.org/en/taliban-takeover-40-afghan-media-have-closed-80-women-journalists-have-lost-their-jobs
31 IFJ (February 03, 2022), https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/new-report-reveals-catastrophic-scale-of-media-collapse-in-afghanistan
32 DW (March 27, 2022), https://www.dw.com/en/taliban-hits-dw-bbc-with-broadcast-bans-in-afghanistan/a-61274630
33 RSF (October 5, 2022), https://rsf.org/en/taliban-have-entered-new-phase-their-media-war-closure-two-major-afghan-news-websites
34 AFJC (March 11, 2023), https://afjc.media/news/northern-province/balkh/explosion-at-journalists-gathering-in-mazar-e-sharif
35 AFJC (May 03, 2024), https://afjc.media/%DA%AF%D8%B2%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B4-%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%88%DB%8C%DA%98%D9%87/press-release/world-media-freedom-day-2024-escalation-of-restrictions-and-ongoing-arrest-of-journalists-in-afghanistan
36 VOA (May 09, 2024), https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-ban-cooperation-with-diaspora-broadcaster-/7605141.html

2b Regulatory and Administrative Media Repressions

Since the Taliban takeover in August 2021, they have issued 17 severe directives to systematically control media and journalists. Mainly, the contents of the directives fall into one of the following four themes.

Exhibit 5

Regulatory Assault on the Press

Summary of main controlling directives deployed against Afghan media

Policy	Description	Consequences
Policy: Monopoly of Information	Media outlets must coordinate with the government and submit detailed reports following Taliban regulations. They control all media outlets, both state-run and private. Journalists are required to obtain a license from the Taliban Ministry of Information and Culture.	The Taliban cancelled the law on access to information and set up over 10 new digital media to boost their narrative.
Policy: Severe Censorship	The Taliban impose strict guidelines on content deemed "un-Islamic" or critical of the regime, "Afghan values," and "public interest". They monitor filter media content severely to ensure compliance with Taliban ideology.	Dozens of journalists were imprisoned. Numerous reporters were beaten and tortured by the Taliban.
Policy: Media Alignment	The Taliban's "11 Journalism Rules" directly instruct media on what to publish, promoting Taliban narratives. Per this media directive, media outlets are compelled to align their content with Taliban policy.	Media linked to opposition parties are shut down (Noor, Barya, Kabul News TV). Private media have to align to propaganda narratives.
Policy: Ban of Foreign Media	Accessing to foreign media outlets is banned, distribution of foreign news (such as BBC, VOA and DW) is prohibited and their websites are blocked.	Access to foreign coverage is severely limited, especially via local TV.

Source: Afghanistan Journalist Center (AFJS).

Exhibit 6

Media Crackdown by the Numbers

Results of abuse against media (from August 15, 2021, to August 15, 2023)

Key figures on state abuse of media

- Cases of injuries: **23**
- Cases of threats: **139**
- Cases of detention: **176**
- Cases of death: **3**
- Physical harassment: **25**
- Overall incidents: **366**

Source: Afghanistan Journalist Center (AFJS).

3a Audience Trends

With the Taliban imposing severe restrictions and censorship on media in Afghanistan, audiences on the ground have increasingly turned to exiled outlets for access to reliable information and entertainment programs.

The internet and social media platforms have become crucial tools for audiences seeking news and exiled media outlets reaching a wide range of audiences.

Since August 2021, Afghan exiled media have significantly increased their online presence, and utilise websites and various social media to bypass the Taliban government's firewall. This has resulted in a rise in their audience engagement and interaction.

KEY FACTS AND FIGURES

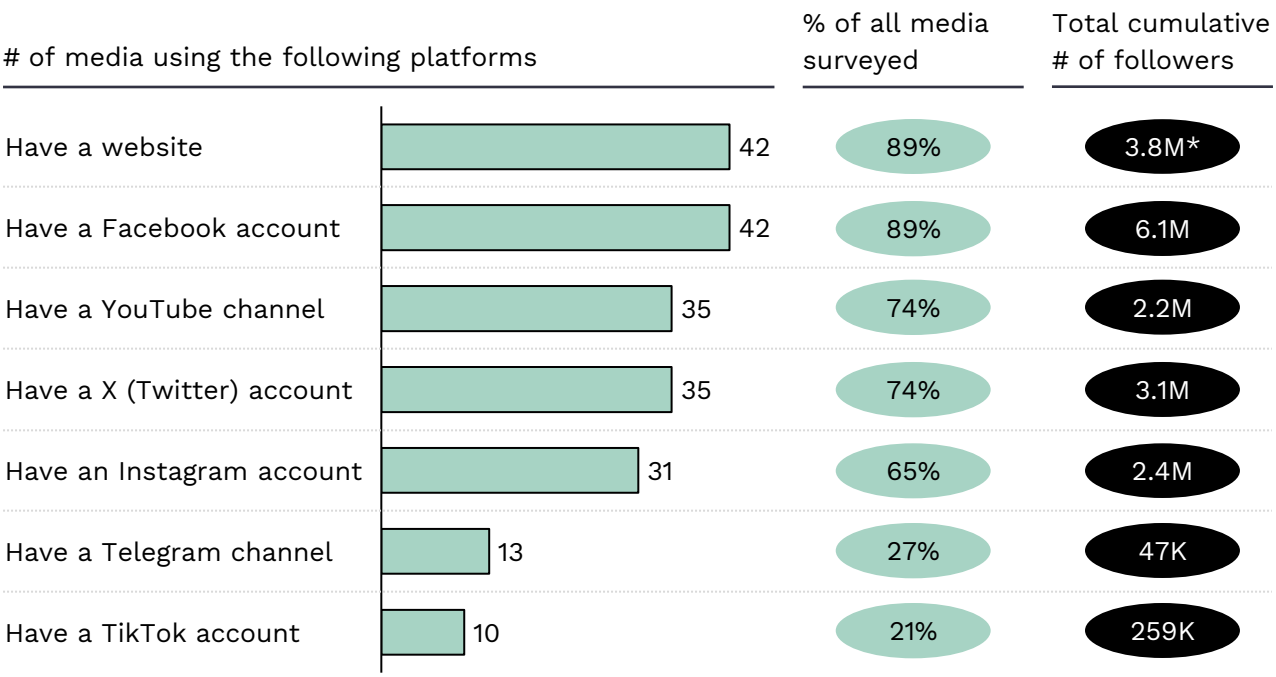
- 47 independent media in exile included in this study[37].
- Over 3 million cumulative monthly website visits (as of April 2024; N=32).
- Over 3 million X followers (as of April 2024; N=31).
- Over 36 million cumulative YouTube views (as of April 2024; N=20).
- 5 out of 47 outlets are dormant[38].

Source: JX Fund Dashboard.

Exhibit 7

Afghanistan Media in Exile: Despite Bans and Firewalls

Descriptive statistics for media surveyed for the JX Fund Dashboard (Apr. 2024, N=47)



*Monthly website visits for 32 media with available data (10 out 42 media with websites fell under the threshold for SimilarWeb data collection, suggesting they had monthly visits below 15K).

Source: JX Fund Dashboard Research, SimilarWeb.

37 Key elements of the definition of independent media in exile are having core operations outside of the country of origin, broad adherence to journalistic principles and engaging in journalistic activities, and not being reliant on funds from the state or Politically Exposed Persons (PEPs). Exiled media are characterized by a fair amount heterodox solutions and structures, making it reasonable to include various hybrid or mixed cases. For details, see Appendix A, page 34

38 Dormant media are defined as having exhibited no public activity over 3 months. Independent media suffer the same fragility of any start-up and are often more changes in external environment. Tracking this figure allows to monitor overall sectoral health.

News publishing on multilingual websites and content for social media are the primary mechanisms of Afghan exiled media to reach additional audiences inside the country and to obtain user-generated content. However, overall country internet accessibility and Taliban online censorship policies influence the media consumption.

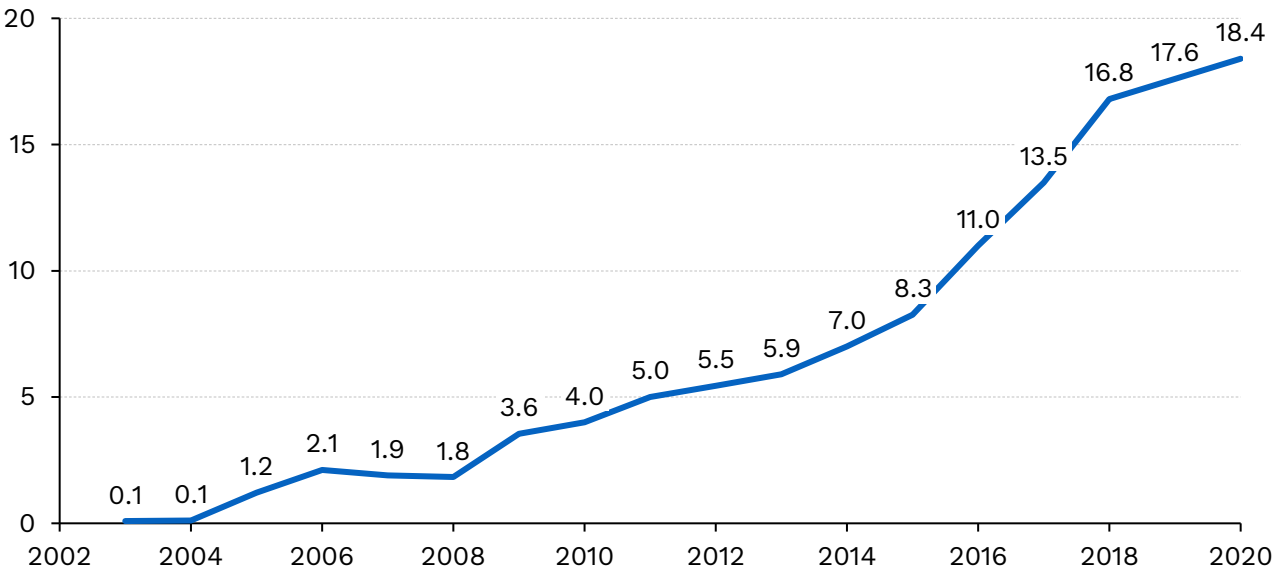
Between the years 2000 and 2020 the country's overall number of internet users increased from 0% to 18.4% of its population. Throughout these years, more people gained access to different sources of information.

As of 2021, 22% of population have access to the Internet, 69% have mobile phones and there are 4.4M social media users[39]. It is worth noting that urban residents with higher education levels showed significantly higher access to smartphones and the internet[40]. Infrastructure deficiencies and widespread poverty are major factors responsible for the fact that internet access is still unavailable to a fairly large portion of the Afghan population.

Exhibit 8

Internet Penetration Rate over the Years

Individuals* using the Internet in Afghanistan (% of population)



*Internet users are individuals who have used the Internet from any location in the last 3 months via mobile phone, PC, digital etc.

Source: World Telecommunication/ ICT Development Report and Database. World Bank Data Catalog.

Gender also plays an important role in general media consumption trends. Due to the growing restrictions on women's movement, work, and education they have less media access in comparison with men.

According to a study by the BBC (ibid.), women were significantly more likely to not have access to any form of media nor to mobile phones were women (7% versus 3% for men), older adults (8% for those 45 or over, compared to 3% for 15- to 24-year-olds), and illiterate individuals (8% versus 4% for males and even less for other categories). Literacy exhibited similar dynamics – as of 2021 the male literacy was 52.06%, while that women was 22.6%[41].

39 BBC News (Aug 16, 2021), https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-57767067
40 BBC Afghanistan Survey of Media Consumption (Dec 1, 2023), https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/reports/asia/afghanistan/media-landscape
41 Country Economy https://countryeconomy.com/demography/literacy-rate/afghanistan

More than half of Afghans dedicate at least 15 min per day to news consumption. Men and older people (45+) are the most engaged, frequently spending over an hour on this activity. Most Afghans devote between 15 minutes and an hour each day to keeping up with current event[42].

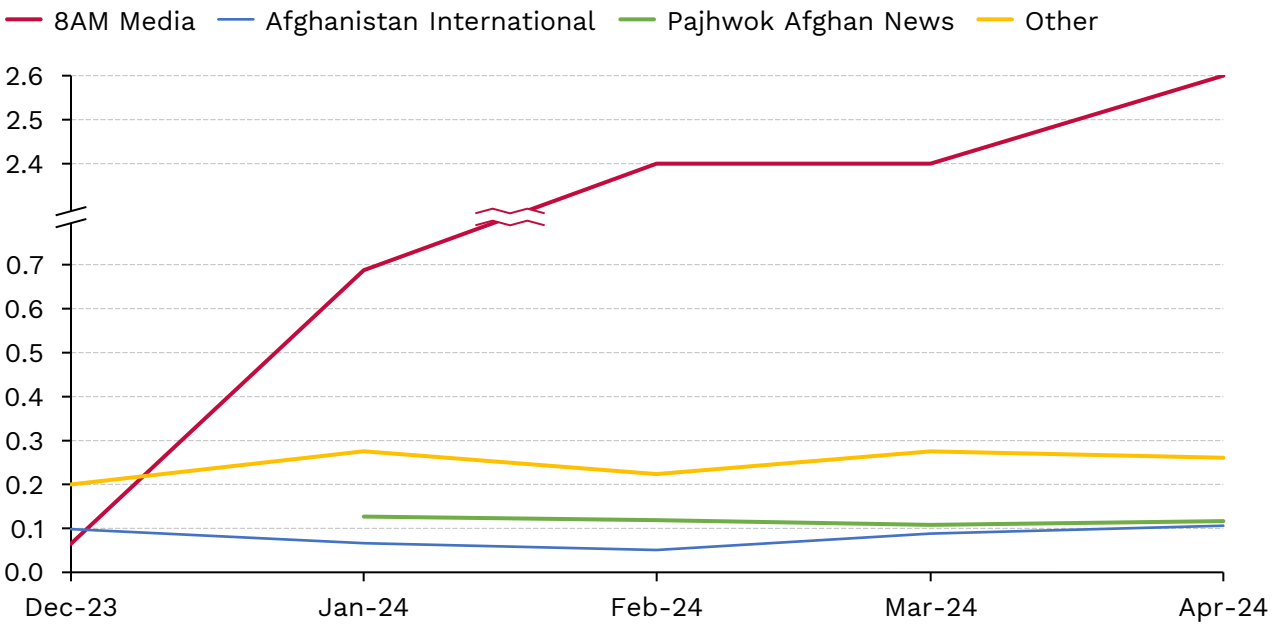
Based on available data of surveyed media the majority of Afghan exiled outlets have multilingual websites, and many experienced growing website traffic following the Taliban coming to power.

The de facto government is enforcing strict restrictions and heavy censorship on professional media and journalists in Afghanistan. This has led to an increase in traffic to exiled media, driven by the audience's urgent need for alternative sources of uncensored information.

Exhibit 9

Website Visits Dynamics

Top 3 Afghan independent media by website visits* (Dec-23 to Apr-24; millions)



*Website data for Pajhwok Afghan News was available only since January 2024.

Source: JX Fund Dashboard Research.

Media in Afghanistan are specifically not permitted to cover security incidents (such as attacks by the armed opposition or Islamic State). Instead, they can only publish information received from authorized provincial authorities (e.g., the governor's office or chief of police) when such an incident occurs.

Media restrictions have had the unintended consequence of causing a rise if citizen journalism[43]. For example, Incidents continue to be reported on social media by individuals. As a result, it is increasingly common to see a dissonance between what is reported via official or sanctioned channels (i.e., by media relying on authorized sources) and what appears in social media – with the population increasingly distrusting news media in favor of social platforms.

42 BBC Afghanistan Survey of Media Consumption (Dec 1, 2023), https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediaaction/publications-and-resources/research/reports/asia/afghanistan/media-landscape
43 Kaweh, Amin (February 18, 2024), https://8am.media/eng/exiled-media-and-the-free-flow-of-information-citizen-journalism-has-flourished/

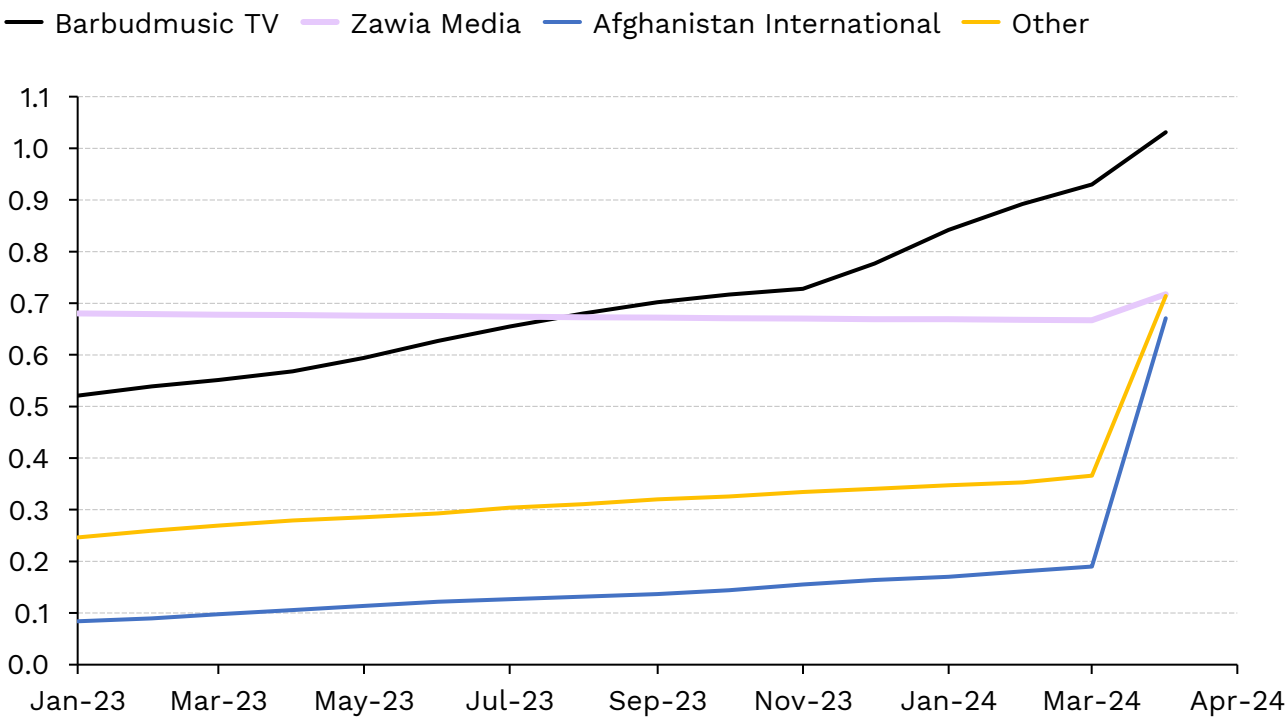
In addition, the lack of access to reliable sources on the ground is a challenge for exiled media to investigate and verify the facts and information. Most Afghan exiled media rely on citizen journalism and anonymous sources[44].

From one hand it's helpful to have access to information on the ground, but from the other, inaccuracy of user-generated content on social media has negatively affected the content of exiled media due to the lack of professional verification mechanisms.

Exhibit 10

Need of Entertainment Content

Total YouTube followers of Afghan media (Jan-23 to Apr-24, millions)



Source: JX Fund Dashboard Research.

The suffocating media atmosphere has caused a wave of emerging YouTube channels in Afghanistan. Many Afghan YouTubers took on the role of citizen journalists and publish various topics from politics to daily life on their channels[45]. But impartiality of most of them is questionable, since Taliban fosters YouTubers to promote their image. As the reward - access to stories that can draw millions of views online[46].

Speaking of Afghan exiled media YouTube traffic, increase in views indicated need in entertainment content, such as music and movies, shift towards multimedia content creation and banning of entertainment content in the Afghan media, especially television.

44 Kaweh, Amin (February 18, 2024), https://8am.media/eng/exiled-media-and-the-free-flow-of-information-citizen-journalism-has-flourished/
45 Lih Yi, Beh, Rahmani, Waliullah (August 14, 2023), https://cpj.org/2023/08/two-years-into-taliban-rule-media-repression-worsens-in-afghanistan/
46 Washington Post (Mar 9, 2024), https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/03/09/afghanistan-taliban-media-youtube-influencers/

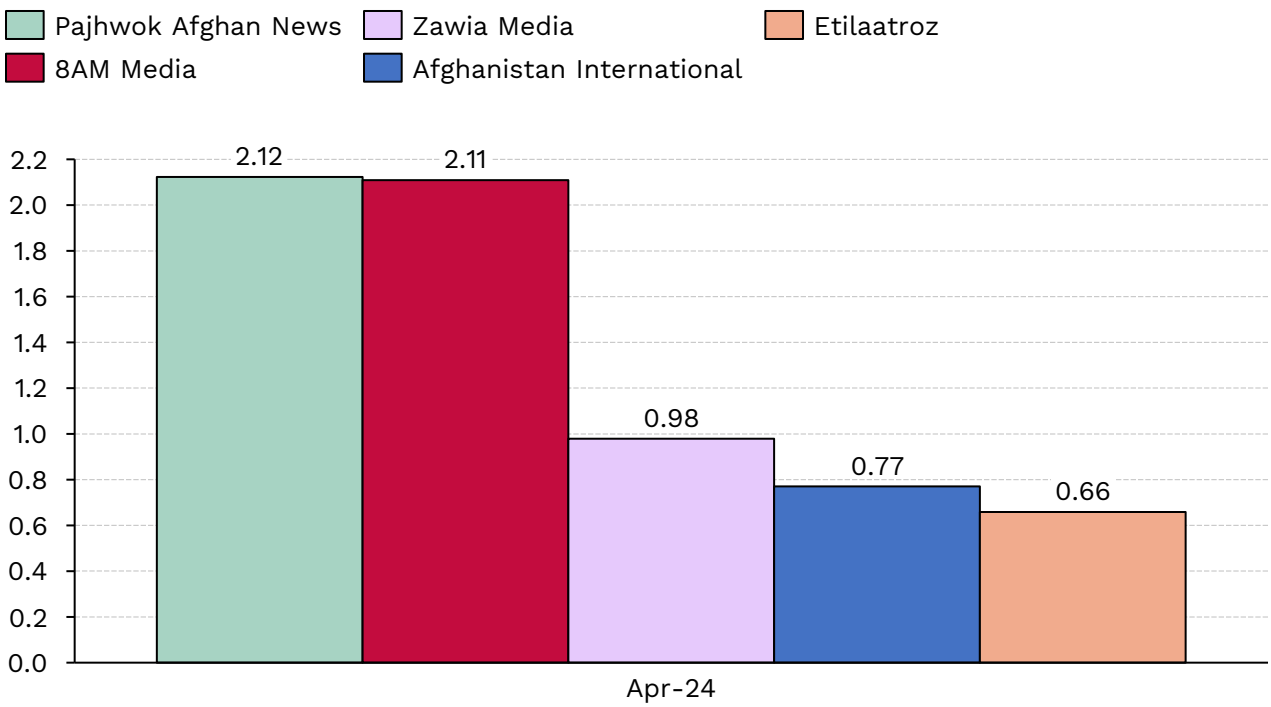
Facebook is the most widely used social network in Afghanistan. Possibility to express your views about certain issues along with photos and videos make this social media as convenient tool for both the audience and exiled media. Also, Facebook is one of the few ways for Afghan girls to continue their education, as it provides access to outside news and educational courses[47].

Recent news stated the Taliban are expanding their policies to target social media platforms and have enacted new regulations to target YouTube channels and currently working on a plan to restrict or block access to Facebook in Afghanistan[48].

Exhibit 11

Facebook – the Main Social Network

Top 5 Afghan media in exile Facebook pages by number of likes (millions)



Source: JX Fund Dashboard Research. Note: Historical data for many Afghan media Facebook pages is unavailable.

It's worth noting the increasing level of misleading information being disseminated, primarily through Facebook. The BBC Media Action's Afghanistan survey of media consumption, which interviewed over 2,600 Afghans in 2023, found that 55% of respondents reported checking multiple sources to verify received information. Facebook, friends, family, and Taliban-controlled media were identified as the main sources of false or misleading information.

Despite this, the overall trust in media among the audience appears to be positive, with 60% of respondents agreeing that the media provides all the information they seek and 50% considering it accurate and reliable. However, women, younger individuals, the educated, and those living in urban areas were more critical.

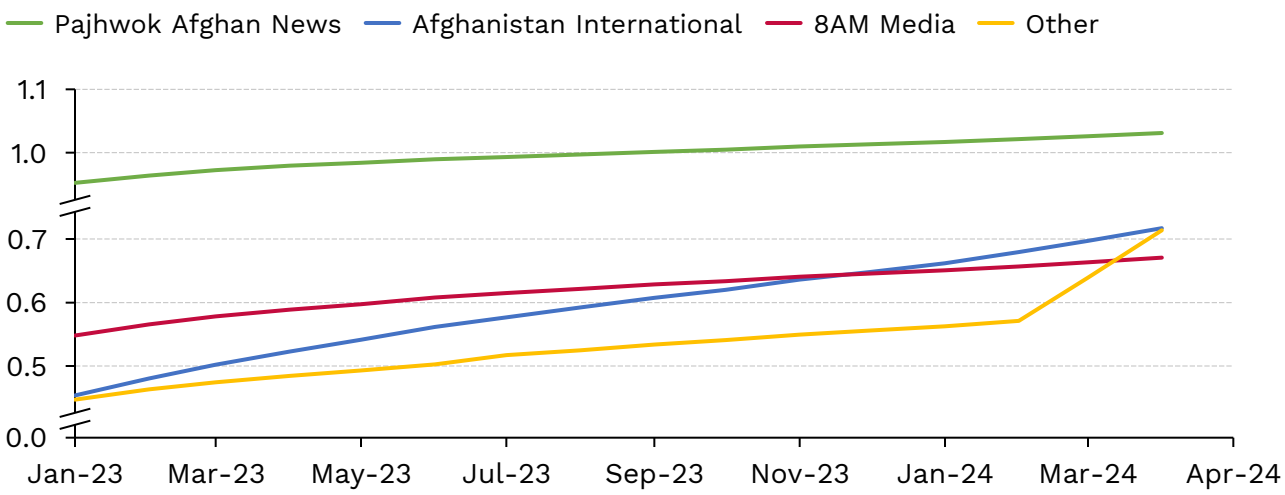
47 RFE/RL (Apr 14, 2024), https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-facebook-last-nail-free-media/32904803.html
48 VOA (Apr 11, 2024), https://www.voanews.com/a/taliban-facebook-plan-is-attempt-to-silence-critics-journalists-say/7566996.html

In recent years X has become one of the popular social media platforms in Afghanistan in terms of publishing news and launching advocacy campaigns. The findings show that the X pages of Afghan exiled media are growing dramatically, and the biggest Afghan independent exiled media X pages have seen meaningful followers' growth. The study identifies the X pages of Pajhwok Afghan News, 8am Media, and Afghanistan International TV, as the top three most popular among Afghan exile media outlets.

Exhibit 12

X Dynamics – a Platform for Discussions

Total X subscribers of Afghan media (Jan-23 to Apr-24; millions)



Source: JX Fund Dashboard Research.

At the beginning of 2023, Instagram's advertising reach in Afghanistan amounted to 7.2 percent of the local internet users, irrespective of their age[1]. The cumulative amount of Instagram followers* of the media surveyed for April 2024 exceeded 2 millions. In the top 5 media with highest amount of followers for the mentioned month are Barbud music TV with more than 800K followers, 8AM Media with over 500K followers, Afghanistan International – 470K, Aamaj News – 190K and Amu TV with over 140K followers (see exhibit 13).

Exhibit 13

Instagram dynamics

Top 5 Afghan media in exile Instagram pages by number of followers ('000s)

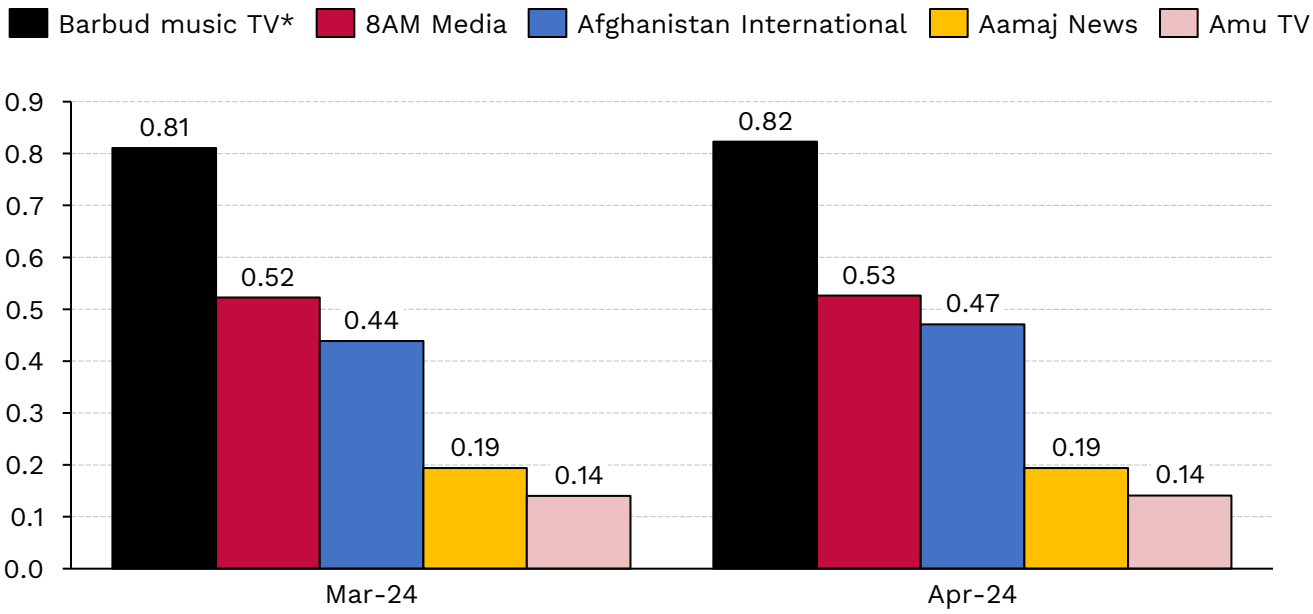
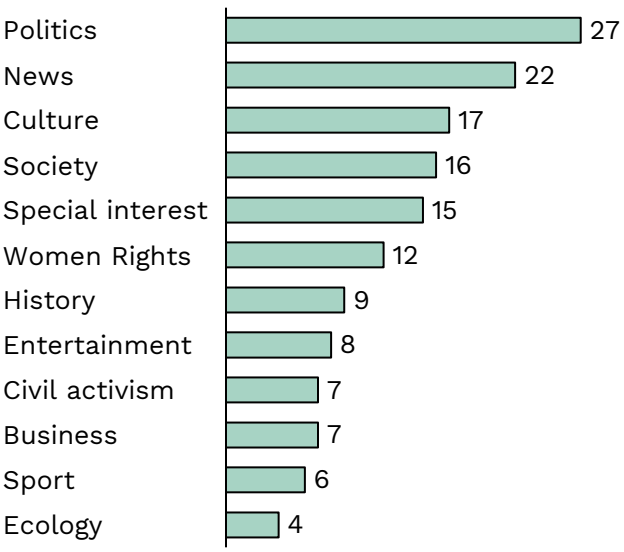


Exhibit 14

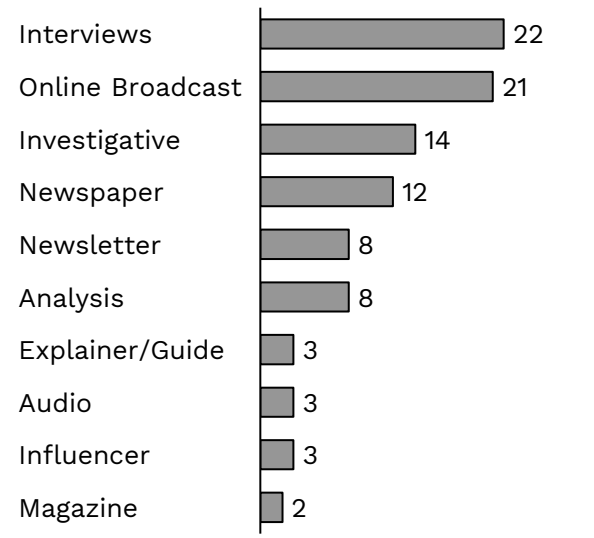
Spotlight on Politics and News

Frequencies of thematic and format labels** (N=47)

Thematic-based label frequency***



Format-based label frequency***



*Barbud Music TV being an entertainment media was included in the Study as an exception given specific country peculiarities and audience preferences. Media included in the Study and Dashboard follow JXF EXIM general set of criteria (see page 34) and additional ones relevant for every country and reflecting the political and social aspects.
**Media are fluid in their thematic focus and formats used by design. To create a best-attempt picture of the space, experts allocated a limited number of labels to each media that best characterized their priority areas of coverage or formats (e.g., having a couple of podcast episodes would probably not qualify for an "audio" label, especially if a media mostly focused on online news and video), subsequently comparing them to ensure relatively cohesive definitions. Note: a single media is expected to have multiple labels, hence the totals do not add up to 47. Note: special interest label encompasses such topics as ethnic, gender, diaspora, LGBTQ+, other relatively niche topic (e.g. Barbud Music).
*** Labels are overlapping both from Topics and Formats since media can cover different themes in variety of formats at the same time.

Source: JX Fund Dashboard; Data as of May 2024.

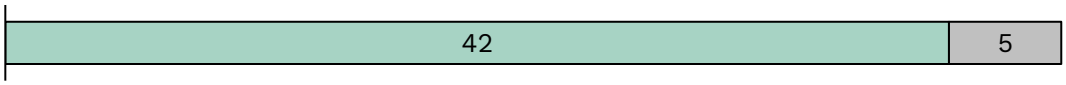
3b Media Facts and Figures: Origins, Profiles, Ownership

Exhibit 14

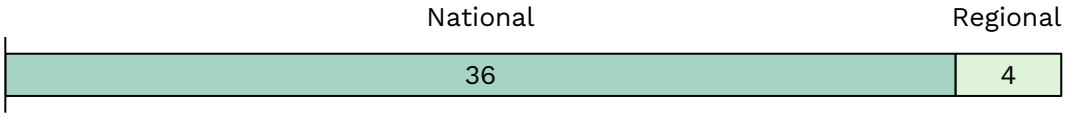
Afghanistan Media in Exile at a Glance

Key descriptive metrics of Afghanistan independent media in exile (as of May 2024)

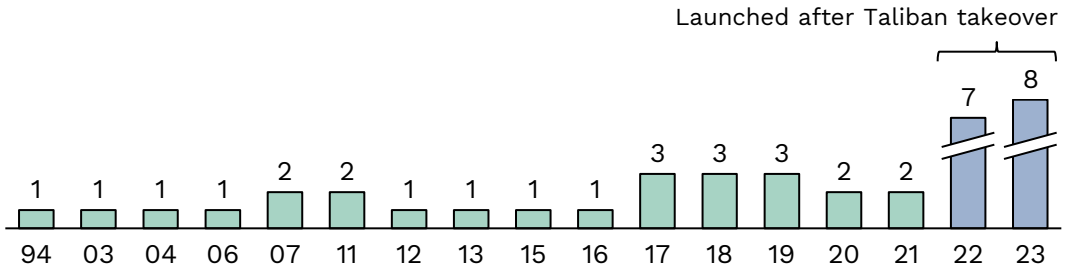
Active/ dormant* (N=47)



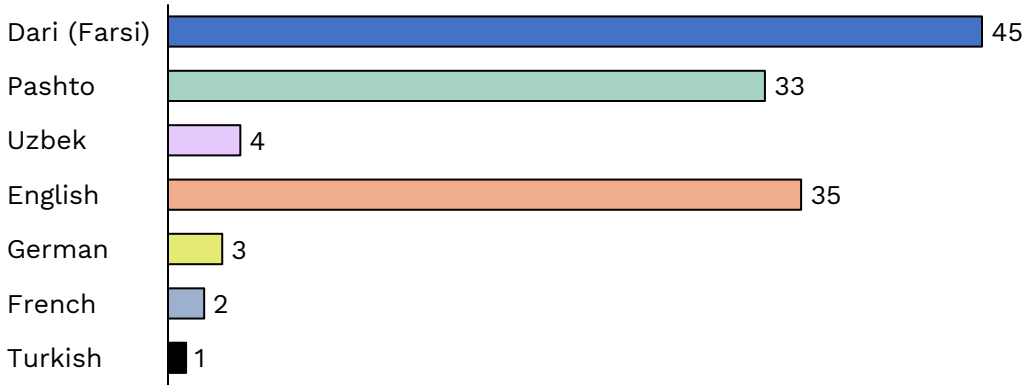
Coverage (N=40)



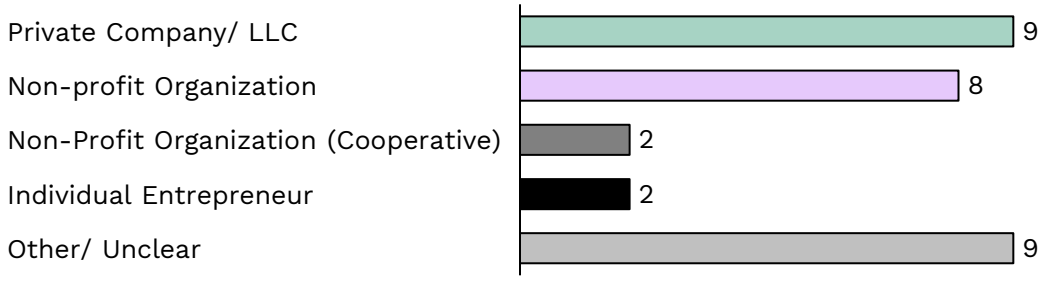
Year founded (N=40)



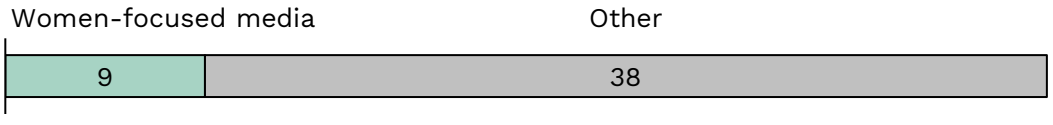
Languages used (N=47)**



Main Legal forms (N=30)***



Women-focused media (N=47)



* Dormant media are defined as having exhibited no public activity over 3 months. Independent media suffer the same fragility of any start-up and are often more changes in external environment. Tracking this figure allows to monitor overall sectoral health.
** The number of media is overlapping, as some outlets publish in multiple languages.
*** Only main legal forms included in the graph.

Source: Media Survey, JX Fund Dashboard Research; Data as of May 2024.

3c The Impact of Ethnic Diversity

After 2001, Afghanistan's political landscape was divided along ethnic and religious lines, something that reflected in the media. Outlets owned by politicians often exhibited content biases aligned with their owners' priorities and affiliations, though they rarely claimed to represent specific groups. Most professed a nation-wide agenda to appeal to a broad audience.

However, funding sources often revealed biases, with many outlets financially supported by entities tied to specific political, ethnic, or religious groups (or foreign interests). This financial backing influenced programming and editorial stances, resulting in a media landscape marked by ethnic segmentation in both ownership and content.

Ayna TV, for instance, was owned by Marshal Abdul Rashid Dostum[49] leader of Junbish-i-Milli Islami Afghanistan (National Islamic Movement of Afghanistan), who later became Vice President of Afghanistan. Ayna TV primarily served as a tool for Dostum and his party. Programs were mostly in Uzbek language, catering to the Uzbek population in northern Afghanistan, although Ayna TV also aired programs in Dari and Pashto to present itself as an independent channel for the general public.

Similarly, Mitra TV, based in Mazar-i-Sharif, was owned by Atta Mohammad Noor, a key leader in the Jamiat-e-Islami party and former governor of Balkh province. Mitra TV claimed independence and broadcast in both Dari and Pashto and clearly followed the directives of Noor and his predominantly Tajik Jamiat-e-Islami party, with content primarily serving Tajik and Dari-speaking communities[50].

Kabul-based Shamshad TV and Zhwandoon TV aired programs in both Dari and Pashto but were biased towards Pashtun nationalistic sentiments. They catered not only to Pashtun communities in Afghanistan but also to Pashtuns across the Durand Line, the de facto border between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Channels like Rah-e-Farda and Negaah TV, founded by ethnic Hazara leaders Mohammad Mohaqiq and former Vice President Karim Khalili respectively, focused on providing coverage for the Hazara community[51].

Tamadon TV, established by religious leader Ayatollah Asif Mohseni, primarily catered to the Shia Muslim community with its content[52]. The ethnic segmentation in the media was also evident in prominent newspapers such as Etilaatroz and Rahmanyat, which were primarily run by individuals from the Hazara community.

Biases in content were visible, reflecting the ethnic and religious affiliations of their editorial boards or their foreign backers' interests. Even the content of several commercial media outlets, including those under the MOBY Group, were influenced by the interests and affiliations of their editorial boards or foreign backers. Nonetheless, the degree of trust that these media outlets command within their respective communities should be critically analyzed.

49 Independent Persian (February 22, 2022) https://www.independentpersian.com/node/216076
50 Wazhmah Osman "Television and the Afghan Culture Wars" (Dec 14, 2020) https://books.google.it/books?id=ZukHEAAAQBAJ&pg=PT284&lpg=PT284&dq=noor+tv+tajik&source=bl&ots=2dkhdoq07T&sig=ACfU3U1KqkNva64M_JHD6spqqUzW65JPg&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwjCl8mc_eKGAxUOg_0HHVPIDe84FBDoAXoECAMQAw#v=onepage&q=noor%20tv%20tajik&f=false
51 VOA (Apr 14, 2022) https://www.voanews.com/a/i-want-truth-to-be-told-/6528998.html
52 France 24 (May 13, 2009) https://www.france24.com/en/20090513-struggle-shiite-hearts-minds-part-ii-

Despite the claim to independence and neutrality, in exile locations, similar ethnic, religious, linguistic, and political affiliations continue to influence the content and ownership of some media outlets. Their political and ethnic affiliations significantly shape their programming, especially in relation to the de facto Taliban government.

While some TV stations are striving to secure their independence and adopt a more neutral editorial policy, many remain influenced by their original affiliations and the interests of their backers. Similar situation could also be seen in media support and advocacy organizations founded in exile[53].

In addition, a number of media outlets in exile have also been blamed for promoting hate speech, disinformation, misinformation, and fake news within the country, which have resulted in flaring ethnic, linguistic, and religious tensions in the country and polarizing society.

The spread of hate speech, disinformation, and fake news by these exiled media outlets not only have profound impacts on Afghan society but distort public perception and trust in exile media, making it increasingly difficult for citizens to distinguish between legitimate news sources and propaganda, leading to a fragmented media landscape where truth becomes a casualty.

53 CIMA (Apr 6, 2022) https://www.cima.ned.org/blog/television-and-the-afghan-culture-wars/

3d The Role of Television

In November 2022, Nai Supporting Open Media, a media advocacy group in Afghanistan, reported that more than 100 television networks had ceased operations since the Taliban takeover in August 2021[54]. The closure of media outlets and the exodus of Afghan media professionals have led to the creation of several TV stations in exile.

To reach their audiences in Afghanistan, TV use different formats and channels, including satellite broadcasting, online streaming, YouTube channels, and social media platforms. Additionally, many of these exiled TV channels are accessible on streaming platforms[55]. The TV channels accessible via satellite are also commonly available through Afghanistan's cable network system.

Television stands as the predominant broadcasting platform in Afghanistan, with urban areas exhibiting a higher prevalence of household TV ownership compared to rural regions. Television coverage extends to nearly 40 percent of Afghanistan’s population[56].

TV programming encompasses a diverse array of genres, including news, current affairs, discussions, soap operas, music, and religious programs. Notably, Turkish and Indian soap operas enjoy widespread popularity, while Iranian, Pakistani, and Western counterparts garner comparatively less attention. The top three music styles aired on Afghan TVs are Indian, Afghan, and Iranian (ibid.).

It's worth noting that, apart from news and current affairs, the majority of Afghanistan’s TV content is sourced from abroad, indicating a heavy reliance on foreign-produced programming.

Prior to the Taliban takeover, international broadcasters such as VOA, BBC, DW, and RFE/RL were accessible to Afghan audiences. For example, VOA streamed various programs daily via privately-owned telecommunication providers like Afghan Wireless, Roshan, and Etisalat Afghanistan (subsidiary of a United Arab Emirates-owned company), as well as through the state-owned telecom company Salam.

VOA Satellite programming included 24-hour direct-to-home TV satellite broadcasting seven days a week, with six hours of Dari and Pashto content repeated multiple times throughout the day[57].

However, in 2023, the Taliban government imposed a ban on foreign media. Local TV channels broadcasting VOA, DW, and BBC content were prohibited, including BBC’s news bulletins in Pashto, Persian, and Uzbek, DW’s political talk show “Aashti” in Dari and Pashto on local partner ToloNews, and science programs broadcast on Ariana TV and Shamshad[58]. Additionally, these restrictions led to blocking access to websites of VOA, BBC, and Radio Azadi/RFE[59].

54 Zan Times (Nov 21, 2022) https://zantimes.com/2022/11/21/100-plus-television-stations-shut-down-during-past-year/
55 Film Sarai Live TV (Mar 21, 2024) https://livetvaf.net/watch-afghan-live-tv-channels-online-accessing-popular-afghan-tv-channels-for-free/
56 Media Landscapes (2020) https://medialandscapes.org/country/afghanistan/media/television
57 VOA https://www.insidevoa.com/p/6455.html
58 Variety (Mar, 2022) https://variety.com/2022/tv/asia/taliban-bans-bbc-dw-voa-afghanistan-news-ban-1235216796/
59 CPJ (Feb, 2023) https://cpj.org/2023/02/access-to-voa-and-rfe-rl-websites-restricted-in-afghanistan/

Exhibit 16

Afghan TV in Exile via Satellite

Afghan TV in Exile accessibility via Satellite

	Description	Accessibility
Afghanistan International	Afghanistan International is a news and current affairs television station headquartered in London, aimed at Afghans and the Afghan diaspora. Launched by Volant Media UK on August 15, 2021, Afghanistan International TV serves as a sister station to Iran International. Languages: Dari, Pashto, English.	TürkmenÄlem 52° E / MonacoSAT satellite. Radio - 7600 kHz. Gobal online streaming - Darya, Jadoo, and Glwiz. App via Google Play, Apple.
Amu TV (Eye Media Group)	Eye Media Group, established by Afghan journalists, including prominent figure Lotfullah Najafizada. Headquartered in Virginia, U.S., Eye Media Group first broadcast online in late 2022, followed by the launch of Amu TV as an international satellite TV channel in 2023. Languages: Dari, Pashto, English.	SES (Al-Maissan Satellite Communications) AMU TV is also available online on various streaming platforms and via mobile application.
Exile TV Network (EXTV)	The Canada-based Exile TV Network (EXTV) is a satellite TV channel. The channel features live 20-minute news bulletins, including business, sports, special reports and offers 24/7 programming from its initial launch. Languages: Dari, Pashto, English.	Express 6AM satellite. The TV channel is available online, on various streaming platforms, and via mobile application.

Exhibit 17

Afghan TV in Exile Online

Afghan TV in Exile accessibility via web, social media, apps and streaming platforms

	Description	Accessibility
Barbud Music TV	Barbud Music TV promotes Afghanistan's musical legacy and culture. Languages: Dari, Pashto, English.	Accessible via YouTube and digital platform ”Darya”.
Bina TV	Bina TV was founded in September 2023 by a group of journalists who fled the country following the Taliban takeover in 2021. Languages: Dari, Pashto, English. Based in Paris, Bina TV publishes also in French.	Accessible via YouTube and social media platforms.
Chiragh TV	Chiragh TV broadcasts in the Pashto language and focuses on the southwest region, traditionally known as a hub of the Taliban. This region has had very limited media presence over the last 20 years due to insecurity and the threat of Taliban insurgency. Languages: Pashto, English.	Accessible via YouTube, social media, and various streaming platforms.

Source: JX Fund Research

	Description	Accessibility
Faza TV	Faza TV, a project of Moby Media Group, Afghanistan's largest media company, provides entertainment, news, and cultural programming. Languages: Dari, English.	Accessible via YouTube, social media, and the Moby Media Group's Darya streaming app.
Quqnoos TV	Dedicated to women's rights in Afghanistan Quqnoos TV primarily composed of human rights activists and several media professionals. The founder, Zahra Sepehr is a human rights activist herself. Languages: Dari, Pashto.	The outlet does not have a website; it's mainly available on social media and YouTube.
Uzbekpedia TV	Established in 2019 by a group of Afghan-Uzbek journalists. The outlet delivers news in Uzbek, catering to Uzbek communities in Afghanistan while also highlighting their unique customs and traditions. Based in Istanbul, Turkey. Languages: Uzbek, Turkish.	Accessible via YouTube.
Watan TV	One of the few media outlets established prior to the collapse of the Republic. Founded in 2019 in Germany by a group of Afghan journalists, media workers, scholars, and politicians, many of whom had ties to the former People's Democratic Party that governed Afghanistan until 1992, Watan TV asserts its independence despite its founders' affiliations. Languages: Dari, Pashto, English.	Accessible online via social media platforms and various streaming services.
Wesal TV	Wesal TV is a collaborative effort between Pajhwok Afghan News - largest independent news agency and a group of Afghan journalists in exile. Headquartered in Ottawa, Canada, Wesal TV employs a hybrid model targeting audiences in Afghanistan and the diaspora. Languages: Dari, Pashto, English.	Wesal TV broadcasts online, and its content is accessible via YouTube, social media apps, and various streaming platforms.
Zan TV	Zan TV was founded by Hamid Samar, a media entrepreneur in 2017. After the Taliban takeover, the channel relocated to the United States. Zan TV is notable for its predominantly female workforce and content with focus on women issues in Afghanistan. Languages: Dari, Pashto, English.	Available via online, YouTube, social media and streaming platforms.
Zarin TV Network	Launched in 2012 from Los Angeles, primarily targeting the diaspora with entertainment and cultural programs. Following the Afghan government collapse in 2021, Zarin TV expanded its outreach within Afghanistan. In late 2022, it launched a new division focused on news reporting and current affairs, including hourly news bulletins. Languages: Dari, Pashto, English.	Accessible via websites, social media, streaming platforms.

Source: JX Fund Research

3e Women and Media

Recent developments have had a particularly negative effect on female journalists and media workers. As per RSF's findings, over 80% of female journalists in Afghanistan ceased working since Taliban came to power on August 15, 2021 (RSF, 2023).

However, there are still a small number of female journalists working in the capital and a few other cities in extremely stressful environments. The hijab is now compulsory, and facemasks are mandatory during live performances. Nevertheless, as the sole providers for their families, some of these women are left with no choice but to work despite the worsening conditions[60].

Commenting on the working conditions of female journalists and media workers, the head of a media advisory group in Kabul, who prefers to remain anonymous, revealed that the Afghan media has lost 93% of female journalists over the course of last year.

According to his assessment, there are still female journalists working in 11 provinces, 19 provinces have women working in media outlets (not necessarily in the role of journalists), and no women at all work as journalists or in media outlets in 13 provinces.

He cited out-migration, threats, family opposition, restrictions, and stressful work environments, such as mandatory hijab and facemasks, as the primary reasons for women media workers losing or quitting their jobs. This loss of female journalists, in combination with Taliban policy in some provinces allowing only female journalists to host female guests, has led to female guests being unable to appear on TV or radio at all.

Adding to this perspective, a media manager overseeing radio stations across Afghanistan from exile, also speaking anonymously, attributed the lack of or scarcity of female journalists in some provinces to the local conservative culture and emphasized the variance seen across the country. He said that the overall situation of female employment was very poor in more conservative provinces like Nooristan, Zabul, Paktya, and Paktika, in contrast to urban areas like Kabul, Jalalabad, Herat, and Balkh.

Overall, interviewees opined that only a small percentage of women had worked in the media sector in those more conservative provinces prior to the Taliban takeover. When the government changed, those few female journalists fled the country, leaving these provinces without any female journalists or media professionals.

As the same exiled journalist described: “In Balkh, our women-run radio stations are still operational. However, Paktya, for example, is much more conservative, thus having women-run radio stations would not be possible there. Women have completely disappeared from the media outlets there”.

In exile, Afghan women journalists have founded media outlets spanning various platforms, including online publications, radio and television channels, social media platforms, and podcasts[61].

60 VOA (Aug 30, 2023) https://www.voanews.com/a/female-afghan-journalists-describe-life-under-taliban-misogyny/7248022.html
61 https://akademie.dw.com/en/in-zan-times-afghanistan-finds-a-voice-in-exile/a-65804496

Among the most prominent are Begum Radio, Ravi Zan, Rukhshana Media founded by journalist Zahra Joya in London; Zan TV, originally founded in Kabul but operating in exile since the Taliban's takeover; Zantimes, founded by prominent journalist Zahra Nader in the United States.

These outlets cover a wide range of topics, including women's rights, education, health, and culture. Through these outlets, they amplify the voices of Afghan women and shed light on the challenges they face under Taliban rule. Gender-based violence, access to education and healthcare, employment opportunities, and women's political participation are among the key issues women journalists focus on[62].

Many Afghan women journalists in exile utilize social media platforms to share their experiences, advocate for women's rights, and connect with supporters worldwide[63]. They also frequently contribute articles, op-eds, and interviews to international news outlets, sharing their perspectives on the situation in Afghanistan and advocating for change[64].

Beyond raising awareness, Afghan women journalists advocate for international support and solidarity via media. They leverage their voices to urge governments, organizations, and individuals worldwide to prioritize the protection and empowerment of Afghan women and girls.

The emergence of Afghan women journalists in exile within the media sphere represents a powerful continuation of their resilience and determination to advocate for gender equality and human rights.

62 https://abcnews.go.com/International/reporters-notebook-abandoned-dreams-afghanistan-save-life/story?id=55044978
63 https://www.vidc.org/detail/afghan-womens-war-for-gender-equality
64 https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/may/02/they-are-trying-to-eradicate-us-completely-the-passion-and-pain-of-telling-the-stories-of-afghan-women

4a Situation in Key Countries

After August 15, 2021, the Afghan media community faced the question of whether to stay or leave? Some media quickly relocated their organizations, going into exile, and evacuated team members within the first few days. However, most Afghan outlets either decided to remain in the country and continued operating under Taliban restrictions or were simply unable to leave.

A considerable part of media outlets and media professional have relocated to United States, Canada, European countries such as Germany, France, UK, Ireland. Concurrently, several new exiled media outlets also were established in the host countries.

United States, Germany, and Canada were among donor countries, providing military and financial support to the republic government[65,66,67].

Furthermore, existing support programs and paths for Afghan exiled journalists in these countries was provided such as issuing emergency visas and relocation assistance. For example, Canada and Germany announced special plans to provide visa and asylum opportunities for Afghan journalists away from the Taliban persecution and suppression[68,69,70,71].

After the Taliban takeover, numerous Afghan media outlets relocated to exile and resumed operations after a brief interruption. They were joined by evacuated journalists, who reunited with their former colleagues in their new homes abroad.

Fearing persecution from the Taliban, many Afghan journalists initially sought refuge in neighbouring countries like Iran and Pakistan. They used these locations as temporary havens while awaiting resettlement in Western countries such as the United States, Germany, and Canada, which had shut down their embassies following the Taliban's takeover[72,73,74].

However, Afghan exiled journalists who couldn’t secure asylum in Western countries or are awaiting decisions on their pending cases with Western embassies or the UNHCR in Pakistan face significant security concerns[75].

Many Taliban sympathizers in Pakistan, combined with the risk of deportation from both Pakistan and Iran, exacerbate their precarious situation. RSF reported that 200 Afghan journalists who fled to Pakistan are at risk of deportation and face increasing violence following the Pakistani government's decision to expel Afghan refugees[76].

65 Witte, Griff (April 22, 2024), https://www.britannica.com/event/Afghanistan-War
66 Maizland, Lindsay (January 19, 2023) https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/taliban-afghanistan
67 Center for Preventive Action (August 17, 2023) https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/war-afghanistan
68 Government of Canada (May 06, 2022) https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/news/2022/05/afghan-journalists-find-freedom-of-expression-in-canada.html
69 Menon, Akhila (September 07, 2022) https://thetyee.ca/News/2022/09/07/Afghan-Journalists-Still-Waiting-To-Come-To-Canada/
70 RSF (July 26, 2023) https://faq.rsf-assistance.org/afg
71 RSF (October 08, 2022) https://rsf.org/en/rsf-helps-evacuate-202-afghan-journalists-takes-152-support-measures
72 Molter, Nina (November 11, 2023), https://akademie.dw.com/en/afghan-journalist-in-exile-if-i-stop-writing-i-stop-existing/a-63761184
73 Government of Canada (April 10, 2024) https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/refugees/afghanistan/special-measures.html
74 CPJ (September 01, 2023) https://cpj.org/2023/09/cpj-insider-september-2023-edition/
75 AJSO (December 31, 2023) https://ajso.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/English-1.pdf
76 RSF (December 11, 2023) https://rsf.org/en/rsf-urges-pakistani-government-not-deport-afghan-journalists

Exhibit 18

Overview of Key Hubs for Afghan Media in Exile

Visa, residency and other considerations in key Afghan media émigré hubs

Germany	• Germany is one of three European states (together with France and the UK) that offered safe refuge for Afghan journalists after August 15, 2021[77,78]; 17 out of 47 Afghan exiled media are at least partially based in Germany. • Around 33,000 Afghans refugees arrived in Germany following the Taliban takeover[79]. Visas were issued for local workers, journalists, researchers, activists, and human rights defenders, as well as their families. • The German Federal Admission Program was launched in October 2022 promising to bring up to 1,000, Afghans per month to safety to Germany, but has faced serious problems to deliver ever since its inception[80,81]. • Several German non-profits currently support Afghan media and journalists in exile, helping with asylum procedure, legal counseling, rebuilding their careers, providing training opportunities and funding various initiatives.
Canada	• Canada became a hub for hundreds of Afghan exiled journalists and media professionals due to the Canadian government evacuation and resettlement programs. 11 teams out of 47 Afghan media in exile surveyed based in Canada. • Following the Taliban takeover, the Canadian government brought more than 43,000 Afghans as refugees into the country[82]. • Some universities and NGOs help Afghan exiled journalists with in-residency programs, fellowships, and other means to rebuild their professional careers, including job placement in Canadian media[83].
United States	• Following the Taliban takeover, the largest group of Afghan people resettled in the U.S. Over 120,000 Afghan people evacuated to safety after August 15, 2021, via U.S government emergency evacuation flights[84]. Most evacuees were granted two-year Humanitarian Parole visas upon arrival. • Securing permanent legal residency is the biggest challenge for Afghans in the U.S., due to a long asylum process. Many evacuees who came to the U.S. under Humanitarian Parole are now essentially stuck in limbo. While this status grants a temporary permission to stay, it lacks a clear path to permanent residency[85,86]. • Currently, several American universities, nonprofits and NGOs support Afghan exiled media and journalists in the U.S., providing fellowships, training programs, financial assistance, pro bono legal counseling, asylum procedure support, and funding for some exiled media outlets. • 9 teams out of 47 Afghan media in exile surveyed are based in U.S.

Source: JX Fund Dashboard Research.

77 Townsend, Mark (March 4, 2023), https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/mar/04/anger-grows-over-afghan-journalists-still-stranded-by-home-office-inaction
78 Douglas, Elliot (October 28, 2021) https://www.dw.com/en/dw-journalists-from-afghanistan-arrive-in-germany/a-59335001
79 Brunnersum Sou-Jie Van (March 22, 2024) https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/55995/german-government-flies-more-afghans-to-germany#:~:text=Germany%20began%20evacuating%20vulnerable%20Afghans,most%20areas%20of%20public%20life.
80 RSF dossier (Oct 16, 2023) https://www.reporterohnegrenzen.de/fileadmin/Redaktion/user_upload/Afghanistan_Dossier_13.10.2023.pdf
81 Gossman, Patricia (August 2, 2023) https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/02/germanys-broken-promises
82 Chini, Joey (December 6, 2023) https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/333-afghan-nationals-arrive-in-winnipeg-will-live-in-various-canadian-communities-1.6676938
83 Sarfraz, Abdul Matin (Feb 14, 2023) https://www.nationalobserver.com/2023/02/14/news/afghan-residence-journalists-human-rights
84 White House (August 31, 2021) https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/31/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-end-of-the-war-in-afghanistan/
85 University of Chicago (May 1, 2024) https://crownschool.uchicago.edu/news-events/all-news/jessica-darrow-leads-panel-discussion-afghan-evacuee-report-published-urban#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20report%2C%20many,to%20lawful%20permanent%20residence%20status.
86 Chini, Joey (December 6, 2023) https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/333-afghan-nationals-arrive-in-winnipeg-will-live-in-various-canadian-communities-1.6676938

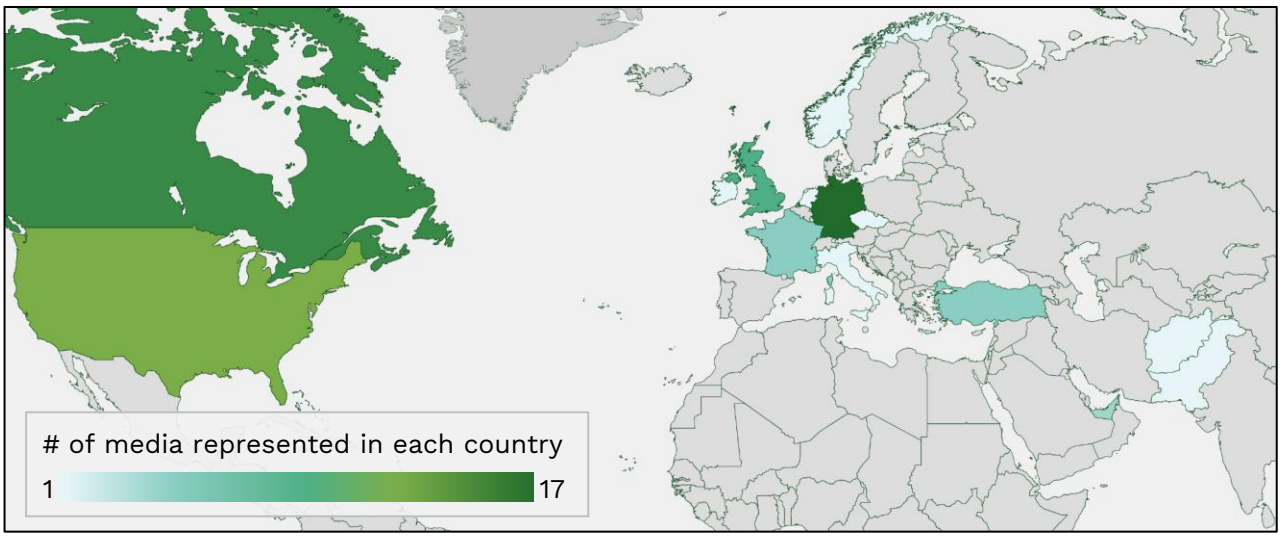
Coinciding with the rise in security concerns for Afghan exiled journalists in Pakistan, the IFJ reported that a prominent Afghan journalist, Ahmed Hanayesh, was shot and seriously wounded in the leg and head by armed men in Islamabad[87].

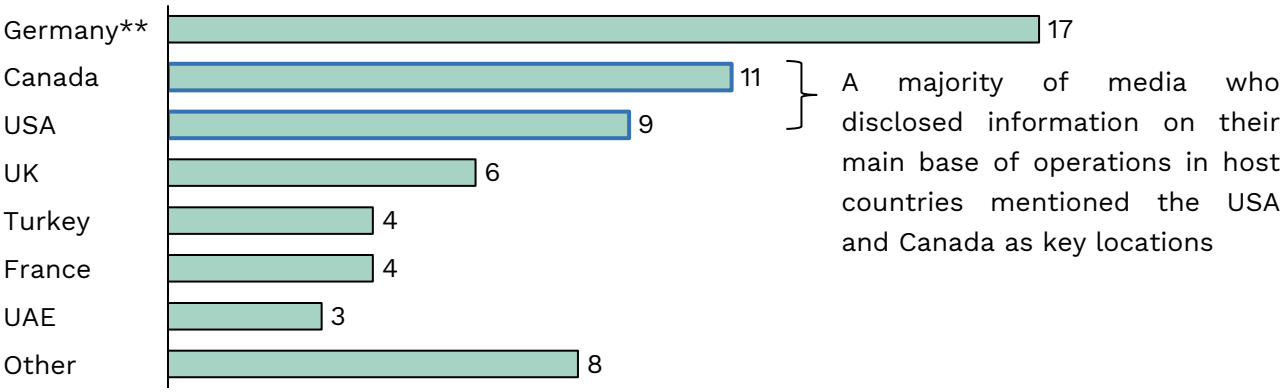
Driven by security concerns, Afghan media workers have relocated across the globe, albeit primarily to countries with programs supporting their relocation. As a result, most of the Afghan media scene in exile in now based in Western Europe and North America.

Exhibit 19

Where Members of Media Teams are Located

Top Afghan media émigré hubs* (n=45)





A majority of media who disclosed information on their main base of operations in host countries mentioned the USA and Canada as key locations

*The number of locations exceeds the number of media, as some teams can be based in multiple locations.
**Note: while Germany has many media present, this is mainly due to individuals rather than the core of a given media team being based there (Afghan media workers in Germany also feature many unaffiliated freelancers).

Source: Media Survey.

87 (April 5, 2024) https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/pakistan-prominent-exiled-afghan-journalist-shot-in-islamabad

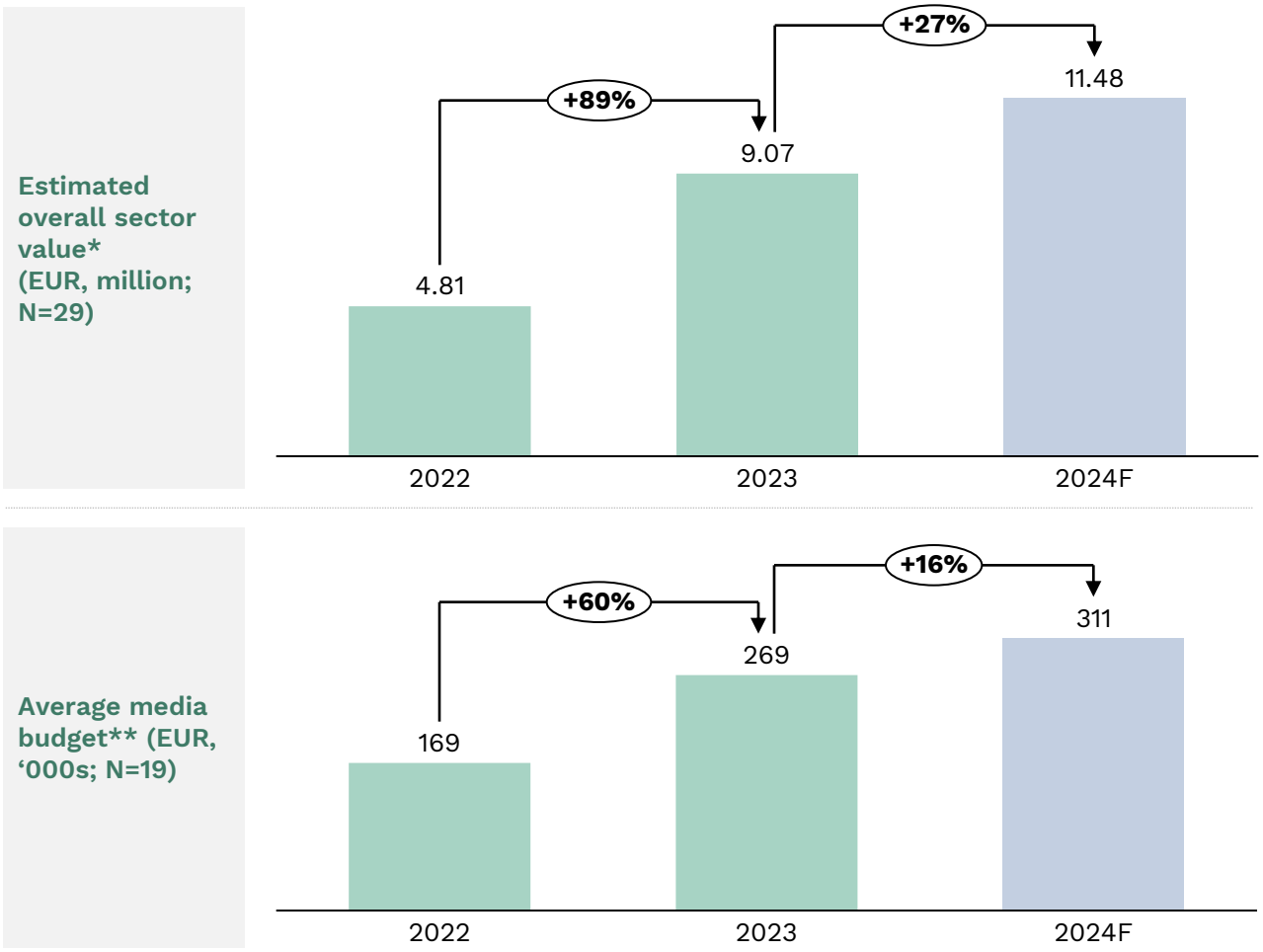
4b Sector Finances: Rising Costs and High Donor Dependency

The move to exile sparked a rapid growth in costs for individual media, as they essentially relocated to some of the world's most high-cost countries (especially Canada, the U.S and Western Europe). Moreover, the rise in expenditures is driven by not only higher living expenses, but also the need to formalize a substantial amount of employment – resulting in substantial taxes and social costs. As a result, the average media budget almost doubled between 2022 and the forecast budget for 2024.

This has had an impact on the estimated overall cost of the sector, which has ballooned not only due to rising expenses of individual media, but also due to new projects coming online in 2022 and 2023. Thus, the cost of the sector overall has grown faster than that of individual media – increasing by a factor of almost 2.4 between 2022 and 2024 (note: this refers to planned expenses, which may be overoptimistic in the case of some publications).

Exhibit 20

Exile has caused a sharp rise in sector funding needs (individual media budgets)



* Estimated value based on the extrapolation of available budgets (provided for 29 out of 47 media in scope) to remaining participants.
**The rise of individual media budgets is lower vs. overall sector growth because the latter is also increased by the launch of new media projects (15 out of 40 media surveyed were launched in 2022 and 2023, see page 19).

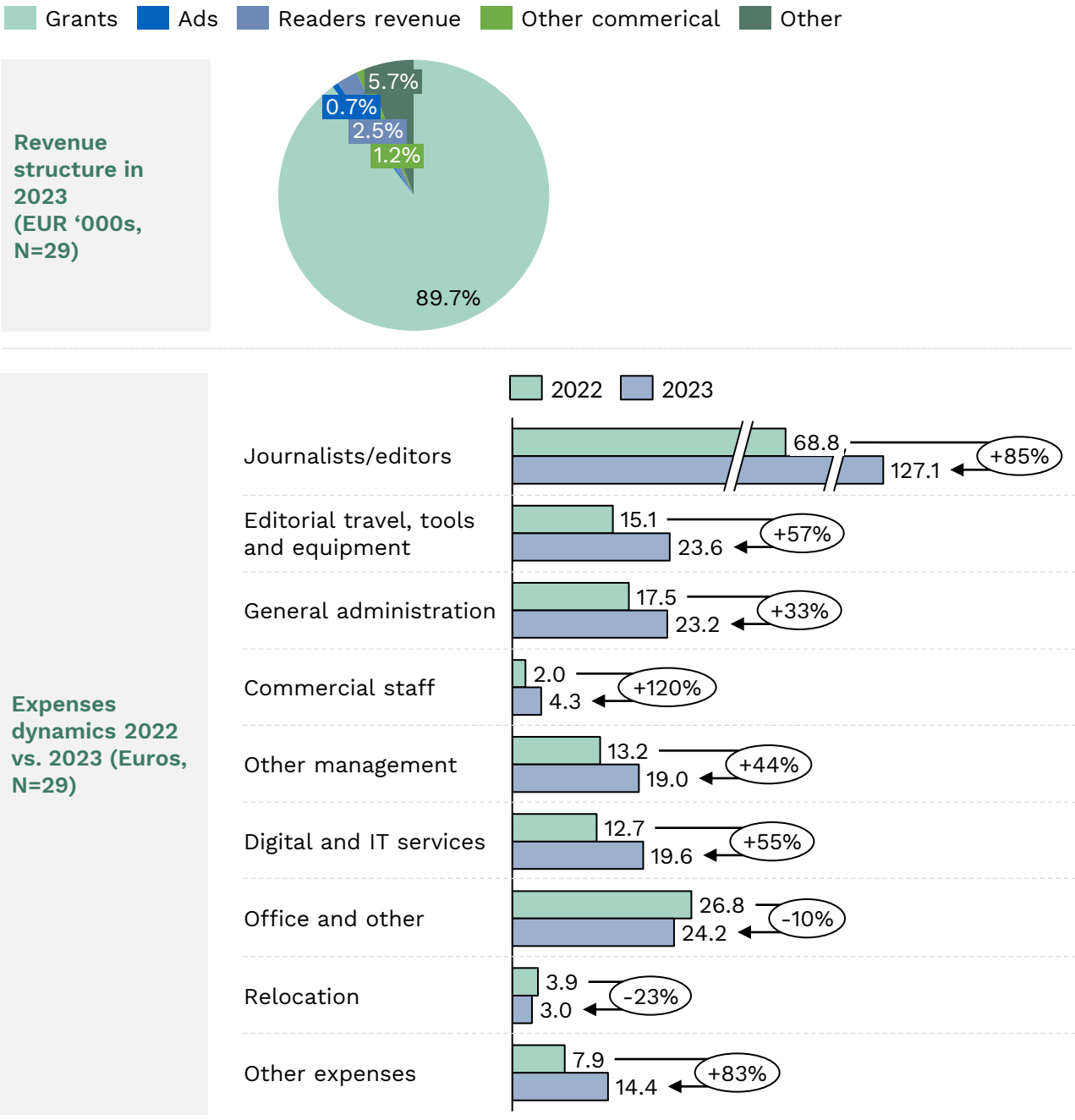
Source: Media Survey.

These fast-rising costs are a challenge as Afghan media are almost entirely donor dependent (roughly 90% of surveyed media budgets were covered from donor resources). With a small and isolated advertising market and generally low-income audiences, it is hard to foresee any changes in the coming years.

Afghan media are at risk of having to carry out rapid, and potentially fatal, cost-cutting exercises in case of funding shortfalls. Before this, however, it is worth looking into ways that can reduce the pace of expenses growth, potentially via shared services or outsourcing some operations to lower-cost jurisdictions.

Exhibit 21

Expenses growth falls on already high donor dependence



Source: Media Survey.

4c Organizational Structure

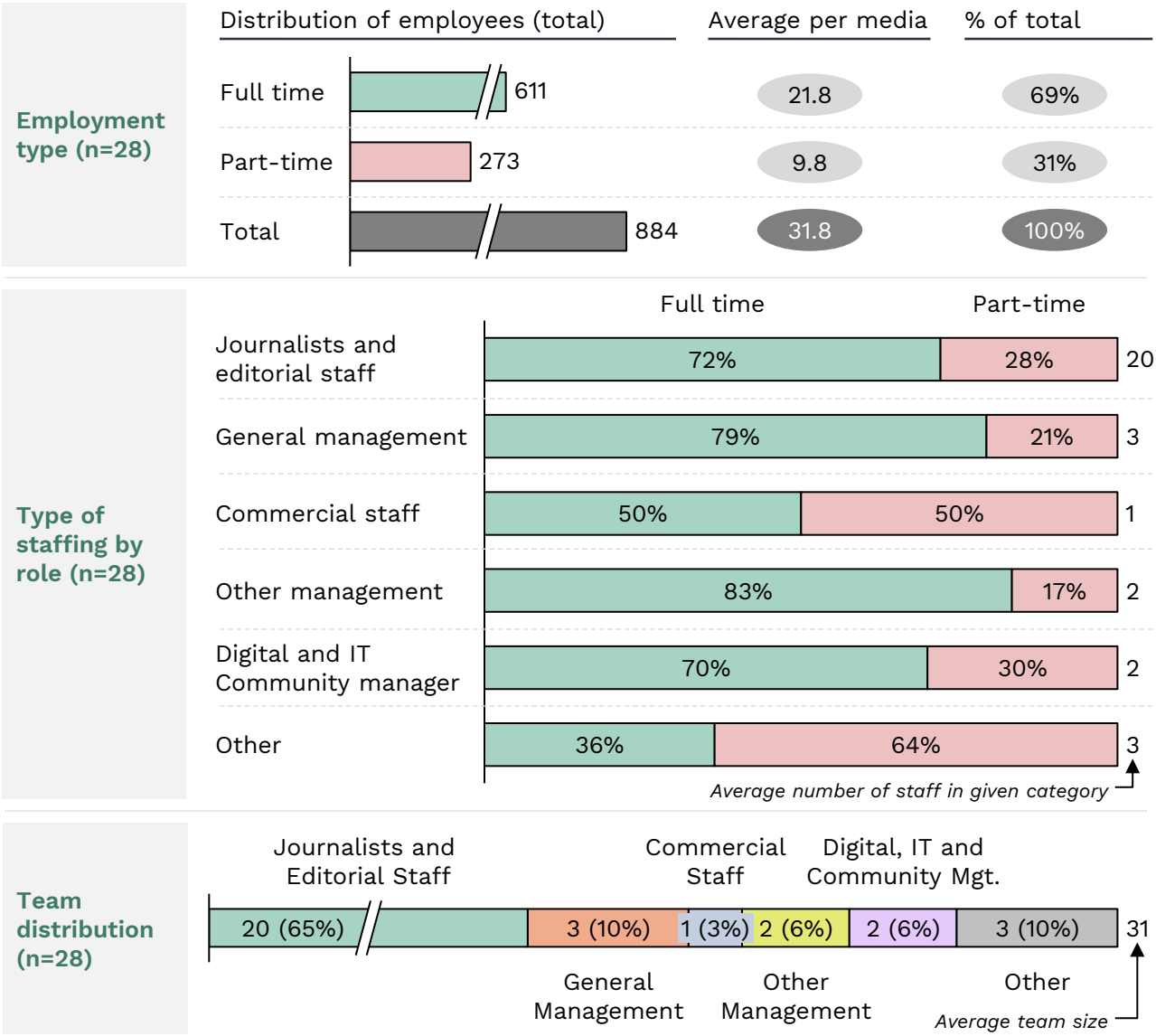
Afghan media in exile staffing tends to lean heavily toward editorial (including journalists, editors and related roles), which is quite usual for both donor-reliant and exiled media. However, the small share of commercial staff is a barrier to developing alternative revenue streams.

The reliance on freelancers – often based closer to home than team leadership[88] (typically in Pakistan, Iran or in Afghanistan itself) – helps maintain "eyes and ears" on the ground, ensuring reporting and news agenda remain relevant to Afghanistan-based audiences. This, however, is also a security risk, as staff in those countries is often subject to repressive legislation and even physical threats (see page 25 for further details).

Exhibit 22

Teams Composition

of team members working by employment type and roles (N=28)



Source: Media Survey.

88 A February 2024 study by the Afghan Journalists Support Organization found that 32% of respondents, including a large share of freelancers, were based in Pakistan or Iran (note: by comparison the survey carried out for this research focused on organizations and hence was tilted toward core team members).

5 Charting the Path Ahead

The Afghan media sector faces a difficult road ahead. Prospects for greater press freedom or the emergence of robust revenue streams are limited. Donor dependency carries risk, as funds may be redirected to other troubled regions.

Meanwhile, operating costs are rising, increasing the level of donor funding needed to sustain the sector. To improve sustainability, it is important to first look to reduce expenses, including via greater collaboration between media.

Media should nonetheless continue to work on developing commercial revenues (e.g., reader revenue, syndication), as this has a positive impact on company culture – without this donor dependence becomes inescapable. However, it should also be paired with communications on the importance and impact of Afghan media in exile and efforts to expand the pool of supporters.

Exhibit 23

Approaches to Build Media Resilience

Recommended measures to help strengthen the Afghan media sector

Cost management, shared services	• Media should undergo a cost exercise, identifying budget lines that can be managed down and slowing the further growth of expenses. This may require difficult trade-offs (e.g., foregoing office space and/or relocating a portion of production to low-cost jurisdictions). • Media currently based in high-cost jurisdictions may consider pooling expenses for various back-office tasks. (e.g., legal support, accounting, HR), helping spread costs across multiple entities, and jointly negotiate the provision of supplies and services (e.g., joint purchases of software).
Getting better at working with both new and existing donors	• Afghan media in exile should promote their unique achievements and role (note: donors who have supported media for long periods should join in), ideally reaching out beyond the current donor base (i.e., building ties with new donors in host countries). Joint promotion can help raise interest and stimulate new entrants, reducing dependence on a few major players. • Media should clearly communicate their mission and unique selling points – avoiding attempts to cover all possible topics, formats and audiences. Focus on quality applications (avoiding “donor buzzwords“ and use of AI) to create a compelling case for continued support. • Showcase solidarity and strong grass-roots organization, avoiding public conflicts which may negatively impact the reputation of those involved. Joint representation, vis-à-vis donors, policy-makers, and the public can serve as a basis for a consolidated strategy and increase overall support.
More structured support, focused on key needs	• The relatively narrow group of donors working with Afghan media should coordinate to smooth out funding availability (avoiding “spikes and crashes” in funding), ideally over several years, to facilitate planning. • Donors and joint media representation should focus on laying out a high-level strategy for the sector over the next 5 years. • Prioritize support toward strategic issues (core media expenses) vs. lofty but low-impact topics (e.g., purely multimedia education projects). • Do not lose focus from security issues for journalists working on the ground (i.a., evacuation, relocation, proper equipment and training).

6a Appendix I: Approach and methodology

The present report employs a mixed-methods research approach, integrating perspectives from various sources and frameworks to offer a comprehensive overview of the current state of Afghan media in exile.

The primary data sources used were open-source historical data (with ongoing updates) on such topics as overall audience reach performance (including the dynamics of views and audience engagement across social media, website analytics, and messaging platforms), data provided by the media themselves (interviews; staffing and budgetary data), and working with researchers on data generation (e.g., labeling media activity).

Exhibit 24

Approach to Data Gathering

Open-source gathering	• Open-source data gathering was a primary input for the dashboard, covering a broad range of topics: media distribution, description, status vis-à-vis legal designation, and various operational metrics; • Sources include media websites, social media channels, SimilarWeb, SocialBlade, TGStat as well as industry research and publications.
Media data integration	• Selected media provided budget and staff structure data and agreed to interviews to develop a more detailed picture of the sector. Different types of media were selected to improve representativeness; • Media selection aims to be as comprehensive as possible – including all potential independent media. However, it is worth noting that already dormant media are difficult to identify retroactively, creating survivorship bias in the sample.
Data generation	• Researchers assessed individual media and added labels based on their primary thematic areas of coverage and formats used. There was a limit of three primary labels (used for comparison of media) to ensure the most relevant features of an outlet were assessed.
Composite metrics	• The totality of available data within the dashboard was used to develop composite indices and benchmarks that were and can be used to compare media performance, help define trends as well as look for outliers that could be the result of data issues and submit them for verification and validation by researchers.

The definition of exiled independent media is a subject of discussion. This is a relatively recent phenomenon – historically it was difficult to find technical solutions that would allow non-state groups to broadcast into a territory that was not accessible to them, and thus reach audiences in the country of origin (unlike, say, journalists who served fellow emigres in “diaspora” publications).

The concept of media itself is shifting, notably by the rise of content creators or satirical shows that deliver news-related content in a way that counteracts growing news fatigue. Furthermore, exiled media can remain unregistered or have a fluid concept for years after relocation.

To reflect the issues above, this study takes an open approach to defining exiled independent media – while entities should exhibit many of the features of such organizations (see exhibit 24), media that partially fall into these buckets are still considered.

It should be noted that the definition of exiled independent media is context specific. In the case of Afghanistan, given Taliban repressions against consumption of music and other entertainment, media the focus on such content should be considered – something that would not necessarily be case for other exiled media landscapes.

Exhibit 25

Defining Exiled Independent Media

Logical structure and illustrative questions used to define exiled independent media

		Example questions (note: this is an abridged selection)
Media	**Self-identification**	Does this organization identify as a media? Does it publish own content, featuring diverse opinions?
	Journalistic approach	Does it cover socially and politically important topics? Is it primarily an activist organization?**
	Organizational structure	Is this a single individual or a team? Is it more than a single creator, self-publishing?
Exiled	**Operations abroad**	Is at least part of the media's work carried out abroad? Is part of the team based outside the country of origin?
	State policy	Does the country-of-origin limit media freedom? Are administrative measures* used against media?
	Target audience	Does the target audience reside in country of origin? Is the coverage relevant to the country of origin?
	Status/ repressions	Was this media targeted by administrative or other repressive measures in the country of origin?
	Ties to country of origin	Did a related organization exist in the country of origin? Is a portion of leadership from the country of origin?
Independent	**Editorial standards**	Does this media adhere to the Munich declaration? Does the organization adhere to editorial principles?
	Funding	Is this media funded from mainly non-state funds? Is the media financially independent of PEPs?
	Rejection of extremism	Has this media called for extremism/ abuse of people from a given group (e.g., on religious grounds)?**

* E.g., "extremist" or "terrorist designation.
** A negative answer is called for to define the entity as an exiled independent media.

6b Appendix II: Exiled Media Dashboard – Concept Overview

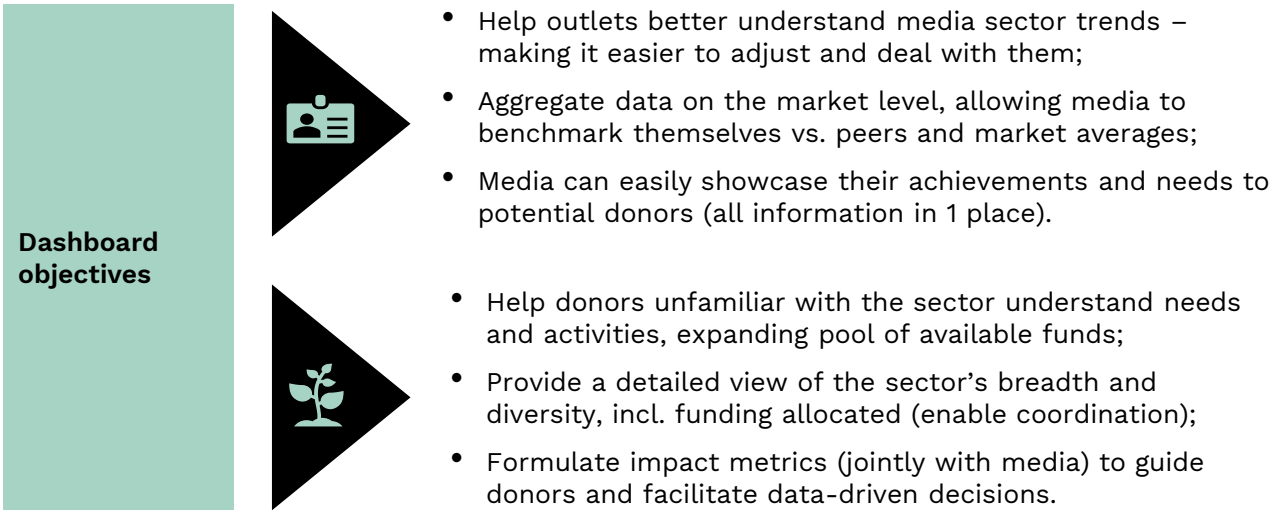
Media in exile play a key role in informing the world about what is happening in some of the world's most oppressive regimes. They counter propaganda and disinformation and sustain a sense of community within authoritarian regimes and those that have fled to freedom.

To support their continued existence and operations, JX Fund together with The Fix Research & Advisory created a database of information that is needed to understand the situation and needs of media. The dashboard is targeted to verified media professionals, donors and policy-makers.

The project is currently in development, with limited access. As a priority, we are looking for partners ready to enter data-sharing discussions, in order to improve the quality and depth of information provided by the dashboard.

Exhibit 26

Exiled Media Dashboard: Key Objectives and Features



6c Appendix III: Case Studies

Despite the hurdles abroad and restrictions imposed in the home country, Afghanistan's exiled media scene remains vibrant and diverse. To preserve this diversity of voices, different media case studies were chosen.

Divided into various categories, this overview includes medium-sized media outlets, as well as large and well-known ones, alongside small and regional outlets. The representation also covers different types of content, ranging from general interest and investigative journalism to women-focused media.

All quotes are taken from direct interviews with the founders, discussing the main challenges and their future plans.

Cases arranged in descending order from large to small outlets.

6c Appendix III: Case Study - EYE Media Group LLC (AMU TV)

Ownership: Independent.

Founded: 2022.

Formats: Television satellite and online broadcasting, podcasts (in the form of Twitter Space) newsletters, interviews, explainers.

Main areas of coverage: Politics, News, Social, History, Culture, Business, Human rights, Entertainment, Lifestyle, Dubbed Dramas.

Social media subscriptions*:

141K	63.2K***
119K	57K
85K**	44K

History of the media

Eye Media Group, established by several Afghan journalists, including prominent figure Lotfullah Najafizada, who fled into exile following the Taliban's seizure of Kabul on August 15, 2021. Headquartered in Virginia, United States, Eye Media Group started its operations in late 2022 with a digital launch, followed by the launch of Amu TV as an international satellite TV channel, in 2023. The primary objective was to establish a platform capable of delivering impartial news and advocating for press freedom beyond Afghanistan's restrictive climate, particularly post the Taliban's assumption of power in 2021.

Funding for the project came from a combination of grants and donations from international partners, private donors, as well as personal contributions from its members and other Afghan journalists. Funding has been allocated towards establishing the satellite channel and covering operational expenses, ensuring broad accessibility while upholding the mission to advance democratic principles and uphold factual journalism.

Most journalists and media professionals affiliated with Eye Media Group LLC previously worked at Moby Media Group, Afghanistan's largest media company. Eye Media is additionally registered in Turkey and has an office in Istanbul.

Main challenges

"Amu TV's main challenges are Taliban's growing attempt to go after its affiliated freelancers [on the ground] and limiting access to state-controlled information; and increasingly limited financial resources to run a TV channel in exile that's unique in its modus operandi.".

Plans for maintaining the audience and content distribution

"Amu TV distributes content via satellite to its audience inside Afghanistan and the region, and through digital, for audiences around the world. The satellite transmission, which is the main medium for Afghans to watch TV in Afghanistan, is a unique opportunity for Amu TV to bypass the Taliban censorship firewall and reach over 19m people who have access to satellite TV. We also plan to deepen our engagement in key diaspora locations like the USA and Europe. We are aiming for a 20% growth in social media followers, particularly on YouTube and Instagram. Special interest: Our focus will be on attracting young viewers and women, enhancing content related to education, youth entertainment, and women's empowerment. Engagement: We plan to boost interactive content and community engagement to increase active participation across platforms. We are using multiple strategy including localized content, digital engagement, and community outreach."

*Social media data as of April 2024; **Facebook likes; ***Website monthly visits

Source: Social Blade, Similar Web

6c Appendix III: Case Study - Madanyat Media

Ownership: Independent.

Founded: 2011.

Formats: Newspaper online, online publications, investigative journalism, interviews.

Main areas of coverage: Politics, News, Social, History, Culture, Business, Human rights, Lifestyle, Minorities, Gender, Diaspora.

Social media subscriptions*:

2K**

0.4K

0.3K

History of the media

Madanyat Media, founded in 2011 initially as Madanyat Weekly, has evolved over the past decade into a daily newspaper. Formerly known as Rah-e-Madanyat Daily, it rebranded itself in exile. Prior to the Taliban takeover, Madanyat Media was a leading investigative newspaper, boasting a team of young journalists, columnists and writers (both professionals and university professors), covering a wide range of topics.

The newspaper established a separate section dedicated to women, led by prominent female writers such as Dr. Humaira Qaderi, Dr. Dina Mohseni, and Sahra Maani. Financially, the newspaper was nearly self-sustainable, with most expenses, including printing costs, covered by marketing revenue. However, it also had donor-supported programs such as "The Successful Women" series (which published over 80 interviews with women leaders).

Following the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the media's print version ceased publication. Most of the staff, including Sayed Asghar Eshraq, the editor-in-chief, were evacuated to Germany. Despite this setback, the team managed to keep their website and social media platforms operational at their own expense and are now focusing on online publishing and maintaining a strong presence on social media. However, the media is currently in a precarious situation and faces an uncertain funding situation.

Main challenges

"We aim to consistently deliver professional, high-quality, and up-to-date content across various formats, including written articles, podcasts, and videos, to engage our viewers and audiences on our website and social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube. Our dedicated editorial team spans across Germany and several other countries, supported by a robust network of journalists and sources in Afghanistan...

...our editorial team in Germany currently faces challenges securing funding to sustain our operations. Thus far, we've relied on personal finances to cover expenses. However, sustaining our media outlet in exile and positioning it as a competitive force in the market without immediate financial support, particularly in the short term, is unfeasible. Without adequate funding, the viability of our outlet's continued operation is at risk."

Plans for maintaining the audience and content distribution

"We plan to enhance our website and include an English version for our international readers. Additionally, we aim to strengthen our presence on social media platforms. Madanyat Daily was once a renowned print newspaper in Afghanistan with a large readership, and we aspire to reconnect with those audiences on our digital platform.

*Social media data as of April 2024; **Website monthly visits

Source: Social Blade, Similar Web

6c Appendix III: Case Study - Wesal TV

Ownership: Independent.

Founded: 2023.

Formats: Television online broadcasting, online publication, podcasts, interviews, explainers.

Main areas of coverage: Politics, News, Social, History, Culture, Business, Human rights, Entertainment, Lifestyle, Minorities.

Social media subscriptions*:

- 69K**
- 1K
- 1K
- 0.8K
- 0.1K

History of the media

Wesal TV was established through a collaborative effort between Pajhwok Afghan News, Afghanistan's largest independent news agency still operating within the country, and a group of Afghan journalists in exile, many of whom left after in August 2021. Headquartered in Ottawa Canada, this hybrid outlet aims to reach audiences in Afghanistan and the global Afghan diaspora, with steadily growing viewership. Strong partnerships between Wesal TV and Pajhwok have not only helped to safeguard the organization but also fostered engagement between people inside and outside Afghanistan.

Officially launched on June 17, 2023, the primary objective of Wesal TV is to provide a platform to freely address issues relevant to Afghanistan and its displaced population, unhampered by regime constraints. This initiative responds directly to the significant political and social upheavals following the collapse of Afghanistan's Republic.

Main challenges

"Wesal TV faces significant challenges operating as an exiled media outlet, particularly due to the political constraints and censorship imposed by the Taliban in Afghanistan. Media oppression and pressure are ongoing issues, creating a hostile environment for free journalism as some of our employees are inside Afghanistan. is another major challenge. Producing high-quality content is a merit good, meaning its intrinsic value often exceeds its market value. This discrepancy makes it difficult to generate sufficient income from the market, as serious and crucial content may not receive adequate attention or monetization on social media or other platforms. Even large media companies struggle with this, as high-standard political content often does not attract as large an audience as more sensational material, complicating funding efforts for Wesal".

Plans for maintaining the audience and content distribution

Over the next six months to a year, Wesal TV aims to expand its outreach: *"To maintain audience engagement and effective content distribution, Wesal TV utilizes a hybrid media model that combines traditional broadcasting techniques with digital innovations. This approach includes delivering content across multiple platforms, such as television, the Wesal TV website, and social media channels like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The focus is on providing high-quality, reliable news and thematic programs that address the needs and interests of both Afghans living in Afghanistan and the Afghan diaspora worldwide. Under the current regime, local media within Afghanistan lacks independence, resulting in lower consumption. By offering high-quality, independent content, Wesal TV aims to attract and engage a broad and Afghanistan inside audience."*

*Social media data as of April 2024; ** Facebook likes

Source: Social Blade, Similar Web

6c Appendix III: Case Study – Zan Times

Ownership: Independent.

Founded: 2022.

Formats: Newspaper online, investigative journalism, interviews, documentaries.

Main areas of coverage: Women, LGBTQ, Minorities, Gender, Human Rights, Politics, News, Social, Activism.

Social media subscriptions* ('000s):

19.3K**	1.8K
4.4K	0.1K
2.8K***	

History of the media

Based in Canada, Zan Times is a women-led investigative newsroom that specializes in covering human rights violations in Afghanistan, with a particular focus on women, the LGBTQ community, who are suffering the most under Taliban, and environmental issues. Comprising predominantly women journalists both inside and outside Afghanistan, Zan Times is dedicated to amplifying the voices of marginalized populations through their storytelling.

Since its establishment in 2022 by a female journalist Zahra Nader and a group of women journalists and activists, Zan Times asserts that it has produced over 60 reports and 200 daily news articles in Dari, Farsi and English. The newsroom strives to shed light on critical issues and contribute to a more informed and empathetic understanding of the challenges faced by vulnerable communities in Afghanistan.

Main challenges

"At Zan Times, we face two big challenges: one is how to keep our colleagues in Afghanistan safe, while ensuring they can continue their work and the second one is lack of long-term, sustainable funding. Since our inception in August 2022, these two have been our most difficult challenges."

Plans for maintaining the audience and content distribution

"Our plan is to focus on investigative journalism because it is important and impactful. It is different, especially now that the Taliban are suppressing any information, they deem critical of their regime and it is time consuming and needs resources, but we know, this is the area where we can have the biggest impact. This is our approach to maintain our audience and reach a wider audience.

To increase our audience engagement, we are focusing on diversifying our content. So far, we have been mostly focusing on text format, but if we have the funding and resources we need, we want to package our content into audio and video to make it more accessible to our audience in Afghanistan, a country with one of the lowest literacy rates in the world."

*Social media data as of April 2024; **Website monthly visits; ***Facebook likes

Source: Social Blade, Similar Web

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