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DISCUSSION PAPER

Afghanistan

Blacked out: Media freedom under the Taliban

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Oppression of women, financial meltdown, censorship:
Research findings by Afghan NGO Nai SOMA and DW Akademie
highlight the extent of the Afghan media sector's breakdown
after the Taliban took power in Kabul.

“Since last week, Taliban have searched my home twice,” reports Mohammad in an interview with DW Akademie. Mohammad is not his real name. The journalist from Kabul is very worried about his family’s well-being. That has overshadowed his concerns about all the documents and books the Taliban removed from his home, he says. “Everything written, everything printed was taken. Normally I would post on social media about this, but now I don’t dare anymore. I’d rather remain in silence—to survive.”

The Taliban took power in Afghanistan in August 2021. Since then, they have practically barred Mohammad, like many other journalists in the country, from doing their jobs.

Recent results from a study by Afghan NGO [Nai-Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan](#) (Nai SOMA) and DW Akademie show the extent of the Afghan media sector’s breakdown.

During the research period in early 2022, the two organizations conducted a multilingual online survey, as well as semi-structured focus group discussions with media professionals from different provinces in Afghanistan. Nine exiled Afghan journalists were also interviewed. They had fled to countries in Asia, Europe, and North America after the Taliban seized power.

“I wouldn’t have left, if I felt there was freedom of speech for me.”

Afghan journalist who now lives in the US

The results highlight an ever-worsening situation for female journalists, a massive economic crisis within the media, and an almost total censorship of political debate. The findings underpin results of other recent studies of Afghan media by organizations such as Reporters without Borders and the Afghan Independent Journalists Association ([RSF/AIJA, 2021](#)), as well as the International Federation of Journalists and the Afghan National Journalist’s Union ([IFJ/ANJU, 2022](#)).

Female voices systematically silenced

“The situation for women journalists is very bad now. They are just at home,” said a female reporter from Kabul, referring to the Taliban ban of women from public life, including journalism ([DW, 2022, January 02](#)). Until recently, she had been working for a daily newspaper.

Are female journalists and media professionals still working?

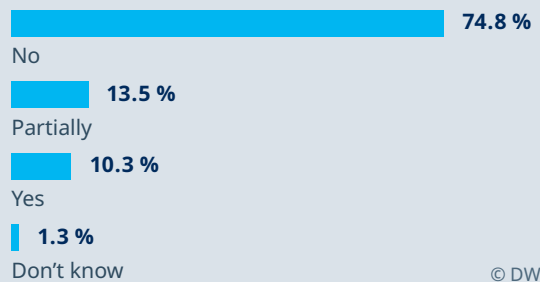


Figure 1 Source: Results of an anonymous online survey among Afghan media workers with 175 respondents, conducted in February 2022. Sums might not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Participants in the DW Akademie/Nai SOMA study described restrictions on female journalists as “the most extreme alteration since August 2021 in the Afghan media landscape” and as “a tragedy for society in general.” They also reported a severe impact on their personal lives and safety.

“The Taliban believe that girls and women don’t have the right to work in society and appear in media programs as journalists or presenters,” a participant said, referring to a Taliban regulation that requires women on screen to wear the hijab ([DW, 2021](#)).

Women journalists are being systematically forced out: “The Taliban dictate that only male journalists are allowed to cover [press] conferences,” one journalist remarked. Women were also barred from reporting on the ground.

“[In Herat,] eight media outlets were active [whose] managers were women, and now they have stopped their activities,” a female journalist from the Western Afghan city said in a focus group discussion.

In Kabul, women journalists are continuing to work, but almost exclusively from behind the scenes, study participants reported.

“Females are censored on TV, dubbed over, and the hijab is mandatory,” said a TV presenter who is now waiting in a refugee camp in Abu Dhabi to continue her journey to a long-term safe place. On the first day the Taliban came to power she was sent home by the TV station and told that she was no longer allowed to work. Like other women journalists, she reported experiences of being harassed, threatened, and belittled.

One participant remarked: “They told us that no Taliban official would speak to a female reporter, no matter how hard they tried.”

“I never thought in my wildest dreams it would happen so fast. We thought they take Kabul within six months, a year. We lost everything. Twenty years of democracy and human rights, especially freedom of expression.

Interviewed journalist from Kabul who fled with his family to Pakistan

Women journalists are disproportionately affected by job loss: Three-quarters of respondents to the online survey said their media organizations no longer employ women journalists.

Of all the participants of DW Akademie's online survey, female and male, half have lost their jobs in the first six months after the Taliban takeover of Kabul—a clear reflection of the severity of the economic and political crisis for the Afghan media.

Financial collapse of the media sector, widespread censorship

Results of DW Akademie's online survey (DW, 2022, April 06) show that more and more Afghan media outlets are ceasing operations due to a deteriorating business situation. Based on the perception of survey participants, 88 percent of the country's media outlets are suffering from difficult to very difficult financial conditions, while only nine percent are managing as normal financially, or doing well.

Furthermore, 40 percent of the operating media houses were not able to pay any salaries to their employees in recent months. One exiled interviewee, originally from Kabul, reported that their own salary had not been paid for two months.

According to DW Akademie's online survey, 82 percent of the participating media professionals are worried about the future of their media company, and over 75 percent of respondents see poor prospects for their media houses.

Worries about their livelihood or the livelihood of their families are widespread, and many respondents indicated that financial difficulties are having one of the biggest impacts on their well-being.

How is the financial situation of your media outlet at the moment?

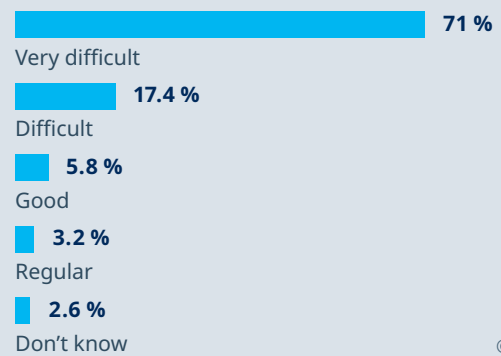


Figure 2 Source: Results of an anonymous online survey among Afghan media workers with 175 respondents, conducted in February 2022. Sums might not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

“It's not about freedom of speech, it's about staying alive.

Journalist from Kabul who now lives in the US

There has also been a general clampdown on civic rights under Taliban rule. “Recently, freedom of expression has suffered greatly,” said a female journalist in a small group discussion.

In September 2021, Taliban authorities announced 11 rules for journalism, a regulation deemed extremely dangerous by media freedom watchdogs because of its vague wording (RSF, 2021).

In another directive issued in November 2021, the Taliban prohibited the broadcast of films that are “against Islamic or Afghan values” as well as soap operas and dramas with female actors (DW, 2021).

Arbitrary rules and widespread threats against media workers have resulted in strong censorship. “There are many topics we couldn't cover in our reports,” said a journalist from Kandahar province, specifying: “When the university started, we were not allowed to produce a report on it.” Also, during an assembly held by Taliban leader Mulla Habtullah Akhundzada, journalists and media were not allowed to report on it, the journalist said. There were similar problems across the country. “Whatever is against the Taliban or criticizes them, they will not allow covering.”

The effects of the clampdown are mirrored by the results of DW Akademie's online survey. Two thirds of respondents affirmed that Afghan media houses cannot publish freely at all, or only to a very limited extent. 85 percent of DW Akademie's survey respondents declared that openly conducted debates are currently very limited or not possible at all.

“Information vacuum” adds to uncertainty

The lack of government structures or coordination between journalists and local officials has been coined as “information vacuum” by one participant. “We have no one to call. Everyone is in charge, no one is in charge”.

The arbitrariness of Taliban information management seems to add to a general sense of wide censorship and self-censorship. According to one journalist, the Taliban have made it clear that the media are not allowed to report on anything they believe violates Taliban policy or their interpretation of Sharia law. Another journalist mentioned that “the Taliban don't want and don't need any media to spread their news.”

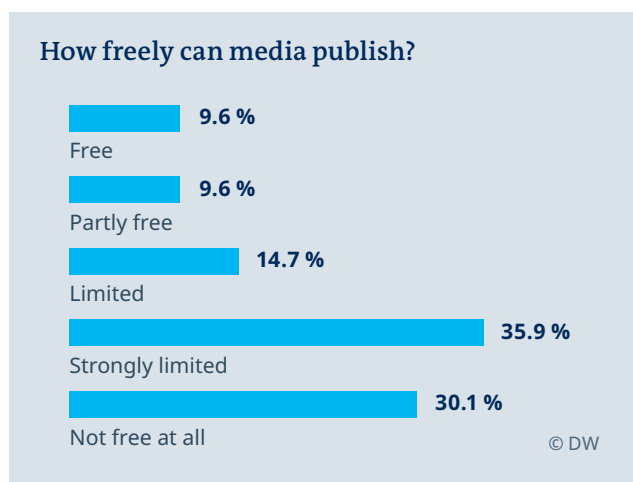


Figure 3 Source: Results of an anonymous online survey among Afghan media workers with 175 respondents, conducted in February 2022. Sums might not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Participants of the focus group discussions report that Taliban orders and policies concerning media coverage come from a confusing variety of sources, including different officials, but also the Istikhbarat intelligence service and the government's media and information center.

The Afghan journalists also report of direct interference in content production. One reporter who now lives in Germany said: “You can't broadcast anything wrong, because the Taliban tell you directly what to broadcast.” Another journalist from a newspaper that stopped publishing recently said that “the Taliban tell you what to write and what not to. They even choose the headlines.”

“We did a lot of investigative journalism before, but there is no media in Afghanistan anymore that can report on all the things that are happening.”

Female Afghan journalist who now lives in the US

These accounts from interviews and focus groups match up with the results of the online survey. According to respondents, restrictions imposed by the Taliban have heavily impacted media reporting on political issues. Coverage of entertainment such as music, movies, TV series and art have also changed significantly, the survey found.

Topics that can still be reported on safely are limited to content that is favorable of Taliban rule. This includes criticism of the former government. Under some circumstances, social topics such as aid distribution, poverty and unemployment can be covered.

However, interviewees pointed out that it is not possible to report freely and without interference, even on trivial matters.

Towards a better future?

After the seizure of power by the Taliban, hopes were voiced that the new rulers would refrain from dramatically restricting personal freedoms. However, survey respondents were more cautious.

“The Taliban say that freedom of expression is important to them, but we know that this is a lie to position themselves well internationally and to be recognized internationally,” a journalist said.

“Don't be seduced and deceived by the Taliban's apparently less strict attitude,” another interviewee shared.

Exiled Afghan journalists paint a dark picture of the future of the country's media sector: "Freedom of expression died on the first day after the fall of Kabul," one study participant said. Whether the interviewees still live in refugee camps or have found work in Europe or a place at a university in the US, their outlook is the same: "As long as Taliban are in power, there won't be any freedom of expression in Afghanistan."

Expectations of a moderate Taliban rule have proved to be illusory against the backdrop of reports of women being banned from secondary education and forced to cover their faces in public ([The Guardian, 2022](#)). But the question remains whether the international community could support journalists and media houses in Afghanistan, and in what ways.

An interviewed journalist said: "A lot depends on the Taliban: how much are they willing to give space for freedom of speech." Another one added: "Without [approval of] the Taliban, any kind of [international media] support will be not possible in Afghanistan."

Others saw at least some entrance points for international media assistance. "Pressure from the international community on the Taliban will change the situation for journalists and media outlets," one participant of a focus group discussion hopes.

Roughly 26 percent of the participants in the online survey indicated that international advocacy for media freedom in Afghanistan would be a meaningful measure.

In addition, 40 percent of the online survey respondents see financial support as the best way for international donors to address the challenges.

Roughly 14 percent of the online survey respondents say that the international community could provide capacity building. In this context, interviewees pointed specifically to online seminars on media safety.

Survey participants said that international media support must not provide a platform for Taliban propaganda, but that discussing potential activities also sparked "hope that we are still part of the international community."

They also called on more international reporting from Afghanistan.

"The international public must not forget our country."

Survey Profile

Online questionnaire

Quantitative data were collected in an anonymous online survey in February 2022.

The semi-standardized questionnaire included 55 questions and was completed by 175 respondents, in Dari (65.4%), Pashto (23.8%), and English (10.7%).

7.2% of participants were female.

The survey largely represents media managers (51.5%), followed by journalists (21%), reporters (19.8%), and others.

Most respondents (78.4%) work for smaller media houses with fewer than 50 staff members. As for media outlets, radio and TV stations are primarily represented (69.5% in total).

Most media respondents are privately funded (39.7%), followed by those financed through public funding (9.6%), international sources (9%), and government funding (5.1%). Overall, advertising revenues are the predominant source of income (63.5%).

Detailed results of the online survey have been published in DW Akademie's #mediadev online resource in April 2022 ([DW, 2022, April 06](#)).

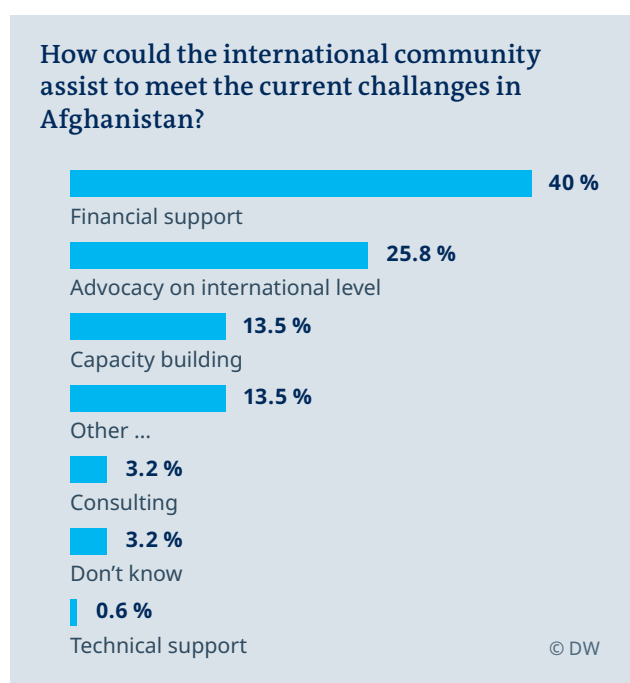


Figure 4 Source: Results of an anonymous online survey among Afghan media workers with 175 respondents, conducted in February 2022. Sums might not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Focus group discussions

Semi-structured focus group discussions were conducted by the NGO Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan. 19 media professionals participated in the three discussion groups, including six women and 13 men, who came from different media sectors such as broadcasting, print media, news agencies, and online media.

The participants were from different provinces of Afghanistan: Kabul, Qandahar, Balkh, Herat, Jawoozjan, Badakhshan, Bamyan, Kapisa, Nangarhar, Kuner, Baghlan, Maidanwadak, Ghazni, Dykundi, Parwan, Baghlan, Takhar, Panjshir, Samangan and Helmand province.

Interviews with journalists in exile

One-on-one interviews with nine journalists, two female, seven male. Interviews were conducted via Zoom or Whatsapp video calls in February 2022. All of the journalists interviewed left Afghanistan between September 2021 and January 2022 and emigrated to the USA, Canada, France or Germany or were still in camps in Pakistan or in the United Arab Emirates. Because of security reasons we have kept their identities anonymous.

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TV anchor Khatereh Ahmadi wears a face covering as she reads the news on TOLO NEWS, in Kabul, Afghanistan, Sunday, May 22, 2022

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