A New Start for Afghanistan’s Media: Tough Challenges Ahead

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Afghanistan endured twenty-four years of a strife-torn Soviet occupation, civil war, and the harsh, disorderly rule of the Taliban, but now there are signs that the country is finally building peace within its borders. Order has not been completely restored to the city of Kabul, but a general feeling of relief is prevailing in spite of terrible poverty, and the city is once again bustling with life. The transitional government of Hamid Karzai has enacted laws covering the press and has made it a priority to refurbish and upgrade Afghanistan’s media. In response, a number of countries have come forward with offers of assistance.

What can we expect from these efforts? The purpose of this article is to describe the present situation of the media in Afghanistan, and to identify the difficulties and challenges that will affect the growth of mass media in this country.

AFGHANISTAN TODAY AND ITS BROADCASTING MEDIA

Afghanistan is a landlocked country in Central Asia with an area of about 652,000 square kilometers, roughly 1.7 times the size of Japan. Three-quarters
of the land is arid, mountainous terrain. The population is diverse, made up of Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras and a number of other different ethnic groups. After 1919, when Afghanistan freed itself from all British control, the country was governed by a monarchy. The decades that followed were not free of unrest, and then a coup d'état by leftist military officers and rebellion by traditionalists led the way to the Soviet invasion of December 1979. The country has experienced unremitting turmoil ever since. By 1996, the Taliban had gained control over 80 percent of Afghanistan with its takeover of Kabul, and it held on until November 2001 when American forces, backed by the Northern Alliance, overthrew the rigidly fundamentalist regime. The Taliban crumbled.

Population figures are not exact, but Afghans probably number about 20 million today, plus about 4 million who fled to Pakistan, Iran, and elsewhere to escape the catastrophes of war. Their repatriation is continuing.

Broadcasting in Afghanistan is a state monopoly run by the national company RTA (Radio-Television Afghanistan). Radio broadcasting was started in 1940 with financial support from Germany, and after World War II East Germany continued to assist in its maintenance. Television came relatively late, launched in 1978 with the help of ODA (Overseas Development Assistance) funds from Japan. NHK has been an important part of the enterprise, assisting in the construction of a building and facilities, contributing equipment, and helping with technical and professional training.

RTA headquarters are in Kabul, and it has stations in Badakshan province and the major provincial cities of Mazar-e-Sharif, Herat, Kandahar, and Jalalabad. These stations were in full use during the years of Soviet occupation, and the Soviets serviced and maintained them. Much of the equipment is Soviet-made and the regional stations use the SECAM video broadcast stan-
standard, which is incompatible with the PAL standard used by RTA's Kabul headquar- 
ters. Conversion of signals between the two different formats is therefore 
required. Besides the regional stations, Afghanistan has fifteen or sixteen 
unmanned relay stations and some low-power stations in several locations.

**Maintaining Equipment Amid Domestic Turmoil**
The network linking the broadcasting stations together was set up to broadcast 
satellite transmissions. This system was installed and equipped by the Soviet 
Union during the years of the occupation, but in the civil war that followed the 
parabola dish antennas and other facilities in the Kabul headquarters were 
destroyed, making it impossible for Kabul to send out program materials to 
the other stations or to do national broadcasting. The regional stations had no 
recourse but to operate on an emergency footing and have videos transported 
from Kabul by airplane or automobile. Carrying them by truck or Jeep 
involved long trips on treacherous, ill-maintained roads, and it was apparent-
ly not unusual for a program to be aired one or two days late, even the news 
programs.

The studio TV cameras and other equipment in Kabul headquarters donat-
ed by Japan twenty-four years ago are old and completely out of date, but they 
still work perfectly. That they are in such good condition is amazing, espe-
cially in view of the fact that all television broadcasts were proscribed for five 
years under the Taliban. Powerless to protest, the RTA technicians put the 
broadcasting equipment under lock and key into storage, but secretly, at regu-
lar intervals, they went in, started them up, and made sure they were running 
properly. Those people kept the equipment working and in good repair. A 
team of NHK technicians who visited the RTA to do a survey were aston-
ished and immensely appreciative to see how devotedly the Afghan technicians had
cared for the equipment during a time of immense hardship and considerable danger.

At the best of times, the Kabul station had 20 television cameras, including the ones used for on-site reporting, and 70 vehicles for reporting. Today, with only 5 cameras and 6 trucks, the station has very few resources of any kind. The Kabul station used to have a 1-kilowatt TV transmitter, but being located quite close to one of the Taliban’s military strongholds, it was destroyed by American bombs. Now the station uses a temporary 200-watt transmitter installed with aid from Iran. The antennas are placed in a good location on Asmai hill (nowadays called “TV Hill”) in the heart of Kabul, and viewers within a radius of 30-40 kilometers get very clear reception.

Around 1980 when RTA was at its prime it employed about 2,600 people, but after the Taliban took over Kabul in 1996, television was prohibited. The staff dropped to 400 at one point, but they have begun to return and today RTA has 1800 people in its employ. Now, however, the government is asking RTA to reduce its workforce. This unpopular measure recently provoked a protest demonstration outside the Ministry of Information and Culture. About 400 of the employees are women, who are active and involved as announcers, reporters, producers, and in various other jobs as well, and many of them appear on screen.

PROGRAMMING

In an Islamic country, nothing begins without the Koran. Accordingly, in Afghanistan the television broadcasting day begins before 6:00 p.m. with the national anthem and readings from the Koran, and it ends just after 10:00 p.m.

Children’s Time program being recorded in the Kabul RTA studio
Thus the average broadcast time each day is about four and a half hours in the evening.

A popular program is Children’s Time, beginning at 6:15 p.m. Each day ten or so children from around Kabul are invited to the RTA studio where, on camera, they recite what they have learned in their daily lessons and talk about their own ideas and opinions. Most of the children are not used to television, and their tense expressions reveal their naïve innocence. One day the children are Pashto speakers and the next they may be Dari-speaking children. The program clearly is intended to convey the importance of learning and continued study, and to stimulate enthusiasm for education not just among children, but among their parents as well. A cartoon may be followed by an old Russian film brought in during the Soviet occupation.

Every evening at 6:35 RTA airs its feature programs, those originally created by the staff. On August 6, 2002, the title was “Good Water Management for Good Health.” The program deals with the problem of impure water, which is one of the causes of the high infant mortality rate. Within a discussion-and-interview format, physicians, sanitation experts, and health workers talk in some detail and give advice about how to secure clean water, what to do when someone gets sick, and other questions. Older Japanese may remember the campaigns to improve living conditions that were so ubiquitous in rural areas after the second world war; in a way, programs like this on RTA are part of another campaign to improve living conditions in Afghanistan. The program the following day was introductory Tae Kwon Do from Korea, a popular sport in Afghanistan. Such feature programs are quite varied in theme.

Kabul’s citizens are starved for entertainment. Everyone likes the folk music hour at 7:00 p.m., which features famous Afghan singers. But every single program is on old video, recorded a few years or even more than a decade ago. During the long tumultuous years of civil strife, the top performers left for the United States, Europe, or elsewhere. From time to time rumors go around—this or that famous singer is coming back to Afghanistan—and the public waits in anticipation, but the stars do not reappear. RTA has little choice but to fall back on the videos that they have kept. Another popular form of entertainment is films; on August 6th the station aired one from Iran, called “Izai’s Friend,” based on an ancient Jewish tale. The Iranian films are in Persian, but Persian and Dari are close enough that Dari speakers can understand the Persian in films without the help of superimposed dialogue. One of RTA’s biggest headaches is insufficient and out-of-date program material, and for now, they are asking other countries to help by supplying music programs, nature documentaries, and other suitable materials for broadcasting.
RTA Program Schedule

TELEVISION (8/6 Tuesday evening)

PM 5:50 National anthem, Koran
6:00 Flash news (order listed separately)
6:15 Children’s Time, studio talk
6:30 Cartoon (Russian-made)
6:35 Feature program (“Good Water Management for Good Health”)
7:00 Folk music program (with pause for evening prayer)
7:20 Commercials—movie theatre, washing machine, engine oil, restaurant, cola, dresses
7:30 Main news (in Dari, order listed separately)
8:00 Afghan Army—Graduation ceremony for Air Force trainees
8:30 Main news (in Pashto, same content as 7:30 news)
9:00 Iranian film—“Izai’s Friend”
10:15 End of broadcast

Juma (Friday) Broadcast (8/9 Friday)

AM 9:00 National anthem, Koran
9:10 Information about Islam
9:30 Documentary—“Animals in the Natural World”
10:00 Music
10:40 Cartoon—“Tom and Jerry”
10:50 Humorous skits
11:05 Pro wrestling, poetry recitation
11:30 Children’s movie (from Iran)
12:20 End of broadcast

RADIO (8/8 Thursday morning)

AM 5:00 National anthem, Koran
5:10 “The Islamic Religion,” poetry recitation
5:30 “Knowledge for Living,” (information on real estate, transportation, etc.)
6:00 News (in Pashto)
6:30 “Good Morning, Afghanistan”
7:30 Family time
8:00 News (in Dari)
8:05 End of broadcast
Order of News Items

FLASH HEADLINES

1. Campaign to banish drugs.
2. NGO conference on water supply in drought-ridden Vardak province and education issues.
4. Two people apprehended for larceny.

MAIN NEWS

1. President Karzai announces policy for preservation of cultural assets.
2. President Karzai confers with Tajikistan minister of transport, Tajikistan promises support to build road between the two countries.
3. President Karzai meets with Pakistan ambassador.
5. Vice-president Arsala meets with group of tribal elders from Nangarhar, who pledge cooperation with the government.
6. Vice-president Shahran meets with groups of tribal elders from northern provinces, hears their requests.
7. Foreign Minister Abdullah confers with Tajikistan delegation, signs bilateral trade agreement.
8. Information and Culture Minister Raheen meets with Tajikistan communications minister, Tajikistan pledges aid for Afghanistan radio broadcasting.
9. Two people arrested for trafficking in gems of unclear provenance.

Special Nature of Public Broadcasting

RTA is public, the national broadcasting station, but they show commercials in a concentrated ten-minute-slot between 7:20 and 7:30 p.m. Some of the ads have the rough, unsophisticated look of a homemade product. The main commercials on August 6th are for the Indian movie now playing at the cinema, a plastic washing machine made in Pakistan that “won’t rust,” and a sales pitch for engine oil. As a matter of fact, many of the cars running around the streets of Kabul are used Japanese cars, but their owners pay close attention to their maintenance and the auto repair and maintenance shops are thriving.

TV commercials are one way the government gets revenue. It seems that 75 percent of the revenue from commercials goes to the ad agency, 25 percent goes into a government bank account, and RTA gets nothing directly.

The main news comes on at 7:30 p.m. in Dari, and at 8:30 p.m. the same news is broadcast again in Pashto. The major topics focus on President
Karzai. One prominent news item on August 6th concerned the preservation of Afghanistan’s cultural assets, which was debated in the June 2002 meeting of the Loya Jirga (the traditional grand council, or decision-making assembly). There was long and detailed discussion about the establishment of a National Archaeology Research Institute to integrate and strengthen the management of the national cultural heritage. Other news highlighted the activities of the more powerful cabinet ministers.

Judging from some of the criticism, not everyone is happy with this news format or editing. Some of the members of the Radio-Television Program Commission, set up in July 2002, reportedly complained that the news was nothing more than a recap of what important government leaders were doing, and that it needed more voices from the people. The RTA president Mohammed Isaq responded, “The station has only five cameras to cover news, and they are overextended. We have to set priorities, and right now we just don’t have the wherewithal to go out and get more news about people in ordinary life.”

To all Muslims in Afghanistan, Friday is “Juma,” the weekly day of rest, the day when everyone watches a lot of television. Programs geared to the day off are broadcast from nine in the morning until noon. So people can watch holiday fare, including short comic dramas, films, and other programs meant for amusement. They even show American pro wrestling, which is transmitted by satellite, but how the matter of copyright is being handled is not clear.

Radio
Radio comes on twice a day, at five in the morning for three hours and again at five in the evening. Radio programs tend to focus on practical information about daily life. A topic on “Knowledge for Living” on August 8th, for example, was real estate—when making a deed or contract, how to confirm who actually holds title to the property. This kind of problem grows out of the endless morass of difficulties created by indiscriminate buying and selling of land and buildings belonging to people who fled the country as refugees.

Another important part of this program is the announcement of obituaries and related funeral information. In a country where the means of transmitting such news are limited, radio is for some the only way they can learn where and when a funeral will take place.

“Good Morning Afghanistan” is a popular one-hour news program that begins at 6:30 a.m. in the morning on the radio. It is new, launched in February 2002 with support from the EU and a Dutch NGO that is providing guidance and direction. Two anchors, a man and a woman, take turns reporting on the news and current topics, with music between sections. This is stan-
standard television for American and European TV audiences, but for the people of Afghanistan, it is innovative and fresh and has enormous popular appeal. The main news on a selected day is the gift of a passenger plane from the Indian government to Afghanistan with assurances that two more are coming later, a single donation that doubled the passenger fleet of Afghanistan's national carrier, Ariana Airlines. You can hear the noise of aircraft in the background as the reporters speak, one in Dari and then the other in Pashto, from Kabul airport. The program director seems certain that over 22 million people are tuned in. In August, the station started a companion program "Good Evening, Afghanistan," which is aired in the evening.

RETURN OF TELEVISION

During the years under Taliban rule, the Taliban radio broadcast, "Voice of Shari'ah" (Islamic law) and the newspaper sanctioned by the regime were the only domestic media to which the people of Afghanistan were allowed access. Since most Afghans cannot read, radio was the single medium available to the overwhelming majority. If you go to the section of Kabul where shops selling electric and electronic goods are concentrated, among the lower-priced items one finds Chinese-made "all-wave" radios for [US]$6 or $8 (and they tend to break down in a very short time). The average monthly income for residents of Kabul being around $30, a radio is generally an affordable device, and according to an RTA executive, most households have one. That adds up to about five million radios in Afghanistan.

Yet during the Taliban period what people listened to was not "Voice of Shari'ah," which offered nothing but Koran and government communications,
but short-wave broadcasts from abroad, like BBC World and Voice of America. BBC has been broadcasting in Persian (almost the same as Dari) for sixty years, and its Pashto-language broadcasts have been going on for twenty. The deputy minister for information and culture, Abdul Mubarez, recalled thoughtfully, “Especially during those twenty-five years of continuous war, the BBC was a window for us Afghans. It gave us a link to the world.” And when American bombs began falling on Afghanistan, the people there clung to their radios and became almost fanatic about listening. Apparently many people made it a habit to compare BBC and VOA accounts and confirm news reports by balancing the two. A great many Afghans listened to Deutsche Wele and Radio Japan, also. They were in a situation where the only way they could get information even about their own country was via foreign media.

When the Taliban fell, television broadcasting started up again after five years of silence. A populace starved for TV entertainment rushed to find televisions to watch. Radio broadcasting also was once more put under the management of the former Radio Afghanistan.

How big is the TV audience currently? There are no hard data. The estimate of the Kabul station management—made with confidence—is 60 percent of the population in Kabul and 50 percent of citizens in principal cities except Kabul. The staff at RTA headquarters and others in the business believe that in residential neighborhoods, probably one in ten households has an antenna for terrestrial wave reception, and one in 30–50 households has a parabola dish antenna for satellite broadcasts. In the electric appliance shops a TV sells for about $200 on average. If the monthly income of the ordinary household is around $30, then a television becomes a high-end item that might be out of reach of most people, but the stores are always filled with customers, even on weekdays, and the people are very eager to buy. They say that some people will even sell their wife’s jewelry to buy a television.

Professor Aziz Fanus, who teaches at the school of journalism at the University of Kabul, says, “In Kabul, everybody gets together, different families, their relatives, and friends, and they crowd around to watch a single TV. In two or maybe three years, just about everyone in the city will probably be watching TV.”

THE PRESS LAW AND MEASURES FOR THE FUTURE

Karzai’s government takes the position that without healthy media, it will be impossible to nurture a democratic nation and society. In February 2002 the government passed a new press law. (See the end of this article.) Article 1 of the law, which stipulates freedom of the press and freedom of expression, is
based on Article 31 of the 1963 (promulgated in 1964) Constitution and it follows the spirit of Article 19 of the International Declaration of Human Rights prohibiting censorship and control of the media. In recognizing freedom of the press and expression, the 1963 Constitution that was adopted by King Muhammad Zahir Shah was regarded as the most forward-looking constitution of all the Islamic countries at the time. But it left the censorship system in place. The present press law, however, prohibits censorship.

**Freedom of the Press**

Freedom of the press and freedom of expression are extremely sensitive issues in Islamic and Middle Eastern countries, almost all of which practice rigid censorship. Those that forbid censorship are exceptions: Qatar, where the satellite news channel al-Jazeera is based, and Dubai, whose government is aiming for more media business from the major stations in the Middle East.

Afghanistan’s press law has some drawbacks, such as the requirement that publishing businesses be approved and an indemnity paid when approval is received. Also, it is necessary to receive prior authorization to distribute foreign publications. But it is worth noting that the press law was passed even before enacting a new constitution, and the government is trying in other ways to create a positive environment to build up the country’s media.

Around the time the press law was passed, especially following the passage of the law, a raft of publications came out in Afghanistan, more than 100 of them, including women’s magazines, English publications, newspapers, and various other magazines. Their content tends to be generally uncontroversial, but a few, like the *Kabul Weekly* newspaper, include articles critical of the government. For a long time there was only one news agency, the national Bakhtar Press Agency, but in August 2002 a new one, the privately-owned and operated Hindukosh News Agency, started doing business. Undoubtedly more private news agencies will appear, and there is growing anticipation of more diverse information in the public realm.

**The Radio-Television Program Commission**

At the directive of President Karzai, a Radio-Television Program Commission was set up in July 2002. It is made up of ten people, including Deputy Minister of Information and Culture Mubarez (chairman of the Commission), the head of RTA, a professor from the University of Kabul, magazine editors, and government officials, and they meet once a week. The Commission monitors RTA’s programs and makes proposals for improvement, which RTA is obliged to implement.

Broadcasting guidelines drawn up by the Commission were approved at the
end of August. Ceremonial gatherings with such people as foreign diplomats are to be covered in news reports with commentary only and no on-site footage. RTA is required to broadcast on-the-spot reactions, whether positive or not, by ordinary people to speeches given in the provinces by national leaders, was accepted. At this point it seems that the Commission is involving itself deeply in matters concerning not only program content, but also in the fine points of directing the broadcasts.

COMPETITION TO ASSIST

In January 2002 representatives from thirty countries gathered at an international conference in Tokyo to plan a program to assist Afghanistan’s recovery, and together they pledged more than $4.5 billion. That amount includes half a billion dollars promised by Japan for aid to education, medical care, media infrastructure, and other areas.

The pledges are no more than that—promises made cautiously. Whether they will materialize or not depends on the prospects for stability of Karzai’s transitional government. All the nations, nonetheless, have been extremely positive about assistance for media infrastructure. There is a history to that. After the second world war, radio broadcasting in Japan and Germany was drastically reformed along Western European-American lines and was considered to have been instrumental in the success of the democratization of those two countries. The United States and the countries of Europe undoubtedly retain an indelible memory of the impact of those reforms. We must also remember that aid given to something as blatantly visible as the media is going to be very visible in itself. Because such assistance can be credited so easily, there is motivation to put one’s money in that corner. It is no surprise, therefore, that RTA’s main office in Kabul hosts a constant stream of visitors from other countries bearing various proposals for assistance. It is almost as if they were in some competition to assist Afghanistan’s media. But this very eagerness by the western nations has roused the Karzai administration to make the growth of the media a top priority.

Broadcasting Loya Jirga

“Loya” means grand, and “Jirga” means council—Loya Jirga is the deliberative body that brings together in one place representatives from all Afghanistan’s ethnic groups. This grand tribal council was convened in June 2002 in Kabul, the proceedings were televised and the broadcast was relayed to seven other cities throughout the country. The June meeting was a significant occasion because the delegates were charged with formally electing a
transitional government to replace the interim post-Taliban administration created in 2001. It was important to let people watch the proceedings, but Afghanistan had never had any TV relay stations. Japan, therefore, decided to provide the assistance that would enable RTA to relay the TV broadcast.

For a number of reasons, some in the interim administration were initially ambivalent about relaying the broadcast of the Loya Jirga around the country. They worried that the intense struggle for leadership between the Northern Alliance (non-Pashtun minorities) and the Pashtuns would erupt and cause the meeting to degenerate into unseemly disorder, and that it was not at all a good idea to risk having the public witness such scenes on television. In the end, Information and Culture Minister Makhdoom Rahin decided that “the citizens have a right to know, and it may be that broadcasting the meeting will actually turn out to be an effective deterrent to disorder.” So the council meeting was broadcast, as planned. NHK-ITECH, an affiliated company of NHK, estimated that about four million people, or half the population in the seven cities, watched the relayed television broadcast.

**Contributors and Mistrust**
A number of countries are making some welcome contributions to Afghanistan’s developing media. The United States has provided VSAT (very small aperture terminal) capability, so that now RTA can send radio broadcasts via satellite to Norway, from where they are sent by short wave to Afghanistan. It is still only short wave, but for the first time in ten years, it is once more possible to broadcast radio programs all over the country. Germany has given permission to dub and broadcast a part of DW Television’s programs. England, for its part, is enthusiastically working on training journalists, and Japan is going to build a 2-kilowatt television transmission facility in Kabul. When it is finished, viewers within a 50-kilometer radius of central Kabul will be able to get a fresh, sharp picture.

Afghanistan welcomes aid from any country, yet some of the people in media are becoming increasingly wary of what in name is supposed to be assistance, but in reality often seems to entail making a deal that could harm Afghanistan’s interests. For example, England donated equipment for two FM radio stations, one of which was to be used as a relay station for BBC World, and so today anyone who lives in Kabul can get the BBC on FM radio loud and clear. The United States is making the same offer, proposing to set up two FM stations, one to broadcast VOA. Germany drew on ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) resources to start an FM broadcast in August, “Voice of Freedom”; Holland is managing the production of RTA’s “Good Morning, Afghanistan.” Even though not everyone likes all the conditions, the
presence of America and Europe is conspicuously and rapidly escalating in Afghanistan’s broadcast media.

Deputy Minister of Information and Culture Mubarez wants to dissolve the state monopoly in broadcasting and open the door to the private sector. It is doubtful whether the private sector has sufficient financial and human resources to start a broadcasting station. At the same time, some of the RTA management, feeling threatened by the steadily growing influence of foreign powers as they push their way into Afghanistan’s media, warn that media projects funded by Western countries will claim the best announcers and journalists, to the detriment of the domestic Afghan stations. With this sense of alarm hovering over the media, Mubarez explained that the press law permits no one but Afghan citizens to invest in broadcasting and that foreign participation in broadcasting start-ups are part of technical cooperation and program exchange on the principle of reciprocity.

**Mini-FM Stations**

Nowadays people in broadcasting in Afghanistan are very interested in low-output mini-FM stations. They are fairly inexpensive to equip, well within the capability of small NGOs or private citizens of Afghanistan. One mini-FM station (Radio Solh, or Radio Peace) has started up in Jabal us Saraj, a small town 70 kilometers north of Kabul. It transmits well within a 10 kilometer radius. For four hours a day it broadcasts programs with such themes as expansion of women’s rights and the stability and independence of Afghanistan, and the radio audience is estimated at 200,000 people. AINA, the French media NGO, is using Radio Solh as a reference and is looking into setting up stations in Kandahar and Bahmian. The BHN Telecommunications Humanitarian Aid Association, which is a Japanese NGO, is also planning to set up three stations in the northern part of Afghanistan.

One difficulty is licensing. Legally, only Afghan citizens are eligible to invest in broadcasting, but what about the possibility of an NGO setting up an FM station under the name of an Afghan citizen? As a rule, NGOs are internationally recognized as groups that extend humanitarian assistance, but that may not hold true for Afghanistan. After much experience, Afghans have learned the hard way that NGOs, or whatever agency, always have strings attached to their help as long as they get assistance from a government or elsewhere. That is axiomatic by now. The Western countries, particularly the NGOs, are going to have to work very hard if they wish to ease the mistrust of the Afghan people.
ROCKY ENVIRONMENT FOR THE MEDIA

One of the most heated debates going on now in Afghanistan’s media world centers on whether or not it is permissible for a woman singer to appear on television or radio. The kinds of entertainment people most crave are music and singing, but since women are forbidden to appear, only male singers are ever seen on TV. Nowadays some audiences are beginning to voice their wish to hear women sing, too.

But according to rules based on Shari’ah, television can be no exception. Conservative Muslims argue that the rules and customs governing women’s lives—they must hide their hair under a scarf, they cannot show their arms—certainly prohibit them from singing on radio or TV.

For Afghanistan to make a fresh start as a democratic country, participation by women in society must be a top priority, and to encourage greater social activity by women President Karzai has created a ministry of women’s affairs. The Television-Radio Program Commission is also behind more freedom for women to share in social activity. It raises no objection to women performers appearing on screen or radio.

The RTA management, however, who actually handle broadcasting, oppose letting women perform on the air because of the high risk of inciting the anger of some in the broadcast audience. It is still too soon, they say. Karzai, who has been thinking about using the broadcast media as an instrument of democratization, probably did not expect RTA opposition. The final decision about how to apply the press law will depend on interpretation of Shari’ah, but in any case, this question of women’s social activity has become a symbolic issue and is not likely to be settled anytime soon.

Dilemmas of Diversity

Afghanistan is a multiethnic country that seems fractured by its diversity. There are at least five major ethnic groups, including the majority Pashtuns, the northern Tajiks, and Hazaras, who look much like Japanese, and many more, and they all differ in language and culture. Their relationships are fraught with continuing friction and rivalries between groups, centering on local warlords and their clan animosities. The single element that ties together this motley population is Islam—Islam is the glue that holds Afghanistan in one piece. At the same time Islam is at the root of numerous potential problems, such as the proscriptions that bar women’s participation in society. One of the big challenges ahead for the media is going to be how to balance their increasingly important role in encouraging democracy with the need to preserve compatibility with Islam.
Twenty-four years of Soviet occupation, civil war, Taliban rule, and upheaval have robbed a whole generation of education, and today those who can read and write are under 10 percent of the population. In other words, more than 90 percent are illiterate, which means that it is going to be some time before newspapers, magazines, any print media are going to find mass readership. By default, then, the job of supplying this diverse population with many-sided, diverse information will continue for some time to fall heavily on radio and television broadcasting. Precisely because radio and TV can supply information, they will also undoubtedly take on an increasingly important role in education. With schools in Afghanistan under great pressure, there is a growing need for courses conducted by radio and television. Radio-Television Program Commission member Aziz Fanus, who is also a professor at Kabul University, says that “in the Program Commission I have been constantly insisting that the first and most important role of radio and television is in education.”

Another difficulty is the two official languages. People of the northern regions, like the Tajiks and others in the Northern Alliance, use Dari, while the majority Pashtuns use Pashto. Both are written using the same letters, but the grammar and lexicon are completely different. The Taliban were Pashtuns, and so when they controlled Kabul only Pashto was used there, but when the Northern Alliance recaptured the city, Dari also became an official language. A lot of Pashtuns understand Dari, too, but most Dari speakers do not understand Pashto. The need to treat both languages fairly and equally in editing, producing, and performing, puts a very heavy burden on a broadcasting station.

Conclusion
The media are basically in tense relations with the authorities and hold their ground against them. The media should be able to supply the information necessary to the people to give them the basis for making judgments of their own. In Afghanistan today, however, the Karzai government is extremely fragile, and it is not at all clear how much criticism from the media it can withstand. The people of Afghanistan today have only a spotty understanding of what democracy is; they still live in a world of Islamic rules and tribal perspectives. A headlong rush to promote Western-style media would risk arousing serious dissension. To recover those lost twenty-four years is going to take more time than that, and the world must be patient, steadily watching over Afghanistan’s media as they grow and mature, giving a hand when they can.
PRESS LAW OF AFGHANISTAN (excerpts)

Article One:
This Law has been issued in accordance with Article 31 of the Constitution of 1343 (1964) and Article 19 of the International Declaration of Human Rights for protecting the freedom of thought and speech and for regulating the media in the country.

Article Two:
The goals of this law are:
1. Preparing the proper opportunity based on which the citizens of the country can express their thoughts and feelings through speaking, writing, drawing, pictures, recording, acting, movement, and other literary and artistic phenomena, and can print and publish material;
2. Supporting the principles of Islam with the observance of freedom of speech and media as has been mentioned in the International Declaration of Human Rights;
3. Helping towards the healthy development of the media in a way that this pillar of the society can become an effective tool for publicizing culture to the citizens of the country and at the same time reflect public opinion in an honest and beneficial way to the society.

Article Three:
The following phrases/words in this law have the following meanings:
1. Media: Printed letters and images that express a subject or a picture, which includes all mass media like newspapers, journals, magazines, pamphlets, books, preaching, speeches and statements.

16. Owner/concessionaire: a person, original or assigned, who:
Prints and publishes periodicals like newspapers, journals, magazines and so on,
Establishes and holds a theatre, cinema, cinematography, music and the sound recording system, printing house or advertising agency;

Article Four:
(1) Only the citizens of the country have the permission, according to the rules of the law, to establish the tools that are mentioned in item 16.
(2) The political foreign missions, international organizations and their missions in Afghanistan can print and distribute news bulletins in accordance with diplomatic standards only after obtaining permission from the Ministry of Information and Culture.
Article Eleven:
Ownership of establishing a printing house is given only to citizens, parties, organizations and the State of Afghanistan in accordance with the rules of the law.

Article Twenty-four:
After the acceptance of the statement, at maximum about one month before starting operations, the concessionaire is obligated to leave a sum of money with the Ministry of Information and Culture as a guarantee.

Article Thirty:
Publishing of the following material in the media is not allowed:
1. Material that could mean insult to the sacred religion of Islam and other religions.
2. Material that could mean insult to individuals or that is obscene;
3. Printing dirty articles or pictures that cause general immorality;
4. Printing material for the weakening of the army of Afghanistan.

Article Forty:
The periodical and non-periodical publications, films, dramas, video cassettes, etc. that are being imported from abroad and also the films and dramas that are being produced by the citizens of foreign countries inside Afghanistan can only be sold, distributed or exhibited if prior permission is obtained from the Ministry of Information and Culture.

Article Forty-one:
Producing of cinematography films by foreign citizens in Afghanistan is conditional upon receiving prior permission from the Ministry of Information and Culture.

(English translation: International Press Institute)