

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind

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Why Afghanistan Needs Media Convergence

The Web and its related technologies have expressively influenced not only the ways in which news is consumed, but also how journalism education and the ongoing training of news professionals are undertaken.

How relevant is journalism curriculum in preparing the students to meet new Challenges posed by the emergence of new media?

The pressures of communication revolution and the information revolution in the mid-nineties forced the journalism educators to discuss alternate models of curriculum. They found the answer in convergence. There are different meanings of the term, "Convergence" and the term is defined and interpreted here within realms of journalism. According to Quinn; Convergence in journalism is referred to as, 'multiple-platform publishing' or as 'integrated journalism.

In media, convergence has given new content generating and delivery platforms. In journalism education, convergence is perceived as imparting education and training across print, broadcast, and online media platforms. Today television, broadband, cell phone and radio have converged to give news round the clock for different readers/listeners/viewers indicating the different ways the news is delivered at the convenience of the audience. Like a web page convergence curriculum is dynamic requiring constant upgrading bridging the void between theory and practice.

The coming of technology in media operations has altered in a positive way, the ecology of mass communication across the world. The haste of the adoption and diffusion of innovations in the contemporary media industry is posing a great challenge to media educators as the newsroom appears to be continually ahead of the classroom, especially in the developing world.

In Afghanistan, like other developing nations, Mass Communication educators grapple with the challenge of ever-increasing innovations and try to incorporate such in the curriculum.

While it is difficult to provide a journalism and mass communication curriculum that is all things to all students, the dynamism and psychology of media audiences have become so intricate and complex such that no media professional that is worth his salt can afford to ignore. Because readers' likes and dislikes keep changing, we, too, must keep changing. That is why readership research, focus groups and listening exercises are such important tools to use as we reshape and rebuild the newspaper. Hence, while the aim of media practitioners remains how to stay afloat in the competitive media market through the constant creation and design of sophisticated media product/cutting edge content, both educators and professionals need to work together to re-invent journalism and mass communication education.

As a result, the mindset should not be about creating new forms of journalism or mass communication, but about new ways of reaching and engaging audiences. The same holds true for educators. Just as the media look to innovative techniques to reach audiences, educators should be asking themselves if they are doing everything possible to reach and engage their students.

In journalism education, convergence is regarded as 'teaching students to think, report, and write across print, broadcast, and online media platforms'. Branded as multi-platform reporting, convergence takes all new kinds of new media ranging from websites to cell phones to blogs and to iPods. From the educator's perspective, convergence is meant to be a blurring of the lines between what have historically been distinct areas of study, the outcome of which is a 'converged curriculum.

Modern technologies have given mass communication media the ability to adopt new forms of publication never explored before. At the present time newspapers have the opportunity to include audio and video on their web publications. Broadcast stations now have the opportunity to include text on their web publications. This approach to new types of unexplored formats is what is called Media convergence.

Media convergence relies on the fact that the members of a given and particular media will have the capacity to work with different formats. In a technology-driven media environment, journalism scholars and educators must make time to stand back from the front line and develop perspective on the wider field for the purpose of better defining journalism education and redesigning its curriculum to keep pace with today's media platforms.

Afghanistan at the Cross Roads

By: Saikat Kumar Basu

Since time immemorial Afghanistan has been a flashpoint of human history in Asia. From the days of the erstwhile Persian Empire till the time of invasion by Alexander, Afghanistan has continued to see bloody battles that stretched into the Colonial Era and the period the Great Games between British and Russian Empires, World Wars, the infamous Russian occupation to the seizing of political power by the Taliban. However, the crises of the helpless Afghan people and Afghanistan as a nation has never found the platform for much needed long term peace and stability necessary for the development of the nation. While rise and fall of great powers have been witnessed across all the continents inhabited by humans except Antarctica; unfortunately Afghanistan has continued to suffer amidst continuous power struggles between global, regional and local geopolitical crises.

With the turns of history, the Afghan people have been hoping for some peace and stability in their country. But most unfortunately almost every time the fate of Afghanistan has been a constant, dreadful, ceaseless fights or in other words incessant power struggles between various groups and stakeholders. One must feel like asking the question as to why this has happened so many times for Afghanistan. The most plausible answer lies with the strategic geopolitical location of Afghanistan. On one hand Afghanistan lies on the ancient Silk Road that connected the East (Asia) with the West (Europe and North Africa). On the other Afghanistan serves as a multiple gateway or as an important entry point to vast territories of South Asia (the Indian subcontinent), steppes of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia), the river valleys of China and Eurasia. No wonder that Afghanistan has been a tragic historic flash point and the perpetual battleground for global, regional and local powers from medieval to modern times.

The Great Game played by frontier forces in the form of proxy battles between the contesting global powers of the time-British and Russian Empires lead to loss of the lives of many Afghans in addition to turning out as mass graves for both Russian and British soldiers. The multiple Anglo-Afghan wars proved costly for both sides and deceitfully forced Afghanistan to sign the unacceptable Durand Line agreement that separated the Pashtun communities across Afghanistan and British India forever. The current standing international border between Pakistan (born out of the partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947) and Afghanistan has thus remained an important point of tension between the two neighbouring countries. The British always feared the aggression of the Russian army and lived in perpetual fear that there would be a clash of the titans across Afghanistan that actually never happened during that period. However, the same fear of the US and her Western allies including Great Britain came back later during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. The proxy war fought by US and her allies using Pakistan and Afghan rebels against the Soviet forces finally forced the latter out of the country in 1989 after paying a heavy price that also contributed towards the final dissolution of the erstwhile Soviet Union. There is no wonder that it has given rise to the phrase about Afghanistan as the 'graveyard of empires'.

The rise of Taliban in Afghanistan made global headlines and the country went through a period of hell. The attacks on the twin towers brought the US back to Afghanistan with direct involvement to eradicate the Taliban since 2001 and they got permanently stuck. There are now talks regarding

withdrawal of the US army from Afghanistan after almost two decades of bloody guerrilla warfare; but no road map has yet been established. The US learnt the hard way why Afghanistan is called the graveyard of civilizations and empires after incurring heavy military loses in almost two decades of intense territorial and aerial fights, guerrilla warfare, and ambushes that drained the US ground troops operating in Afghanistan severely. Taliban still continue being a major political and military force in Afghanistan and holds a significant portion of the country under their control. Pakistan continues to be a perpetual pain for Afghanistan providing covert logistic support to the rebellious Taliban and providing them sanctuary inside Pakistan to carry out multiple attacks on Afghanistan round the year. The Central Asian countries as well as the Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) have been switching allegiance from time to time; but officially favoured a peaceful Afghanistan for the long term economic development of the country and the region. However, they had not actively participated in the long term peace talks or neither supported Afghanistan genuinely.

The real difference to Afghanistan's future could be made by countries like India, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the US, China and Russia. Unfortunately each of these countries have their own long term conflicts with another making the peace process challenging for the victim named Afghanistan. The strong animosity and mistrust between India and Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia, the US, China and Russia as also the strong economic competition between them has been proving detrimental towards the peace process in Afghanistan. There is no doubt that India, China, the US and Russia have made investments in Afghanistan and have been trying to help the country; but since they are unable to work on a common platform due to divergent interests, conflicts and strong competitions among them; a collective force to establish peace in currently non-existent. Various peace groups or forums lead by the US, China, Russia, India and Pakistan have been trying with their own specific agenda in mind and in spite of several rounds of meetings no long term peace equations could be formulated till date. While some groups supported sharing power with Taliban others vehemently opposed it. As a consequence no concrete platform could be established to give any long term relief to the unfortunate people of Afghanistan.

Without direct cooperation from Pakistan, the immediate neighbour a long term peace process could not be established in Afghanistan. Under the cover, Pakistan continues to haunt and bleed Afghanistan on almost a weekly basis. With the increasing military, economic and diplomatic difference between the US and Pakistan increasing; and a subsequent China and Pakistan cooperation increasing is making the peace equation a long distant dream to achieve. The ideological war across the Middle East and North Africa is keeping Iran and Saudi Arabia engaged in their own power struggle with very little or almost negligible participation in the multi-nation peace dialogue. India being pushed as a strong competitor for China by the US; and the massive lack of trust between two super powers like the Russia and the US is putting Afghanistan at cross roads in the peace talks and negotiations. If all the contending sides and stakeholders would have been able to take a holistic view and kind enough to step back a little to allow the other side some respectable space; the peace bargain would have been fruitful. But that does not seem to be the order of the day. Under these circumstances, the peace process in Afghanistan seemed to be caught in the cross roads with no clear long term resolution visible in the immediate future.

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Regional Competition over Hosting Afghan Peace Process

By: Mohammad Zahir Akbari

After 2001, many of regional countries considered the Taliban as a terrorist group because they committed human crimes against civilians with disregarding international law. When Taliban took over the power, three regional countries (Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates) recognized the government of Taliban. Following the September 11th incident and the United States' decision to overthrow the Taliban's regime, they were forced to desist from supporting Taliban and joined the US front to fight against terrorism. As the Afghan peace talks have accelerated in recent months, some regional countries have become more generous to host the Afghan peace process than others. The basic question is what these countries (including Russia, the UAE, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey) are seeking? To answer this question, there is need for a brief overview of the foreign policy of Saudi Arabia and Iran towards the region.

Based on realistic theory on international relations, all governments struggle to optimize their national interests and security which they pursue them through maintaining a status quo or an expansionist policy. Iran and Saudi Arabia are the two countries that have acute ideological and regional completions in the region and across the Islamic world. After changes in their containment policy towards Iraq in 1979, the foreign policy of these two countries not only fluctuated, but also took a hostile approach towards each other. Their foreign policies are based on the use of religion as a means of expanding their influences and weakening the rival's position. After the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan in 1979, the two countries found opportunity to expand their influence in Afghanistan as from one hand the central government was debilitated; and on the other hand, the imposed crisis facilitated the religious propaganda of the two countries in the format of contributing jihad against communism and the Soviet Union.

During this period, Saudi Arabia established thousands of religious schools in Pakistan and areas outside the control of the Afghan government, and thousands of Afghan children who often had lost their families in war against the Soviet Union, joined these schools to learn religious teachings. In addition, these schools provided some fiscal aid to families of those children. People who graduated from these schools contrasted with traditional and moderate Islam of the Afghan community which was Hanafi but they were aligned with Salafists, especially Wahhabism, which has a strict interpretation from Islam. Students of these religious schools have been trained to have faith in jihad and to take part in Afghanistan's war against Soviet Union.

In 1989, the Soviet Union left Afghanistan but another three years of war continued with the Soviet-backed government while Saudi Arabia was struggling to support the extremist factions in order not to remain back from rivalry of Iran that supported the Northern Alliance. Most of Saudi religious school graduates had joined the Taliban terrorist group. The Taliban who have strict interpretation of Islam have committed many crimes such as destruction of a human heritage (the Bamiyan Buddha), or massacring the civilians in Mazar-i-Sharif or elsewhere in the country.

After 1979, Iran also sought to expand its religious beliefs to swell its influence among moderate jihadist groups. When the Taliban came to power, Iran supported Taliban opponents in Afghanistan and considered the Taliban as a

terrorist group. The relationship between Afghanistan and Iran during the Taliban, especially after the killing of Iranian diplomats by Taliban in Mazar-i-Sharif, was blurred until the brink of war. After the 9/11 incident, Iran attempted to overthrow the Taliban regime, and even there were the signs that the United States and Iran might proceed to normalize their relationships because of having common enemies such as Taliban and al-Qaeda, but Bush's famous speech in 2002 when called Iran one of malevolence axes in the world, made Iran to resume its previous stance.

During the reign of Hamid Karzai, Iran was in close contact with the Afghan government, as there were reports that President Karzai's office was had receiving cash money from the Iranian government. Late during the presidency of Hamid Karzai and the intensification of the Iranian nuclear crisis with the West, the Taliban appeared to have support of Iran. However, from the political points of view, this does not seem strange because the Taliban and Iran both are in the same position.

Until recently, Iran denied having relationship with the Taliban, but in the Moscow summit Iran toned down and helped the Taliban to be accepted as a political actor in Afghanistan and also in the region. After the Moscow summit, another meeting was held in Abu Dhabi, somewhat anti-Iran (Saudi Arabia-UAE). A few days after of the meeting, the Iranian Foreign Ministry spoke person Abbas Araghchi, who later traveled to Kabul conveyed the message of the Taliban to the Afghan government, while also strived to highlight Iran's role in the Afghan peace process.

One of other professing leaders in the Muslim world is Turkey that recently joined the queue to host the Afghan peace process in the near future. Now we can say that Tehran, Riyadh and Ankara are trying not to drop behind from the regional competition because each of them are the professing leaders of the Islamic world; in the Middle East, each of them is considered the as main actor of war and peace. However, any kind of efforts aimed to bring peace in Afghanistan should be welcomed but for some reasons it can be said that the intervention of these three countries can complicate the peace process in Afghanistan: First, each of these countries is somehow involved in the conflicts of the entire Middle East, and so it can be said that these countries are part of the problem, not a solution. Second, all three countries are blamed for producing fundamentalism; so, can they help the peace process in Afghanistan that has suffered from terrorism and fundamentalism for many years? Third, as these countries compete with each other, when one of them makes constructive efforts in the peace process it would be challenged by the rest as they would think it may endanger their influence and interests in the region.

Therefore, it is the responsibility of Afghan government to take leadership of all peace-building meetings and not allow any third country to invite the Taliban for peace talks. As much as Taliban is introduced less dangerous in the world, the peace process will become more complicated because the Taliban are not flexible in accepting democracy and human rights. When in the nineties, when the international community left Afghanistan alone and did not regard the Taliban as a threat to humanity, as a result, we witnessed numerous crimes by this group in Afghanistan, we may witness the same in the future.

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