

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

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**Media Upholding Freedoms of Speech and Opinion**

The media plays a highly significant role in Afghanistan for upholding democracy and freedom of speech. It provides a platform for the public to have their say freely about social and political issues. However, media outlets also have some negative side effects in Afghanistan.

In the post-Taliban Afghanistan, a large number of media outlets had emerged to support freedoms of thought and speech and uphold democratic principles. The government also played a pivotal role in supporting the media and freedom of speech. The public could communicate their needs and demands with officials through the mass media and vice versa.

Notwithstanding all the challenges, freedom of speech in Afghanistan has to be admired. The media outlets air and publish reports and let people express their views without censorship by the government. Afghan Constitution states in Article 34, "Freedom of expression shall be inviolable. Every Afghan shall have the right to express thoughts through speech, writing, illustrations as well as other means in accordance with provisions of this constitution. Every Afghan shall have the right, according to provisions of law, to print and publish on subjects without prior submission to state authorities..." Since it is said in the preamble of Afghan Constitution that Afghans will observe the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the government will also endorse freedom of speech and opinion maintained in the UDHR as it states in Article 19, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers".

Media outlets monitor the government and criticize officials severely without receiving reaction from the government. Meanwhile, the media provides platform for people from all walks of life to speak their mind without fear. The Taliban leaders are also interviewed by Afghan journalists to have their say and communicate their views with officials and the public.

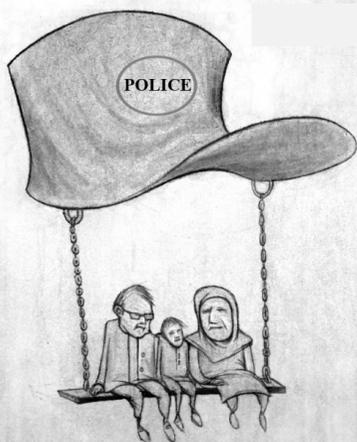
To speak of social media, it is a free and open platform for each and every Afghan citizens, who express their views. That is, social media gives every individual a free rein to speak about anyone without a tinge of censorship. Thus, Afghan officials receive the harshest rhetoric from social media users, who also satirize officials in the worst possible way. Social media is also means of pressure on the government. Besides playing a pivotal role in convening people for public demonstration, social media could draw the attention of officials to many national concerns being voiced by social media users.

However, social media has also been changed into means of entertainment for youths, which is spoiling. Worst of all, since social media is a free and open platform, a number of media users speak unfairly of the government officials or simply hurl vitriol against them without feeling a sense of responsibility. Meanwhile, a number of individuals also stoke sectarian issues on social media and make a mountain out of a mole with impunity since Afghanistan lacks cyber law. The free platform of social media is being used negatively as individuals attack religious values and cultural norms of others, which outrages the public conscience in the society.

Propaganda is spread and baseless claims are made on social media. It is also believed that radical individuals and insurgent groups are using social media to channel public sensation against the government.

The destructive aspect of the mass media in the country is that negative issues form the bulk of the news. That is to say, journalists are used to focus on negative issues. It is right that Afghanistan is embroiled in many challenges, the positive issues should not be ignored. In some cases, negative issues are exaggerated whether intentionally or unintentionally, which will fill the air with fear and disappointment. Being inundated with negative news and reports, Afghans have turned highly pessimists viewing social and political issues pessimistically.

It is believed that there are many positive issues to be covered. Unfortunately, all attention is turned to negative aspects of social and political issues. For example, instead of admiring the freedom of speech and press, reports are focused on obstacles hampering the freedom of expression or threats posed to the life of journalists; instead of viewing election as a strong back-up to democracy, electoral rigging and challenges ahead of voters are overstated; and instead of casualties inflicted on the militants, civilian or military casualties are brought up. Thus, news and reports are not balanced in the country since negative aspects outweigh positive ones.

**The Extension of Takfiri Terrorist Group is More Worrying than Taliban**By: **Mohammad Zahir Akbari**

The expanding news of Takfiri terrorist group is repeatedly heard in Afghanistan after they lost its so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq. It is said that more than 5,000 IS forces that fled from Syria and Iraq, have sheltered in Afghanistan and they will be a serious threat to security of the country. Recently, the First vice President, Abdul Rashid Dostum has warned that Daesh terrorist group would likely take Taliban's place if the militants abandon insurgency. He also said that Daesh presence was a matter of concern in Afghanistan, adding that the terrorist group would take place in the battle ground after Taliban.

Dostum said to his supporters that he had shared his concern over Daesh threat with President Ghani, but he assured that "Afghan soldiers would take revenge". Few days later, the National Directorate of Security's Special Unit has detained at least six members of Daesh (Islamic State) extremist group, in an operation conducted in Kabul. It is said that These Daesh members were involved in kidnappings, transferring of weapons and explosives, and relocating of Daesh members to Nangarhar – an eastern province. However, there is no mention about exact place where the security forces conducted the operation, but the statement said a number of weapons were also seized from the arrested Daesh loyalists.

Reportedly, the detained individuals are identified as Mohammad Abed, Subhan Ahmad, Hamdullah, Mohammad Younus son of Mohammad Gul, Mohammad Younus son of Haji Babrak and Abdul Rashid. The group was secretly operating under the direction of Din Mohammad known as Naweed, who is in charge of the group in the capital Kabul. The terrorist group has so far asserted responsibility of several attacks mostly against religious gatherings and scholars in the country. The Afghanistan affiliate refers to itself as the Khorasan Province - a name applied to parts of Afghanistan, Iran and central Asia in the middle Ages.

This comes after recent expression of Alexander Bortnikov, the head of the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation and Scott Miller, the US commander of resolute support forces as they alarmed security Daesh threats in Afghanistan. Mr. Burtinkov had said that more than 5,000 IS forces that fled from Syria and Iraq have sheltered in the northern borders of Afghanistan and they will be a serious threat to the security of entire region. Scott Miller had also said that al-Qaeda is still in some parts of Afghanistan fighting against the Afghan government in coordination with other terrorist groups. In recent months, there were many reports of full coordination between the Taliban and al-Qaeda and the unity of the two terrorist groups.

Nevertheless, the presence of Takfiri group is not new in Afghanistan; initially, they announced its expansion to the Khorasan region in 2015, which historically encompasses parts of modern day Iran,

Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Despite initial skepticism about the group's existence from analysts and government officials alike, Takfiri group has been responsible for nearly 100 attacks against civilians in Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as roughly 250 clashes with the U.S., Afghan, and Pakistani security forces since January 2017. Though the group has yet to conduct attacks against the U.S. homeland, the group represents an enduring threat to U.S. and allied interests in South and Central Asia.

According to experts, the Takfiri Terrorist Group is more dangerous than Taliban. In recent months, the Taliban have said they have no ambitions to monopolize power in a post-war Afghanistan, while IS is committed to overthrow the Kabul government on its path to establishing a global caliphate. However, The Islamic State group has lost its caliphate in Syria and Iraq, but in the forbidding mountains of northeastern Afghanistan the group has expanded its footprint, recruiting new fighters and plotting attacks on national and international security officials.

The other reason which makes them more brutal than Taliban is because of its increasingly sophisticated military capabilities and its strategy of targeting civilians, both in Afghanistan and abroad. Concerns run so deep that many have come to see the Taliban, which has also clashed with IS, as a potential partner in containing it. According to U.S. intelligence official, the recent wave of attacks in the capital, Kabul, is "practice runs" for even bigger attacks in Europe and the United States.

Thirdly, the terrorist groups, especially Daesh Takfiri group is the most ignorant and foolish people of the world as they are used as an aimless tool by intelligence networks. Unfortunately, many regional and global powers directly or indirectly use them as weapon against one and other to strengthen their political and economic interests. Seemingly, no other area in the region will be better playground than Afghanistan for regional and international actors and the nest of terrorism. Over the past several years, there were many reports that certain country provides aerial and logistic supports to the extremist groups in Afghanistan.

Consequently, if we fail to make a compressive combating strategy against terrorists, there would be serious possibility that Afghanistan may once again go to throat of terrorist groups but this round it would be worse than what were witnessed in the past as Daesh terrorist group is more atrocious than other terrorist groups. If this happens, the rest of terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and the Taliban will once again dominate larger parts of Afghanistan, and they will try to display their latest style of violence that have not shown in Syria and Iraq.

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**Taming the Wild West of Digital Health Innovation**By: **Asha George, Amnesty LeFevre & Rajani Ved**

Digital technology is revolutionizing our daily lives. Mobile devices monitor our movements, marketing algorithms guide our consumption, and social media shape our world-views and politics. While such innovations have their advantages, they also carry significant risks, including potentially widening existing inequalities within our societies. This prospect is particularly worrying when it comes to global health.

Sustaining and scaling digital health innovations is hardly an easy process. Of the more than 600 pilot mobile-health initiatives that emerged in the last decade, very few reached delivery at scale, and even fewer were sustained. Nonetheless, some high-profile digital health initiatives – such as MomConnect in South Africa and Mobile Academy, TeCHO+, and ANMOL in India – shifted, at least partly, from donor to government funding. This change is part of an ongoing wave of enthusiasm for new technologies' potential to improve health systems and in turn, health. It reflects key opportunities to shape the digital health sector in ways that benefit all of society.

To be sure, steps are already being taken to position health-related digital technologies as a disruptive force for good. The World Health Organization (WHO) recently announced the creation of a Department of Digital Health, along with guidelines on digital health interventions.

Moreover, some initiatives that have already been rolled out globally hold significant promise. For example, the governments of Ghana, South Africa, and Tanzania, among others, are taking advantage of near-ubiquitous mobile-phone access to supplement limited interactions with health-care providers by delivering important health information to beneficiaries.

Initiatives focused on equipping health-care providers with digital tools – in India, for example – are enabling them to eliminate cumbersome paper-based records and improve the clinical content of service delivery (with decision-support algorithms, videos, and other content that may enhance patient-provider interactions). Efforts are also underway to use blockchain technology to track funding flows and facilitate the timely payment of frontline health workers. But there is no guarantee that digital innovations in health will bring shared benefits. That is why, before moving forward with any new digital tool, it is vital to consider who it will reach, the motivations of the various actors involved in its development and deployment, and the implications and opportunity costs for users and health systems alike.

Start with reach. If a product requires a high level of digital literacy, it might be inaccessible to people who already lack access to education or health care; as a result, adopting it would exacerbate and entrench inequalities. To optimize the design, reach, and effec-

tiveness of digital-health programs, user capabilities and technology requirements must be aligned. Welcoming innovation includes humility about the limits of technology and the pressing need to strengthen health systems to ensure that they serve all members of society.

Then there is the question of who is designing and delivering health innovations – and who is accountable for them. In the past, innovation entailed collaborations between governments, donors, NGOs, and research organizations. In the digital age, new actors – such as mobile network operators and technology companies – have joined this process, each with its own language, agenda, and incentives. Without mediation, this can lead to distorted power dynamics, with some initiatives becoming "too big to fail" and governments struggling to exercise oversight.

The broader potential effects on users must also be considered. Consider the data-privacy question. Digital health programs may involve the collection of huge amounts of personal data. As that information is collected, it passes through an array of channels, making it increasingly difficult to de-identify. This can create major privacy risks, which are compounded by the temptation to commodify and sell patient data. While this might seem like a simple way to generate more revenue to sustain and expand health programs, the sale of private data runs counter to building trust in health systems.

Fortunately, some governments recognize this, and efforts are underway to mitigate data-privacy risks. The European Union has led the way on this front, with its recently adopted General Data Protection Regulation. A number of low- and middle-income countries are now following its example with their own data-privacy standards. But regulating existing activities is only the first step. Given the impossibility of anticipating all the ways in which data might be used in the future, robust governance structures that promote transparency and accountability must be established. Otherwise, digital innovation could quickly turn into a sort of "Wild West," a lawless environment in which people are at the mercy of whatever powerful new innovator comes to town.

Next year's Sixth Global Symposium on Health Systems Research will focus on the nexus between government stewardship, innovation, and accountability. Only with a clear-eyed assessment of a new technology – including who is responsible for it and who could be left behind if it is deployed – can we ensure that the digital revolution delivers on its promise to improve global health.

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