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# The enigma of news media development with multi-pronged ‘capture’: The Afghanistan case

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## Abstract

This qualitative study of influences on a purposive sample of Afghan journalists was carried out in the year after the US military mission was declared over. After more than a hundred million dollars of Western government funding had been invested in development of liberal democratic journalism, the study found the paradox of news media ‘capture’. We conceptualize this phenomenon further into political, bureaucratic, foreign-donor, and violent-actor capture. The study concludes that in countries with heavy foreign intervention, where imported journalism values are layered upon previous and continued institutional arrangements and where violence and instability continue unabated, news media work is prone to ‘capture’ by a variety of actors outside media organizations. We suggest that future research could refine a typology with six distinct forms of capture – economic, political, cultural, legal, bureaucratic, and societal.

## Keywords

Afghanistan, capture, conflict, democratic values, ‘de-westernized’ approaches, mediated spaces, news media development, social change

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## Introduction

When Hamid Karzai ascended to the presidency of Afghanistan in 2001, he was noted to have said, 'Freedom of expression and belief is the right for each and every Afghan citizen, and it is our responsibility to defend this' (Torfeh, 2009: 39). The ensuing years have been described as a 'Wild West atmosphere' in the country, 'a free-for-all as all manner of media actors and training agencies' from the BBC to Deutsche Welle to American organizations such as Internews and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Japanese and German governments (p. 40) stepped in to shape a new media landscape.

Nearly a decade and a half has passed and more than a hundred million dollars of Western government spending has been infused into media infrastructure and training of thousands of Afghan journalists (Cary, 2012) in the liberal democratic journalism tradition. New legal instruments advancing freedom of expression have been adopted and a more modern news media infrastructure has been built in a society staggering under 30 years of conflict.

This research utilized the critical juncture of the withdrawal of intensive foreign support and other factors to address the overarching research question that explores the impact of external interventions in the Afghan context and how journalists there perceive the current news media ecosystem. Our findings provide a potential framework for future research in conflict or post-conflict zones that have received large amounts of media development assistance in recent years, for there has been little research in this area outside of the post-Soviet states and satellite countries (Berger, 2010; Relly et al., 2015a, 2015b).

This research builds on early critical work focused on one-way information flow from industrialized to developing nations (Nordenstreng and Schiller, 1993; Schiller, [1971] 1992), 'party colonization' of the news media (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014), perspectives on post-imperialism (Boyd-Barrett, 2010; Schiller, 2010; Straubhaar, 2010), measurements of news freedom (Becker and Vlad, 2011), and trajectories of former authoritarian or autocratic countries that have undergone news media development (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008; Sparks, 2008; Voltmer, 2006, 2013). Although governments around the world spend up to half a billion dollars (US) annually in journalism development training globally (Kaplan, 2012; Myers, 2009; Ricchiardi, 2011), little research has examined how these imports are integrated, or received, into established or nascent media systems in other countries with significant cultural differences from the West and that are in continuous conflict (Taylor and Napoli, 2003; Relly et al., 2015b). We conducted this qualitative study in Kabul, the Afghan capital, with an attempt to 'de-westernize' the research approach, which generally requires avoiding the use of theories and methods that are largely utilized in the West (Waisbord and Mellado, 2014). We thus, as realistically as possible, adopted an inductive approach to this research with several inevitable variables linked to the West, most markedly the foreign government funding toward news media 'development'. The study transpired over 7 months in 2015, the year after the United States ended its combat mission in the country.

Our study found that 80 percent of the purposive sample of journalists that we interviewed ( $n=30$ ) had received professional training by nongovernmental organizations

(NGOs) contracted by Western donor nations. In addition, extensive new infrastructure such as production and transmission equipment and salaries was made available that had not been in decades prior. A majority of study participants indicated that their work was largely curtailed by multiple forms of ‘capture’, a term that we define and explore in this research anticipating that the work could be utilized in other post-conflict or conflict environments with transitioning political or developing economies. In this article, we attempt to conceptualize this phenomenon further into political, bureaucratic, foreign-donor, and violent-actor capture, all originating outside of news organizations.

The following sections outline the historical trajectory of journalism in Afghanistan, followed by a review of an emerging body of literature focused on ‘de-westernized’ approaches to research, the concept of mediated spaces, news media development, and a narrow line of literature focused on ‘media capture’.

## **News media context in Afghanistan**

Although the first independent news outlet, *Siraj-ul-Akhbar* (Lamp of the News), was published in 1911, it was decades later that freedom of expression was recognized in Afghanistan’s 1964 Constitution (Human Rights Watch, 2015). The press expanded through the 1960s and into the next decade when King Mohammed Zahir Shah was overthrown in 1973 by former Prime Minister Mohammed Daoud Khan, which led to new press restrictions (Human Rights Watch, 2015: 6). The pro-Soviet People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan took over the country, which led to a civil war and the 1979 occupation by the Soviet Union and its takeover of the news media (Gibbs, 2002: 1; Skuse, 2002). In 1996, the Taliban seized power in Kabul, outlawed television as ‘un-Islamic’, and exerted control through one official broadcast apparatus, Radio Sharia, and about a dozen state-run newspapers countrywide (Human Rights Watch, 2015: 6).

Under the Taliban, which ruled until 2001, there were no independent news media. The US-led invasion that ousted them and an occupation of various forces largely funded by governments from the West led to a flood of resources, including a campaign to advance freedom of expression and a massive news media development program. The United States has been the largest donor to media development in Afghanistan (Cary, 2012: 12). The USAID alone poured in some US\$43.5 million from 2002 to 2010 for media development (Cary, 2012: 4). Media training organizations generally provide short courses of a few days to a few months that combine skill building, technical, and other Western-style journalistic values such as accuracy and fairness. Some development organizations provide an online publication outlet for the news produced by trainees as a type of ongoing mentoring. In addition to basic radio, print, and video reporting, most training organizations soon added more specialized seminars or workshops such as reporting about corruption, investigative and elections reporting, law and ethics, and media management. Some have published training manuals and books; others created media outlets. The US-funded Internews, for example, started *Salam Watandar*, a radio network that is Afghan-owned and operated, and *Nai*, an advocacy and training organization. Although it is not clear exactly how many Afghans have been trained as journalists, Internews alone reported that since 2005 they have trained some 19,000 Afghans, including 4143 women (Internews, n.d.). *Nai* started the *Nai Media Institute* in 2012, funded by



**Figure 1.** Afghanistan and six adjacent countries.

USAID, offering short trainings and also a 2-year program leading to a Diploma in Media approved by the Afghanistan's Education Ministries (Nai, n.d.). The London-based Institute for War & Peace Reporting follows the training program with an on-the-job mentoring program in which trainees report and produce news.

By 2014, Afghanistan had 22 state-owned channels, 174 radio stations (47 in the capital), 68 private TV stations, four news agencies, and hundreds of publications with about seven daily newspapers (*BBC*, 2015: 1). The country continues to pose a dangerous environment for journalists. Since the US mission ended in December 2014, 11 journalists have been killed (Nai, 2016). The Committee to Protect Journalists (2016) lists the country among the top 10 nations in the world noted for impunity.

The Afghan case provides an important set of circumstances that allows for a study of deep complexity, which likely has similarities to other unstable nations, those in conflict or post-conflict. For example, the 2004 Afghan constitution contains Article 34, which allows for freedom of expression and the press; yet at the same time, news content is prohibited if it runs contrary to Islam, the state religion (Cary, 2012: 6). Article 130 of the constitution states that Islamic jurists may rule “in a way that attains justice in the best manner,” creating leeway for discriminatory or contradictory rulings’ according to Freedom House (2015). A 2009 Afghan Mass Media Law does not permit censorship and advances the right for the public to seek and obtain information (Freedom House, 2015). Although Freedom House has ranked the news media ‘not free’, journalists have greater freedoms than in the six adjacent nations (Figure 1), including Pakistan (Cary, 2012: 6).

## **'De-westernized' approaches and 'mediated spaces'**

Our study in Afghanistan over 7 months attempts to engage the calls for the 'de-westernization' approach to research (Gunaratne, 2010; Waisbord and Mellado, 2014; Wang, 2010). There has been criticism of applying theoretical and research orientations born and utilized in the West to outside regions. This becomes even more critical as the body of research continues to grow in non-Western regions of the world.

Waisbord and Mellado (2014) noted 'de-westernization' is 'viewed as a necessary shift to reorient intellectual work against academic Eurocentrism' and that 'communication scholarship in the rest of the world has historically drawn from quite different political, economic, sociocultural, and academic settings, notwithstanding the exposure to U.S. and European intellectual traditions' (p. 362). We recognize that we are obliged to conduct this 'de-westernization' approach with much care given that we are attempting to explore Afghan journalism from an organic perspective, although we are Western researchers ourselves and are focused on the impact of nearly 15 years of Western-led news media development.

We apply Reese's (2016) 'mediated spaces' concept, which takes into consideration 'newwork', a 'networked public sphere', 'institutional arrangements', 'global connections', and 'deliberative spaces' (p. 7). We believe this work, derived from an earlier case study (Reese, 2015) in China, acknowledges the complexity of utilizing a 'de-westernized' approach, which should include 'reassessing and expanding ontological horizons' of study 'by analyzing issues and non-Western cases that are either understudied or absent in the West or go beyond conventional geographical boundaries' (Downing, 1996; Thusu, 2009; Waisbord and Mellado, 2014: 363). At the same time, research should be grounded in the local environment 'though it may be also inspired by theoretical questions and academic debates elsewhere' (Waisbord and Mellado, 2014: 364).

## **The concept of 'news media development'**

Whatever the verisimilitude of the ideal, news media development has been defined broadly as 'any kind of support that helps foster free and unbiased media in developing countries' (Myers, 2009: 8). News media development often has been interwoven with 'complicated processes' known as 'nation-building', 'state-building', and 'society-building' (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008: 88). Media development assistance, which has consisted of donors and intermediaries, has been noted in some cases to follow an objective of strengthening 'the indigenous capacity for a free and unfettered flow of news and information, bolstering democratic institutions and culture' (Kumar, 2006: 3, 7–8). This is a focus that in itself advances a particular perspective when introduced to an environment, such as Afghanistan, that has a recent past influence from multiple and different orientations.

In addition to studying how nearly 15 years of imported Western journalism funding and values has impacted a purposive sample of thousands of Afghans who had received journalism training, our research attempts to interrogate the ideal of news media development and to examine how it was received through the perceptions of Afghan journalists. We suggest that it would be remiss to ignore these foreign interventions, which

should be taken into consideration in any ‘mediated spaces’ (Reese, 2016) study in other countries that have had outside investments similar to Afghanistan.

As Reich and Hanitzsch (2013) point out, ‘there is a great theoretical and practical interest in studying the extent to which journalists are autonomous enough to enable the flow of credible and reliable information to the citizenry’ (p. 134). Early work by Siebert et al. (1956) theorized autonomy, or press freedom, on the opposite side of the spectrum from government-controlled news media. Although the Western normative value of autonomy has been a professional journalistic value that has been examined in the literature (Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Waisbord, 2013), conceptualizing the antithesis of this value, news media ‘control’, has largely focused on this phenomenon with an emphasis on the state (Merrill, 1987: 223). Furthermore, as Becker and Vlad (2011) point out, some of the enduring longitudinal measurements of freedom of the press have received criticism for being ‘developed by elites from western countries with strong interests in exporting their own views of media freedom’ (p. 40).

There are lessons to be learned about the influence of news media development in the ‘mixed picture of post-communist Eastern Europe’ and the region, following the in-common initial phases of ‘liberalization, or the passage from total control to limited pluralism, with censorship and repression replaced by self-censorship and partial control’ and ultimately deregulation (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008: 90). In Eastern Europe, the tradition of communism seems to be an even stronger predictor of whether a nation later has a free press or not, with less than half of the former communist nations in Eastern Europe being ranked by Freedom House as ‘free’ and the remaining as ‘not free’ and ‘partly free’ more than 15 years after the breakup of the Soviet Union and various levels of news media development (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008: 90).

Recent research focused on news media development in countries in conflict is situated in nearly five decades of scholarly and other work that initially criticized exported Western norms for news media and the strategy of one-way information flow from industrialized nations to countries considered on the periphery (Buchanan, 2015; Pickard, 2007; Schiller, [1971] 1992; Schiller, 1976). During the 1970s and the following decade, a major debate lingered with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Representatives from 55 developing nations argued that the New World Information and Communication Order, referred to as NWICO, was ‘neo-colonial’, characterizing the system as ‘cultural imperialism’ with the suggestion that ‘control over media technologies, including the capacity to produce ... news, was almost entirely in the hands of corporations based in the world’s most affluent nations’ (Buchanan, 2015: 391, 397; Nordenstreng, 1984).

### **‘Media capture’**

In conceptualizing the perspective of news media capture for this study, we draw on the literature that has focused on media control under authoritarian regimes, transitioning political environments, and zones of conflict (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Becker and Vlad, 2011; Besley and Prat, 2006; Coman, 2004; Corneo, 2006; Kim, 2010; Kim and Hama-Saeed, 2008; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008; Petrova, 2008; Sparks, 2008; Waisbord, 2002). We note for this study that ‘news media capture’ is not strictly focused on state-control. Thus

for our work, we look to Mungiu-Pippidi's (2008) reference to 'media capture' as a context

in which the media has not succeeded in becoming autonomous to manifest a will of its own and to exercise its main function ... but has persisted in an intermediate state, whereas various groups, not just the government, use it for other purposes. (p. 91)

In Central and Eastern Europe, Bajomi-Lázár (2014), whose work focused on political party colonization of the news media, pointed out that political scientists have 'largely ignored the relationships between parties and the media', noting that some scholarship pins news media lacking freedom on in-country institutional legacies, external political actors, and professional, entrepreneurial, and economic conditions (pp. 3, 11–14). Furthering that work, research focused on patterns of parties exploiting such news media resources including regulatory framework, funding, and airtime; political party and news media parallelism; and other potential relationships (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014: 30–31). Others found that media capture often was economic, including outlets' dependence upon 'support from political and business elites', a majority of advertising through the government, media concentration, incomplete privatization, and dependence on donors or owners from outside of the country (Peruško and Popović, 2008; Tadić Mijović and Šajkaš, 2016: 4). Still other research examined single-political-party influences on journalists and cooptation into national propaganda programs (Amin, 2002).

Corneo's (2006) work emphasizes that other forms of capture include market structure and technologies. Other methods of control have included mandatory licensing, state-and-corporate capture through controlling advertising, and other communication policies that curb news media rights (MacHale, 1983: 189; Rockwell and Janus, 2002), including requiring mandatory college education (Perkins, 1999).

Importantly, Bajomi-Lázár (2014) has noted that there is not a consensus among scholars on the definition of capture, yet there is agreement that controlled media influence 'public opinion and voting behavior, that is, the capturers' ability to manage information, including selection and framing of the public agenda' (pp. 15–16). In environments of conflict, we would add there is potential for actors working outside of the law – including organized crime groups, terror organizations, militias, and others – to pose a large news media capture threat. We suggest that violence is the ultimate form of capture for it literally 'silences' journalists who are killed and leads to organizational- or self-censorship when the threats become overwhelming. Although aggregated datasets provide a longitudinal and important perspective about violence toward journalists at the nation level, details about specific or highly nuanced issues are not evident from the aggregated public figures reported each year.<sup>1</sup> Anti-press violence has, surprisingly, received little conceptual or theoretical focus, although a body of literature has examined the influence of violence on the news media (Kim, 2010; Kim and Hama-Saeed, 2008; Relly and González de Bustamante, 2014; Tumber and Webster, 2006; Waisbord, 2002). Our research studies the myriad of actors who could capture the news media in various ways, specifically in zones of conflict or post-conflict in politically or economically transitioning nations.

## Method

A trained Afghan research assistant recruited 30 Afghan journalists to participate in our qualitative study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted from 19 February through 22 September 2015 in Kabul. We based our investigation in the capital because of the concentration of journalists there, the largest number of attacks on news media employees in Kabul province (277 reported from 2001 to 2016; Nai, 2016), and to minimize security risks for our research assistant.

The questionnaire for the study was developed in English with cultural, political, societal, and security concerns taken into consideration and in consultation with Afghan nationals in the field. We developed a questionnaire adapted from other scholars' work in conflict zones (Kim and Hama-Saeed, 2008; Relly and González de Bustamante, 2014). The instrument was translated into Dari and Pashto, the two official languages of Afghanistan, and reviewed and then back-translated into English to validate translated interpretation of the meaning.

The year 2015 was chosen as a critical juncture because it had been 14 years since the fall of the Taliban: more than a decade since journalism trainings had begun and because it was a year after contested presidential elections resulting in the unusual power-sharing agreement between Ashraf Ghani as president and Abdullah Abdullah as chief executive. In addition, the US Obama Administration had just concluded its combat mission in the country, and development funding was clearly dwindling.

Although there was not a complete list of news media outlets in Afghanistan available, through published work and other means, we were able to develop a list for a purposive sample of small, medium, and large news organizations in the capital of more than 3 million residents. In total, 50 journalists were approached and 30 agreed to participate in the study for a 60 percent response rate, which is high. We attribute this to our Afghan-native research assistant's knowledge of the country and the journalism field and his fluency in Pashto, Dari, and English. We recruited journalists from print, online, radio, television, magazine, and multiple platforms, as have others (Kim, 2010; Kim and Hama-Saeed, 2008; Relly and González de Bustamante, 2014).

The interviews were conducted in locations the participants selected. Our research assistant, who received Human Subjects Certification and approval through the university's Institutional Review Board, received permission from participants to audio record the interviews. All but two participants gave permission for their names and news organizations to be used for academic work. The authors, however, chose to not use the names of the research participants to protect them in case the security situation worsens in the country.

The audio was translated from Dari and Pashto into English and then transcribed. Each case in this article is noted by a 'K' for Kabul followed by a numeric representation of the case. Data were coded utilizing an inductive approach and the following organizing framework.

## Organizing framework: News media capture and a hierarchy of influences

After reviewing hundreds of pages of transcripts from qualitative interviews with journalists, our capture model emerged from an inductive approach that focuses on the

aspects appearing to have the greatest impact on journalists' work. Within the hierarchy of influences (Shoemaker and Reese, 1996, 2014), the level of focus for this analysis is at the extra-media/social system level, which seemed to subject journalists to an array of forms of 'capture' and appeared stronger and more numerous than individual-, routine-, organizational-, and ideological-level influences at the time of the study. We thus broadly analyzed interview data to study journalists' perceptions of 'capture', which other scholars have linked with the contrasting concept of news media 'autonomy' (Christians et al., 2009; Hallin and Mancini, 2004; Kim and Hama-Saeed, 2008; Reich and Hanitzsch, 2013; Relly et al., 2015a, 2015b; Wilkins and Brennan, 2004). We utilized the extra-media/social systems level of the Hierarchy of Influences Model to guide the organization of our data, which demonstrates factors that impact journalists who ultimately are responsible for news content.

### *Extra-media (social institutions) level influences*

Shoemaker and Reese (2014) have outlined the social institutions level as the 'many forces outside of the formal media structures', which are 'other institutional power centers in society, relationships that can be coercive or collusive and can shape media content' (p. 95). Among extra-media sources that scholars have noted are news sources, including government officials, bureaucrats, politicians, interest groups, intergovernmental organizations, scholars, media watchdog groups, other news organizations, advertisers and other businesses, audiences, other governments, donor countries, militias, organized crime groups, and others outside the news outlet (Hanitzsch et al., 2010; Hughes et al., 2016; Kim, 2010; Pintak, 2014; Pintak and Ginges, 2008; Relly et al., 2015a, 2015b; Relly and González de Bustamante, 2014; Shoemaker and Reese, 2014; Zhu et al., 1997).

## **Findings**

The interviews were conducted in locations that study participants indicated that they were comfortable in and included newsrooms, production offices, conference rooms, restaurants, and areas outside the Parliament building. All but one interview was face-to-face; one participant sent questionnaire responses by email. Of the study's 30 participants, 28 (93.3%) were male and two (6.7%) were female, which according to other researchers is typical of the region (Kim, 2010; Relly et al., 2015a, 2015b). The study participants were aged 21–50 years, with a median age of 27 (mean = 29.3) years. In total, 80 percent of the journalists interviewed had participated in at least one journalism training session by a donor-based organization. More than half (60%) had received three or more trainings, some lasting as long as 6 months. One reporter had participated in 20 trainings on various aspects of journalism work.

Most of the journalists in our purposive sample had been trained with the BBC (World Service Trust), the Institute for War & Peace Reporting (both British based) or Internews, a US-based organization that has had 'the greatest presence' (Cary, 2012: 5) in media development, or one of their progeny (such as Nai or Pajhwok Afghan News). A few journalists in the study reported to have trained in Egypt, India and Pakistan. The news media training organizations generally provided short courses of a few days to a few

months that combine skill building, technical and otherwise, and Western-style journalistic values such as accuracy and fairness. The London-based Institute for War & Peace Reporting (n.d.), for example, state on a policy page as follows: ‘Our reporting maintains a moderate, balanced and fact-based tone, seeking in particular to break down rather than reinforce grievances across ethnic, national, tribal or other conflict lines’.

Five Afghan journalists (16.7%) worked for global news organizations, with the remainder working for domestic news outlets (83.3%). In total, 16 (53.3%) covered Kabul primarily, 9 (30%) covered the entire country, and 5 (16.7%) covered Kabul and a few other provinces. Among the news outlets, 20 percent (n=6) of the journalists worked for print news outlets, 26.7 percent (n=8) for television news, 30 percent (n=9) for multiple platforms in one outlet, 16.7 percent (n=5) in radio news, and 6.7 percent (n=2) for a wire service. Overall, 23 percent (n=7) of the participants had master’s degrees or were working on one, 56.7 percent (n=17) had bachelor’s degrees, 16.7 percent (n=5) had attended college, and 3.3 percent (n=1) were high school graduates. Some 53.3 percent (n=16) were reporters, while 40 percent (n=12) held reporter posts and other duties (eight were a reporter and editor, two were reporters and producers, one was a reporter and news director, and one was an investigative reporter and investigative editor). The journalists had 1–20 years of experience with a median of 6.5 years (mean=7.03 years).

Through inductive work from responses in the transcripts from the 30, we found that capture was one of the strongest influences on the practice and the field. We found that capture tended to stem from issues related to funding from donor countries, NGO contractors, foreign governments and political groups, and national and local governments. We also found capture in a separate category of groups operating outside of the law that included corrupt government officials, militias and armed government opposition groups, such as the Taliban and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and, finally, the ‘mafia’ and warlords – both of which operate inside and outside of government. The following section outlines the myriad of extra-media influences – factors outside the news organization that led to ‘capture’ of news media in Afghanistan.

### **Extra-media influences and the concept of ‘media capture’**

It is a challenge to segregate forces acting upon journalists in Afghanistan, a country of 33 million citizens riven by ongoing violence. In an effort to ‘de-westernize’ our research approach and for security reasons, our open-ended questionnaire did not address potential ethnic, religious, or tribal issues, specifically. Participants often spoke in general terms rather than specific terms about threats and violence, which our research assistant noted was for personal security reasons.

News media capture stemming from the ecosystem for the practice ranged from lack of rule of law to anti-press violence accompanied by impunity for perpetrators of violence against journalists. Among our purposefully stratified group of participants, it was noted that most of the perpetrators of violence were government employees: usually police, military, and other security forces. A close second were the Taliban, ‘insurgents’, and members of other ‘opposition’ groups. Direct violent contact with politicians was less prevalent; most of the examples of political ‘capture’ were related to threats or dictates by proxy actors on behalf of political actors.

In a report published by the Afghanistan Journalists Center, there were 191 cases of reported threats, intimidation, and violence against journalists from mid-March 2015 to mid-March 2016, nearly twice that of the previous year's incidents of 103 cases reported (IFEX, 2016). The latest figures indicated that the greatest proportion of the attacks (82 cases or 43% of the total) were by government officials, including the Afghan military (IFEX, 2016: 1).

### **Domestic street-level bureaucracy 'capture'**

Reporters repeatedly identified as challenges the violence against reporters and restricted or no access to government bureaucrats in response to daily news events, which often included violence. 'Unfortunately, laws are not enforced in Afghanistan', said a radio news reporter (K11: 10).

### **Government violence as 'capture'**

In addition to swaths of provinces that seem lawless, in cities, study participants noted, the violent behavior of police and other law enforcement officials toward journalists was a form of restriction of journalistic work. 'Because Afghan security forces are not aware of the legal rights of journalists while they work on their stories, they misbehave or even sometimes attack them physically', noted a TV news reporter (K1: 4). A global news agency reporter (K10: 4) stated, 'Government institutions are also a threat. They interrogate you, why you went there, what time did you go there?' A reporter for a political party news outlet noted it is routine for 'police beating and mistreating journalists, when they are preparing reports at an incident site' (K15: 2).

One television news reporter noted the year before the study (the year of the US military mission withdrawal) was the most dangerous for journalists, with the year of the study predicted to be the same. He noted that the year before two journalists had been killed, but the authorities ignored their cases. 'So when we want to work on any investigative journalism, these cases come in front of our eyes and influences our work' (K30: 4).

A radio reporter said that after 8am newspaper published news about children being abused in one of the centers in the provinces, he and his news organization faced many challenges:

We were threatened by government officials, even by a parliament member. They wanted to make a case for us, because their interests were in danger. Therefore, when the next incident happened ... I collected the information, but due to the previous threats, I couldn't write a story. (K19: 5)

### **Unresponsive government bureaucracy as 'capture'**

Study participants noted that simple newsgathering such as obtaining a response from a government official after a major attack or acquiring basic statistics was most often met with silence. The issue of lingering practices in the bureaucracy even with regime change is not uncommon, as was noted in a body of literature after the fall of the Soviet Union

(Freedman and Shafer, 2011). The Afghan bureaucracy most recently is a product of Soviet and Taliban rule, the former of which had a legacy of governmental secrecy. A TV news reporter noted,

I can say that the anti-government groups are much better at giving information than the government, because when we call the anti-government groups for getting information about something that happened, they answer right away, but when we call the government, we have to try 10 times to reach a spokesperson or an official. (K27: 3)

Other reporters noted increased difficulty obtaining government information (K4, K7, K22, K26) following the exit of the Karzai administration. A radio news reporter noted,

It was better with the previous government. We could talk to district governors, and district police chiefs or governors for any information [that] happened in their region, but now most of the districts don't even have government. (K29: 4)

One newspaper reporter, who was working on a 'wasteful expenditure' report about the office of the Special Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs, noted that he had contacted the Minister for an interview and was ignored. The Ministry spokesman also ignored the request. The Ministry directors did not consent. 'They fool the reporter for one week, two weeks, three weeks, till finally the report loses its value. This is not [uncommon for] most of the ministries' (K4: 4).

An Afghan journalist with a global news outlet (K7: 10) noted, 'The dictatorship mentality is still there and if you are investigating somebody's corruption, in fact, you are playing with your life'. He added that Afghan officials still operate with 'a kind of intelligence mentality. They have all been associated with previous government systems'. The reporter noted, 'They still believe that free press should sing only their praises, and should only report in their favor. "Don't criticize me and don't expose my corruption"' (K7: 14).

### **Political-actor 'capture'**

As the funding from outside donors for news outlets has receded, political parties and individual politicians, rather than commercial interests, have filled the void (Cary, 2012: 19). According to a TV news reporter,

One of the biggest problems that exists really is that heads of the media outlets themselves are connected to some political party. They always try to advance their own interests. There are very few media outlets that are for the national interests of everyone. (K30: 5-6)

Reporters noted the challenge of working for organizations that are run by those who are politically connected. A reporter for a medium-sized Dari-language weekly that is privately funded said,

Money is given to them, and the journalist who works with that media outlet has to abide by the policy and objective of that political party or that powerful individual. Thus they go outside the

standards of journalism. ... Unfortunately, most of the media, be it print or television, have connection to political parties. So it is a challenge for the journalists. If they don't work for them, then they lose their job, and can't find another job. (K11: 8)

A reporter with a global news outlet noted,

I know people here, they are paying local channels money to be invited for interviews and this and that. In provinces, some governors even shower journalists with gifts. For example, they give journalists plots [of land], a 24-hour power supply and provide them other financial assistance. Because they understand the role of the media, they know if the media goes against them in the provinces, they can't stay long in their positions. (K7: 8)

### **Violent-actor capture: Taliban, warlords, 'insurgents', and 'mafia'**

Data focused on state and non-state actors perpetrating violence against journalists in Afghanistan vary depending on the report. The Afghan Journalists Center reported that the Taliban was responsible for 52 of the 191 threat and violence incidents (27%) against journalists in the country (IFEX, 2016: 1). Armed people accounted for 34 incidents (17.8%), including the attack against the seven Tolo TV journalists that appeared to focus on journalists supporting 'western values' (IFEX, 2016: 1).

In some accounts, the Taliban in Afghanistan has been documented as the largest group threat to journalists. According to the US-funded Nai Institute, which the Taliban has accused of being 'the center of the American cultural invasion', there were 105 attacks on the news media between March 2014 and March 2015, mostly by Taliban but also by warlords and local authorities (Raghavan, 2015: para 1). The Taliban have been documented as running their own outreach to news media operations, similar to groups outside of the law in other parts of the world, such as narcotraffickers in Mexico (Relly and González de Bustamante, 2014), and meting out 'threatening phone calls and letters to journalists who have not portrayed the Taliban in ways they deem favorable' (Cary, 2012: 17).

'Threats, killings and beating by Taliban is routine', said a radio news reporter (K11: 9). 'If they get their hands on [journalists], they would be killed'. A TV news journalist concurs, 'The biggest challenge for the journalists, if I mention one of them, is Taliban' (K12: 3).

The Taliban reportedly follow whether or not reporters cover their attacks, whether they are writing favorably about the government, and whether the Afghan government or the former North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-run, United Nations (UN)-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) defeated Taliban forces, according to Cary (2012). That author noted, 'Insurgent media activities include posting on various insurgency websites, communications to the press criticizing the government and foreign military, "night letters" threatening civilians and taking credit for certain military actions. They rely heavily on spokesmen to relay their messages' (Cary, 2012: 17-18).

It has been reported that 'the specter of the Taliban playing a significant role in Afghanistan's future seems more and more real' (Cary, 2012: 42). Also involved are the Taliban's brother organization, the Haqqani Network, a guerilla group believed to be led

by ailing former anti-Soviet commander Mawlawi Jalaluddin Haqqani, noted for his Pakistani ties (Council on Foreign Relations, 2011: 1).

One TV news reporter (K30: 3) noted that a major challenge journalists face is ‘anti-government groups, that in last 14 years have beheaded a number of journalists’. A global agency reporter noted that warlords and ‘powerful people’ are another threat in the provinces, in particular, and that journalists in those regions ‘live in constant danger ... You can’t do any reporting without their permission’. He later added that after he reported ‘insurgents were raping someone ...’, he was threatened by phone. ‘I left that region and went somewhere for a month ... I returned when the situation cooled down to some extent’ (K10: 4, 13). A radio news reporter echoed his impressions. ‘These problems are due to insecurity or some powerful persons. For example, in a remote area there is an illegal court and someone is being stoned, we can’t report it’ (K17: 9).

The impact of violence on preparing news reports is constant, said one TV news reporter:

If we want to report on the abuse of someone by a powerful figure, be it a reporter or a civilian, we would be nervous, ... We can clearly say that if a reporter wants to prepare a report from a province, a village, a district, he/she faces hundreds of threats ... We can [say] it is a main problem for journalists during collecting and preparing reports. (K12: 4–6)

### Foreign-donor ‘capture’

Foreign-donor funding rarely is unlimited and financial backing from outside of an organization rarely comes without expectations. US-government grants for news media development are fading in the country and some Afghans who were drawn to the occupation of journalist in the early boom days reported in their interviews that they are leaving the field for other jobs. A reporter in the study said,

It’s true that Afghanistan’s local media faces financial problems, because previously PRT’s [Provincial Reconstruction Teams] and other foreign agencies supported media to a large extent and they were often paying hefty amounts to Afghan media. ... Previously there were some talented journalists, who worked with media companies and were highly paid in thousands of dollars, but nowadays some of them have stopped working with media due to payment decrease. So this condition certainly affects the situation of journalists. (K10: 8)

One daily newspaper reporter (K3: 5) noted, ‘As I am aware, 2014 broke the backs of most of the media outlets’. Another radio reporter (K17: 2) said of news outlets, ‘As long as they were funded, they were great. After their funding stopped, many collapsed’.

A reporter with a large Dari-language television news channel (K2: 5) said that he produced and hosted a USAID project called *Kabul Debate* that stopped running when the funding ended. Another program, *Veil*, intended to expose violence against women, also is gone (K2: 5).

In the year that the US military mission ended in Afghanistan and US money for media development was waning, journalists in the study reported that some colleagues, who normally made between US\$200 and US\$700 a month, had not been paid for their

work for up to 8 months (K1: 4; K11: 7; Raghavan, 2015: 9). As was recommended by outside organizations, many projects now funded by donors are contract-based, for special coverage such as elections. When the project ends, the funding ends.

Some critics of media assistance programs note that the two lines of work, training journalists in democratic journalistic ethics and values and countering Taliban messaging and boosting coverage of development progress, was a 'two-edged sword' (Cary, 2012; Fraenkel et al., 2010). For example, a Department of Defense report noted that 'the Pentagon had lost track and control over its information operations, and the lack of supervision had resulted in poor coordination and a number of scandals that directly affected independent media' (Cary, 2012: 33).

Only one of the 30 reporters interviewed for this study had engaged in reporting the development agenda for donor governments. His work included traveling to all of the country's provinces and preparing special 15-minute segments on infrastructure and other development accomplishments while gathering information from the communities about their 'needs, to bring it to the attention of the government and the international community'. The radio reporter (K11: 4) noted,

It was not promotional in a sense ... The production was based on facts, so the people could learn about the developments that have happened in their areas, provinces. It also shared the culture and achievements of one province with others. ... It helped people of other provinces to learn about and be inspired for development in their own areas. ... The journalists convey it to the international community and the world, so the world becomes aware of the situation in Afghanistan and in turn that contributes to attracting aid to the country.

Others agreed that to an extent reporting for donor-backed news outlets or those being run by owners with ties to neighboring countries influenced coverage (K1, K2). 'The news and reports should be in line with those policies. Otherwise they won't get published', said a reporter with a large, privately run Dari-language television news station (K1: 4). Another reporter from a large Dari-language television news program said,

I am sure that if our political situation worsens with Iran, three or four of our media outlets will be paralyzed, and hundreds of people are working there. If we get into trouble with the USA, seven or eight media outlets will fail. Directly or indirectly they are linked to the USA. The same way, Pakistan has a lot of [leverage]. (K2: 6)

## Discussion and conclusion

Our research utilized an inductive approach to explore influences of a decade and a half of Western-originated news media development in Afghanistan at a time when funding was receding and the year after the US military mission ended in the country. We utilize the case of Afghanistan because it is a country with a history of foreign interventions, similar to some other nations in recent times, and because the nation literally rebuilt its news media after the reported fall of the Taliban. We suggest that this study contributes to the scholarship focused upon the post-Soviet state and satellite countries that examines the trajectory and capture of news media (Bajomi-Lázár, 2014; Mungiu-Pippidi,

2008; Sparks, 2008). That research largely focused on country environments that ultimately were overall less violent than nations receiving substantial foreign interventions in recent times and still are amid serious conflict. The violence perpetrated upon the news media by various sectors of the government operating outside of the law as well as other groups, in countries such as Afghanistan, clearly present newly complicated forms of capture with interrelated layers of ‘institutional arrangements’, ‘global connections’, and ‘deliberative spaces’ (Reese, 2016: 7). Our major contribution to the literature is adding this conceptual category of violent actors to the ‘media capture’ literature.

This work contributes to previous research that reported news media capture indicators, such as concentrated and opaque media outlet ownership models, political elite associations with news media, and secret service infiltration of news organizations (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008: 91) in environments that had received news media development assistance. In our study, we interrogate the type of media development that appeared to transpire, according to study participants, and the influence that it had from the Afghan perspective. We then discuss domestic-bureaucratic ‘capture’, including unresponsive government bureaucracy ‘capture’ and government violence ‘capture’, political-actor ‘capture’, violent-actor ‘capture’, and foreign-donor ‘capture’, which appeared to emerge from the study’s fieldwork. We then discuss the potential for utilizing this framework in other contexts.

The Afghan case is an important one, as is Iraq, because the United States alone spent more than a half a billion dollars on news media development during the two occupations (Cary, 2012; Ricchiardi, 2011). We note that this is not the first period that this level of spending occurred. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, US\$350 million was spent on the development of independent news media (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008: 95). Furthermore, during the decade that led up to the revolution in Georgia, more than US\$154 million was spent by the United States on democracy assistance (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2008: 95).

We first address the types of news media development that emerged in this study. We found that, overall, reporters appeared to have been exposed to news media development aimed at advancing journalistic autonomy, and they appeared focused on accuracy, fairness, and issue-oriented coverage, as noted in the nonprofit literature by Cary (2012). At the same time, most of the journalists in the study indicated the environment in the country had become nearly too harsh for performing the most basic reporting and certainly for investigative journalism, which some of them had received training in. Although Sparks (2008) noted the weakness with scholarship that theorizes ‘social continuity in societies in transition, rather than assuming that the process was essentially one of democratization’, the former seems more apt in the Afghan case (p. 47). Although Afghanistan has managed to hold elections over the years since the Taliban fell in the capital, some parliamentary and provincial council elections have had irregularities or been fraudulent (Freedom House, 2016); the indicators for democracy are weak in the country. Challenges to freedom of expression for the news media are conditions that create an environment that is prime for violent-actor ‘capture’. The fieldwork for this study demonstrates external actors from many corrupt and unpredictable forces, such as unprofessional law enforcement officers and others within the political system or government, perpetrate acts (or send proxies to carry out the acts) of violence upon journalists who conduct independent reporting.

We note that it likely is not a coincidence that news media training and assistance receded as Western-based troops left both Afghanistan and Iraq. Although Iraq received US and other Western country media development funding for nearly a decade and Afghanistan for a decade and a half, which is a remarkable amount of time, it would be worth studying these cases and others for potential intentions of intelligence gathering to protect outside interests occupying the country as well as stated interests by outside governments to advance pluralistic news media.

Clearly, there were some initiatives by foreign governments to ‘promote a country’s foreign policy interests’, as Kumar (2006) suggested is the case with news media development as public diplomacy. Democracy promotion was advanced or legitimized in news media training in Afghanistan, which includes a worldview about gender equity, human rights, government accountability and transparency, and other democratic norms that were not native, in recent years, to Afghanistan.

The ‘media development’ orientation toward ‘communication for development’ was discussed by only one study participant in his account of reports more or less showcasing development achievements. We note, however, that inherent in the somewhat imported fair and balanced reporting ideals, foreign allied governments and the ruling party in Afghanistan would ensure that the Taliban did not receive all of the press, although the group has delegated representatives to plant messages, responded quickly to reporters’ questions, and threatened and carried out violent acts against journalists reporting beyond their messaging. We suggest, as well, given that the Department of Defense was involved, in part, with a form of ‘media development’ (Cary, 2012), that these two disparate lines of work, ‘psychological operations’ and straight journalism training, are on face value, peculiar companion projects. We note that this type of coupling – news media training and propaganda operations – occurred in Iraq, as well, and that any links between the two cast a shadow on what would be considered ‘legitimate’ journalism training (Relly et al., 2015a, 2015b).

We now turn to expanding the concept of news ‘media capture’. This work expands upon literature focused on media control in autocratic and authoritarian environments as well as the economic and technological ‘media capture’ literature. Broadly, we found domestic unresponsive bureaucratic and violent government capture, political-actor capture, violent-actor capture, and foreign-donor capture including a strand of cultural capture, such as ethnic and some potentially pseudo-religious concerns that need further exploration before development into a ‘capture’ category. The latter cultural challenges, although not identified as ‘capture’ elsewhere in the scholarly literature, as far as we know, can be present in transitional societies with pronounced ethnic divides, conflict zones, and countries with weak rule of law or histories of violence.

Political party and political corruption capture, which we refer to as ‘political-actor capture’, also are familiar constraints in other contexts and when juxtaposed upon news media environments in developing economies and countries undergoing political transition and development, paradoxes emerge, as we found in this study. Mungiu-Pippidi (2008) noted that media corruption ‘is an underrated and understudied phenomenon’ (p. 97). Although our study focuses on reporters and not news organization owners or other gatekeepers, such as editors or producers, we recognize that political parallelism and clientelism would be important areas for later research.

Besley and Prat (2006) suggested that media pluralism offers somewhat of a shield against government capture and independent ownership mitigates capture. Critics have suggested that independent news media development in Afghanistan ‘created unreasonable expectations about commercial viability’ (Cary, 2012: 6), and our study found that political parties, warlords, and neighboring government-backed operations had filled the void. It is important to note that commercially secure news operations are not necessarily a panacea even in longtime democracies with issues of monopoly or ownership concentration, advertising pressures, and corporate control rather than unfettered journalism in the public interest (Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney and Nichols, 2010; Peruško and Popović, 2008). Thus, commercial media could produce its own form of capture. In Afghanistan, the family-owned Moby Group, a ‘media empire’, which produces Tolo News (since late 2010) and numerous entertainment products, makes US\$20 million in annual revenue with growth of up to 70 percent a year, according to the family, which more than a decade ago invested millions in the business along with a USAID investment (Cary, 2012: 12). Although commercial ‘capture’ did not emerge as an influence in the fieldwork in Afghanistan, a country with the latest reported gross domestic product (GDP) per capita at US\$668 (UN Development Program, 2014), it would be an important area of study in the future.

In 2012, the Center for International Media Assistance reported that the ‘new, vibrant, and expanding Afghan media face significant risks’, including news media outlet risks when donor support ceases, government restrictions, violence, and the Taliban resuming power and tamping down news media operations (Cary, 2012: 7). Although our research did not aim to validate this and other nongovernmental work (Fraenkel et al., 2010), we found some of these same issues through our fieldwork.

Furthermore, the findings of ‘violent-actor capture’ of the informal institutions (not formally sanctioned) operating buoyantly outside of the law (the Taliban, warlords, ‘insurgents’, ‘mafia’, and corrupt government officials) may receive other names in other regions but reflect similar behavior of organized crime groups in Latin America and militias in Iraq and other groups around the world operating outside of the formal institutions inside the law (Relly et al., 2015a, 2015b; Relly and González de Bustamante, 2014). The confluence of types of capture identified by numerous of Afghan journalists is encapsulated by one account from a journalist who also described being held by Taliban and Afghan government forces, separately, in one day: ‘I, myself, have been kidnapped and taken by the Taliban. ... I have been injured, the government has imprisoned me, and foreign forces have imprisoned me. All of this has happened’ (K7: 7).

Donor and foreign government capture also have certain hallmarks, specifically the necessity of following certain ideologies (be it the US government, Iranian investors, Pakistani influences, or European nations). As the participants noted, there is the reality of external funds ceasing to flow and the risk of disillusionment when support (of many types) ends.

As other scholars have found, ideology or even role perceptions about journalistic work in conflict situations may run counter to what journalists can do on the ground (Allan and Zelizer, 2004; Kim and Hama-Saeed, 2008; Relly and González de Bustamante, 2014). For example, as we found definitively among our study

participants, many reporters spoke about how freedom of expression and a vibrant news media was one of the great achievements of the Karzai administration, which was the governing body during most of the years after the Taliban fell in Kabul. This same language is found in NGO reports and government documents (Bajraktari and Parajon, 2008; Fraenkel et al., 2010), yet many of the circumstances and forms of capture do not engender an enabling environment for autonomous journalistic reporting and investigations, a liberal democratic model concept, which are among the counter-concepts to 'capture'.

This study has limitations. Qualitative work does not allow the findings to be generalized. Furthermore, in the Afghan case, the research reflects journalists based in the capital, although nearly half worked throughout the country. The conditions and context in the capital are distinct and at a cross-section in time. The hierarchy of those in power in the capital is different from areas in the provinces as are the types of ruling institutions, whether formal or informal, as study participants pointed out.

We suggest that future research would look more closely at both news media development and the paradox of news media 'capture' in environments with heavy foreign intervention, where imported journalism values are layered upon multiple conflicts and previous and continued institutional arrangements that are bound to manifest in hybrid approaches. We suggest a typology could further refine this work with six distinct forms of capture (economic, political, cultural, legal, bureaucratic, and societal) along with counter-concepts, which could be further developed by country.

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### Note

1. The detailed methodology for the aggregated figure for Freedom of the Press is published each year by Freedom House – <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press-2016-methodology> and Reporters without Borders – <https://rsf.org/en/detailed-methodology>.

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### Author biographies

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Margaret Zanger (MSL 1989, Yale Law School; MA 1985, The University of Arizona) is a professor of Practice at The University of Arizona School of Journalism and an Affiliated Faculty Member of the university's Center for Middle Eastern Studies and Center for Border & Global Journalism. Her research focuses on international journalism and the Middle East in particular, with an emphasis on Iraq, the Kurds, and crises reporting. Before coming to The University of Arizona, she was Iraq's country director of the Institute for War & Peace Reporting, a London-based media development organization. Prior to conducting this research, she served as director of a partnership project with Nangarhar University in Jalalabad, Afghanistan, to assist in developing a new journalism department.