



“Minding the Gap”: Reflections on Media Practice & Theory

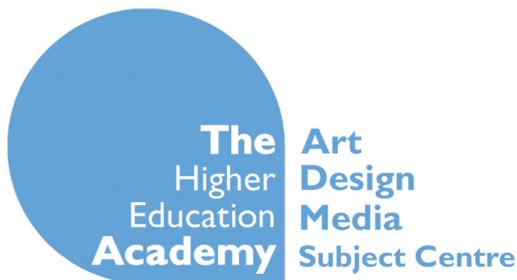
*Postgraduate & Early Career Researchers Training Day
Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, University of Oxford
Saturday 12th May 2007*

Convenors: Paddy Coulter (Reuters Institute) & Cathy Baldwin (ISCA)

Supported by:

*MECCSA Postgraduate Network (ADM-HEA),
Reuters Institute & ISCA, University of Oxford &
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Grounds for Development: Media Development Practice and Theory in Post-Conflict Afghanistan

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As I am opening the discussion on ‘perspectives from the developing world’, I thought I would begin by observing that there is a growing awareness and criticism that media theory is primarily developed from US and UK-based contexts. The applicability of theory with such a narrow empirical base in the wider world is often in question. At the moment, media practitioners in the developing world often draw their intellectual base from US/UK-based theory. Further, in situations of post-conflict reconstruction, as has been the case in Kosovo, Serbia, and Afghanistan, the development of media *systems* in developing countries is based on models from the Western world. So today I’d like to explore areas of gap - or phrased more positively, under explored potential – that could bridge Western-centric media theory/practice, and theory/practice in what I might call the larger world.

I will be basing my paper around two admittedly large questions in order to generate some discussion on media in developing contexts. First, is there a need for a media development theory? While there are relevant and useful historical accounts of the media’s growth in industrialized contexts, theories of media transition in response to new technologies and media innovations, anthropological accounts of media use and production in development contexts, sociological accounts of media’s links with modernity, and practitioner literature on development communications and Information Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D), there is a dearth of theory on media development in developing countries. So is there a need to address this through a concerted body of intellectual theory particularized to media development contexts? Second, as a media development practitioner, I have observed that we often apply western-centric media theory to development contexts. The assumption is generally that industrialized countries and their presumably more advanced media systems can contribute theoretically to the progress of developing nations. I would like to flip that situation around for a moment. What can the development context contribute to Western-based theory?¹

¹ I leave the similarly relevant question of what non-Western media theory could contribute to the progress of industrialized nations to another time, when my language skills and discussions with non-Western media academics could provide some basis for an answer to the question.

My work as a media practitioner has been focused around the aid and reconstruction processes of Afghanistan from 2002 until now. I have worked in and around Afghanistan since the summer of 2001 and observed the pre- and post-Taliban media environments, which I think represent one of the most extreme examples of media change we've seen in recent history. What I'll do in this talk is use Afghanistan's media history as a case in point to illustrate some arguments in response to the questions above. But before I do that, let me present you with a rather vague definition. When I talk about a media development context, I mean heuristically a media-poor rather than media-rich, socio-politically unstable, infrastructure-poor, and economically depressed nation state – or in other words, a sufficiently 'different' environment from those generally assumed by the UK/US-based theories predominant in media studies to warrant the questions I have been raising.

Afghanistan is one such 'different' environment, and has been the site of protracted investments in reconstruction. Media reconstruction has been a significant and high profile element in the aid process, but what is often overlooked is that this media reconstruction period has been occurring in a very concentrated period of time (about five years) following a 100-year history of media's growth in the country. In fact, there were two prior periods of media boom when the pace of and intent behind media change would characterize it as media development rather than media evolution in Afghanistan.

The first boom occurred from 1919 to 1929, during Amanullah Shah's reign. Amanullah Shah was a progressive ruler keen on the industrialization and westernization of his nation. In ten years of reign Amanullah introduced many reforms in women's rights and universal education, health care, human rights and national media. His wife, Queen Soraya, launched a women's magazine in 1922. By 1923, Afghanistan had 23 newspapers. Afghanistan's first radio, *Radio Kabul*, was launched in 1928, before conservative elements in Afghanistan, angered by what they saw to be Amanullah's corrupting influence (Amanullah had decreed that women could go unveiled), rose up and forced him into exile in 1929.

The second period of media development was from 1979 to 1989, during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In 1979, the Soviet Union decided to invade and take over control of Afghanistan, and worked on developing a media regime dedicated to promoting Soviet ideology. The Soviets set up and trained government-controlled regional TV and radio broadcasting stations across the country,

and introduced inclusive media broadcasting programs with cultural programming from all the disparate ethno-linguistic groups across the country in an attempt to foster unity. But their Communist reforms were not popular, and opposition to Soviet rule grew and strengthened with US and other external support. Afghan Mujahideen (Muslim guerilla fighters) mounted a stubborn campaign against the Communist government in 1985, finally forcing the Soviets to withdraw in 1989, leaving an all-Afghan government in control of the country.

Very briefly, much of Afghanistan's media infrastructure was devastated in the civil war that followed: The Mujahideen wrested control of the all-Afghan government left behind after the Soviet withdrawal, then engaged in infighting, then fought the Taliban movement. The decade-long civil war devastated much of the infrastructure in Kabul as well as in other cities. The Taliban gained control of approximately 90% of Afghanistan and implemented a ban on most media, destroyed printing presses and televisions as well as cassettes and photographs, and operated a very ascetic radio station called the *Voice of Sharia* out of *Radio Afghanistan* (formerly *Radio Kabul*) facilities. The US-led military campaign against the Taliban in 2001 also destroyed media infrastructure, bombing the *Voice of Sharia* off the air on the second day of the war.

The 2002-2006 period of international aid and reconstruction in Afghanistan has brought about the third boom in the country's media development. This third process of change has been rapid and extraordinary in scope: the number of radio stations in the country have jumped from two to nearly 50, TV stations from none to five, and internet cafes have proliferated in the major urban centres.

I have two observations: first, the current media development phase is nested in a longer history, but has proceeded largely in ignorance of that. The more 'revolutionary' and extrinsic as opposed to 'evolutionary' and intrinsic nature of the changes in the country present both an intellectual argument as well as an ethical imperative for developing a specific theory to address both the best practices and the implications of media development. The pace, scale, and implications of media change are certainly different from what would typically happen in industrialized countries. Second, all three periods of growth in Afghanistan's media coincided with modernization and rapid social reforms. Media development was a means to an end rather than an end in itself – control of the media was often a priority for new political regimes as a means of consolidating control, but also for pressing forward with sociopolitical transition. Media development, then, may well be

fundamentally interlinked with social flux, raising questions on the best methods and models for understanding a changing media system embedded in a transitional society. Existing US/UK-based media theory offers little support for such contexts.

Now let's turn the question on its head, and instead of asking whether existing theory fits media development, let's move to my second major question and look at what media development could bring to existing theory. One area in which development contexts could be useful is in acting as a space for testing the 'fit' of existing theory. The media effects tradition works, at its core, to determine whether exposure to violence in the media tends to cause media consumers (especially children) to become more aggressive or violent. It is a central concern in media studies more generally, but in development in particular, where the media are often used for (pro-social) positive effects, to promote peace and other development goals. The media effects tradition already has a vast body of critique so my aim is not to reproduce or review that literature so much as to demonstrate how blind spots and areas of dissonance in effects theory can be revealed by particularities of the development context in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's current state as a post-conflict nation is occasionally described as existing in a nether space between peace and war – neither stable nor in armed conflict. With the shaky peace maintained under President Hamid Karzai's government, one of the very real anxieties I have often encountered regarding media in Afghanistan is that not so much a 'media panic'² over the corruption of youth and morality as a deep fear of media-incited destabilization, violence, and societal breakdown. I found that media producers self-censored and many consumers applauded the wisdom of such censorship despite having themselves suffered (and criticized) years of media censorship and control. Dangerous topics in the media were approached using indirect, careful wording or by conspicuous omission. War criminals – many of whom have gained political power in the post-Taliban state – are often not named, partially through self-preservation on the part of the journalist, but also due to fear of destabilizing the fragile ceasefire. In effect, in crisis states, there can be stronger and more willing collusion between media institutions, producers, and the public in avoiding negative media outcomes than might generally be suggested in the rather more antagonistic media/society framings of Western-based effects theory. The 'media' cannot be

² Media panics can be defined by the following phenomenon: 'the introduction of a new mass medium causes strong public reactions whose repetitiveness is as predictable as the fervour with which they are brought forward. Adult experts...define the new mass medium as a social, psychological, or moral threat to the young...and appoint themselves as public troubleshooters' (Drotner 1992: 43).

segregated from the audience or society in a theory of effects, as they are bound by the rules of the same system.

The media effects model also does not adequately account for non-individualistic societies. Ahmadi and Ahmadi (1998) suggest that one of Islam's cultural influences is its exclusion of the concept of individuality. In Afghanistan, action is seen and judged as a reflection on a clan rather than on the self, and Islam and tradition constrain the behaviour of all members of a family (Lindisfarne-Tapper 1991). The effects model can theorize the influence of a single media instance on a single individual's behaviour or beliefs, but I would argue breaks down if applied to communities where social bonds supersede individual choice. There may be ways of tweaking the model (suggesting, say, the media could affect behaviour upon influencing at least a majority or "tipping point" number of members in a social group) but I would imagine that such arguments or model additions would need to account for a great deal of complexity. Reflected back on Western contexts, the breakdown of the effects model in Afghanistan might suggest that the model's frame of reference is too small – that the unit of inquiry should be the society, not the individual. Indeed, while the empirical basis for the effects model is at the individual level, the assumed sphere of its influence is usually societal: more violent media-influenced individuals are aggregated to assume a more violent society, and media panics reflect fears of societal, not individual, degeneration or breakdown. From a pro-social development perspective, the idea of using mass media is to influence the whole, not a few. Media-influenced changes have to be societal/structural to have lasting impact, thus the effects model's limitation to change at the individual level is unhelpful.

To wrap up the discussion, I have rather unhelpfully raised questions that need proper answers, and all I can offer are my suggestions on what some elements of their answers might address. Yes, I do think we need a particularized theory to deal with media development, because a solid understanding of the social frame is critical to understanding media change processes. US/UK-based theory does not insist on the importance of history, and assumes a stability and continuity that is sometimes lacking in the larger world. As scholars, there is an ethical imperative to address this gap in intellectual knowledge due to the dangers of uncritically applying US/UK-based theory in development contexts. As practitioners, we must listen and be prepared to rethink our assumptions on media models of 'best fit' in other countries until a stronger body of knowledge on media development can inform our work. Further, I believe that the media development context can

certainly inform the existing body of media theory. One valuable contribution would be in pinpointing areas where theory can go wrong and suggesting ways of improving existing media paradigms such as the media effects tradition. Finally, I think that those of us who are academic-practitioners have a certain obligation, given that our feet are in both camps, to escalate our struggles in conceptualizing and harmonizing what we learn in the different worlds we inhabit to larger arenas, helping others in ‘minding the gap’ we so often stumble across.

P.S.: I've been influenced by a number of thinkers in putting together the ideas in this presentation, including those listed below. I've been especially influenced by my late supervisor, Roger Silverstone, towards thinking about what it means and why it matters.

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