Media, War & Conflict

Intrastate conflict and transformation of the media system: The case of Afghanistan

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Abstract
This study aims to extend the media system framework to analyse the transformation process of media systems within fragile states that suffer from intrastate conflict. This theoretical goal is achieved through the scrutinization of the transformation of the Afghan media system throughout the Taliban takeover. Through conducting 21 semi-structured interviews with Afghan journalists, the authors examined the Afghan media system before, during and after the intrastate conflict escalation in 2021. The results showed that the media system in Afghanistan was highly fragmented before the Taliban took over. Consequently, the Taliban capitalized on this fragmented structure by optimizing an effective digital propaganda campaign that facilitated their victory in 2021. As a result of this armed victory, the Taliban started their campaign to control the communication sphere, forming an authoritarian proto-state media system. The results help to enhance comparative media systems analysis and to refine dynamic and conflict-related aspects.

Keywords
Afghanistan, conflict, fragile states, media systems, Taliban

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Introduction

Scholars have long tried to study the structure of the media and its relationship to the political system across different countries. One of the relevant milestones in this field was Hallin and Mancini's (2004) book *Comparing Media Systems*, in which they compared the media systems of 18 countries in Europe and the US. Despite the rich contribution of this study in developing a theoretical framework for analysing and comparing media structures, it had limitations, which emphasizes the need for more conceptual and theoretical development (Hallin and Mancini, 2012, 2017). One of the central limitations is the inability of the framework to analyse the dynamic interaction between media systems and intrastate conflict. The whole typology was developed within Western democratic contexts at a certain moment in which social conflicts are restricted within peaceful political limits. Thus, it falls short in being applied to the same Western countries in other times when they suffer from higher political conflict and polarization, or non-democratic or transitional countries (Voltmer, 2012; Zhao, 2012), where intrastate conflict can manifest itself in an armed form. Accordingly, scholars worked on developing the conceptual framework of the study and applying it to non-democratic countries with armed intrastate conflicts (Al-Shami, 2021; Badran, 2021; Wollenberg and Richter, 2020).

Another related limitation in Hallin and Mancini's framework is their confinement to countries with a potent state that manages to monopolize the use of force (Winkler and El Damanhoury, 2022). This confinement impedes applying their framework to fragile states wherein the state institutions are incapable of enforcing their legal sovereignty over the whole of the country (Fiedler and Wollenberg, 2023; Hamidi, 2015; Stremlau, 2013). Against this backdrop, our study aims to analyse the media system transformation in Afghanistan, a fragile state that has been suffering from intrastate conflicts for decades.

Afghanistan is an appropriate case study for this theoretical contribution since for years[1] it has been a fragile state that suffers from a long ongoing armed intrastate conflict leading to various metamorphoses in its media system (Hamidi, 2015; Osman, 2020; Page and Siddiqi, 2012), especially after the latest escalation in 2021, which ended in the Taliban taking over power. Our analysis is conducted through 21 qualitative semi-structured interviews with journalists from different Afghan media outlets. Based on the results, the article analyses how, on the one hand, the media system affected the conflict and, on the other hand, the political outcomes of the conflict transformed the media system. We assume that these influences have changed over time. Therefore, instead of taking a snapshot of the media system at one moment, we examine the system in three phases (before, during and after the conflict). The choice of the case of Afghanistan was based on the special characteristics of its media system that do not fit into the typology of Hallin and Mancini (2017), which in turn warrants and opens up the opportunity for theoretical rethinking and extension of the media system framework to enable it to incorporate various non-Western countries with their dissimilarities. Thus, this study takes an explorative bottom-up approach in which zooming in on the case of Afghanistan is used as a starting point to contribute to developing the media system analytical framework. We apply different concepts t were used to describe the media system in countries similar to Afghanistan, such as media in a fragile state, fragmented media system and proto-state media system.

The article is structured as follows: first, we present the contextual background of the media environment and the conflict in Afghanistan. Secondly, the literature on the reciprocal relationship between intrastate conflict and the media is reviewed. Accordingly, we zoom in on the different epistemic approaches to expand the media system framework to fragile states. Afterwards, the research questions and chosen methodology to answer them are emphasized. The results are presented in the form of three phases of the media system in Afghanistan: before, during and after the conflict escalation in 2021. Finally, in the discussion, we explain how the Afghan media system before 2021 affected the conflict and how the consequence of the conflict transformed the media structure of the country.

Case study: Afghanistan

After 2001, the US tried to install a republican government to replace the Taliban in Afghanistan. However, this plan failed as the new government failed to consolidate its power, and the Taliban returned to regain control of many parts until they took over Kabul in August 2021 (Bacon and Byman, 2021; Sakhi, 2022). One of the significant factors that facilitated the fall of the republican government was its failure to unite the fractured, divided ethnic groups of the country (Sakhi, 2022). In a fragmented social structure like Afghanistan, the conservative ethnic and religious groups, especially in rural areas, enjoyed a high level of political and legal autonomy, which in turn prevented the republican government from broadening its authority outside the big urban cities (Page and Siddiqi, 2012; Sakhi, 2022). Adding to that the fact that these groups had an historical scepticism towards Western powers (Page and Siddiqi, 2012), the Taliban utilized their 'anti-foreigner and anti-government' sentiment to regain its social popularity among these ethnic groups, especially the Pashtuns who felt excluded from the republican government (Bacon and Byman, 2021; Sakhi, 2022: 387). Due to corruption and failures, many segments gradually lost their trust in the government, facilitating its collapse in August 2021.

Parallel to these social and political developments, the Afghan media system experienced important transformations. After 2001, the US and the government tried to liberalize and commercialize the media (Deane, 2013; Hamidi, 2015). Accordingly, new liberal laws were induced to guarantee the right to open new outlets, which led to a boost in the number of private commercial media, especially on TV (Cary, 2012; Page and Siddiqi, 2012). These laws entailed some ambivalent sections concerning public broadcasting, licensing and defamation that opened the door for state intervention (Salih, 2023). Also, this boost in private outlets had its shortcomings. The new laws enabled politicians and warlords to establish their own media outlets and control some media institutions (Page and Siddiqi, 2012; Relly and Zanger, 2017; Salih, 2023). In addition, the state media was ineffective and could not compete with the big private outlets, leading to the de-institutionalization of the media system and the lack of a collective national identity (Deane, 2013). Moreover, the lack of a strong state and institutional regulation on the media advanced the instrumentalization of the media outlets by the fighting groups and politicians, which had repercussions on the professionalization of journalism (Hamidi, 2015; Relly and Zanger, 2017). As a result of all these factors, the Afghan media system was transformed into a fragmented one.

Meanwhile, the Taliban had their own media outlets, especially on the internet, dominating the areas under its rule (Adolphsen et al., 2010; Page and Siddiqi, 2012). These outlets played a significant role in spreading Taliban propaganda, especially during the violent escalation in 2021 (Bahar, 2020; Buoncompagni, 2021). Most of this propaganda was on the internet despite the low level of internet penetration in Afghanistan. According to a report by We Are Social and Hootsuite (2021), by 2021, out of a population of 39.38 million, there were only 8.64 million internet users and 4.4 million social media users in Afghanistan. The internet penetration in Afghanistan stood at 22.0 percent in January 2021. After the Taliban took over, they started a new era of renewed authoritarian proto-state governance with the aim of establishing full control over the media (Karimi, 2023). Against this background, our study aims to answer the following research questions:

RQ1.   *How did the media system affect the armed and political intrastate conflict in Afghanistan?*

RQ2.   *How did the consequences of the armed and political intrastate conflict transform the media system?*

Intrastate conflicts and media systems

There have been many attempts to theorize the relationship between media and armed conflicts in general. Most of the literature in that regard focuses on the role of the media in violent conflicts (Gilboa, 2009; Hussain, 2017; Schoemaker and Stremlau, 2014) and the different avenues through which the media can foster conflict resolution and peace (Lynch and McGoldrick, 2005). Another related rising line of research highlights the role of digital media in violent conflicts and how new communication technologies affect and alter the nature of wars (Wolfsfeld, 2018; Zeitzoff, 2017).

Despite the rich contribution of that literature, it suffers from being one-sided as it confines its analysis to how media affects and alters the nature and results of armed conflicts. Nevertheless, it does not cover how armed conflicts influence and transform the media system. Thus, much less effort has been made to discern the different patterns whereby armed conflicts reshape constellations within different media systems (Peri, 2012; Richter and Kozman, 2021; Vultee, 2009). Hence, there is a need to deal with conflict as a transformative force that changes the political system and, consequently, the media system. In that regard, literature about intrastate conflicts sheds light on the process whereby these conflicts transform societies by changing their economic, political and social power constellation (Eibl et al., 2021; Sorensen, 2003). These social, political and economic changes result in transformations in the media system as well.

Concerning this process of media systems' transformation, Hallin and Mancini (2017: 162) postulated that many of the Western media systems had converged toward the liberal model. Nonetheless, empirical analysis, particularly about non-Western states, showed the limitations of such hypotheses (Hallin and Mancini, 2012). Some transitional countries moved into a hybrid form between liberal and authoritarian models (Voltmer, 2008), while others even experienced an opposite transformation process toward a more

authoritarian media system (Hafez, 2015; Peri, 2012). Such cases show that transformation is not unidirectional towards the liberal democratic model, which in turn highlights the need 'to move on to more sophisticated hypotheses about media system change' (Hallin and Mancini, 2017: 164).

In countries affected by intrastate conflict,[2] this process of media system transformation is highly dependent on the results of that conflict. By looking at different studies that tracked this process of media systems change in countries affected by intrastate conflict (for example, Al-Shami, 2021; Deane, 2013; Wollenberg, 2019), certain patterns of the conflict effects on the media system can be noticed. These patterns are not deterministic and vary from one country to another.

The first pattern is fragmentation and polarization. Whereas democratic countries can also suffer from non-violent polarization in society (Brüggemann and Meyer, 2023), when such polarization takes an armed form in a non-democratic context, its scale and repercussions increase significantly. In fragile war-torn countries, political and armed conflict dominates society and transforms the media system into a fragmented one where each social or armed group has its own media apparatus and sometimes even its separated affiliated audiences (Badran, 2021; Hamidi, 2015).

Another scenario is the decline in media freedom, especially as a result of conflicts, and especially intrastate ones (Vultee, 2009). In addition, one of the most relevant patterns is the decline in the legal and political authority of the state and its regulating ability. Within this scenario, the power of the non-state actors involved in the conflict increases while the regulative capabilities of the media decrease (El-Richani, 2016: 80). This sequence of the weakening of the state institutions and its legal monopoly over the use of violence vis-à-vis the armed non-state actors is highly relevant and common within societies affected by intrastate conflicts (Call, 2011). As a result, a media system arises in which the armed non-state groups and warlords have their own media and control over the communication sphere while the state's role decreases dramatically (Deane, 2013; El-Richani, 2016).

There have been various epistemic attempts to develop terms that conceptualize different cases of this weak state media structure and its underlying power constellations (Stremlau, 2013). For instance, El-Richani (2016: 186) used the term crisis and conflict-prone polarized pluralist media system (CRISPP) to explain the Lebanese context where the sectarian groups own their platforms and dominate the public sphere due to state impotence. In addition, Winkler and El-Damanhoury (2022) coined the term *proto-state media system* to describe the media of areas under the control of ISIS. Other studies utilize the term *fragile states* (Fiedler and Wollenberg, 2023; Hamidi, 2015) to highlight the weakness of the state as the main constituent in such media systems. In this study, we use the term 'fragile state' as it fits the Afghan context and its conflict (Deane, 2013; Hamidi, 2015). This conceptual choice stems from the ability of the term fragile state to highlight a pivotal, enduring trait of the socio-political structure in Afghanistan, which is the impotence of the state institutions to monopolize the use of violent power or achieve their necessary legal duties in regulating the society.

Media systems in fragile states

Many scholars have tried to conceptualize fragile states (see, for example, Call, 2011; Osaghae, 2007). One of the helpful conceptualizations came from Osaghae (2007: 692, 693) as states that suffer from one or more of the challenges of weak and ineffective political institutions, inability to exercise effective jurisdiction over its territory, legitimacy crisis, unstable and divided population, underdeveloped institutions of conflict management and resolution, pervasive corruption and poverty. The rationale behind this and other conceptualizations is to develop an empirical framework that highlights the essential, necessary functions of states and categorizes fragile states according to their inability to fulfill these functions (Call, 2011). Moving from the political and judicial structure in fragile states into the media system, there have been some efforts to provide analytical approaches to gauge the structure of their media (Deane, 2013; Fiedler and Wollenberg, 2023; Relly and Zanger, 2017; Stremlau, 2013). To that aim, Stremlau (2013) provided a diagnostic approach to analyse the various power dynamics, the flow of information in new and old communication ecologies, and the culture of persuasion and participation in fragile states. Building on this diagnostic approach, we try to investigate what the media systems – using Hallin and Mancini's framework – look like in fragile states.

   Hallin and Mancini's (2004) typology depended on categorizing the media systems in the examined countries according to four dimensions: (1) the development of the media market; (2) journalists' professionalism; (3) political parallelism; and (4) the role of the state. According to these four dimensions, they categorized the examined media systems into three models: (1) the liberal model; (2) the democratic corporatist model; and (3) the polarized pluralist model. The first challenge that arose when scholars tried to apply this comparative framework to non-democratic countries is that the polarized pluralist model seemed to become 'a catch-all category for media systems outside the Western world', which in turn impeded a nuanced comparison between these media systems in those countries (Voltmer, 2012: 225). Generally speaking, it is easier to develop and apply the four dimensions of the typology to non-Western countries than the three models, as Hallin and Mancini (2012: 287) state in their anthology *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World*. However, the four dimensions can serve as a starting point for analysing the media system of any country (see, for example, Badr, 2020; El-Richani, 2016).

   When applying this framework to fragile states, the four dimensions take certain forms. Concerning political parallelism, the strong polarization in society can extend to the media (Hafez, 2015), resulting in a deeper affiliation between media outlets and armed or political groups within the conflict (Wollenberg, 2019: 75, 76). Wollenberg and Richter (2020) investigated political parallelism in the Libyan media system and explained the co-existence of platforms tied to and controlled by the political actors in the conflict and other non-political outlets. The first category of platforms presented high political parallelism and mirrored the polarization between the conflicting political groups, as this media was owned by these political actors.

   Concerning the second dimension of the media market, the intrastate conflict can lead to the contraction of the media market as advertising expenditure tends to decrease,

causing a financial crisis for the media and journalists. This crisis lays the foundation for the instrumentalization of the media by the political actors involved in the conflict, especially when they own or finance the media affiliated with them (El-Richani, 2016: 182, 183). This pattern of instrumentalization has a serious negative effect on the journalists' professionalism in the country (Wollenberg, 2019: 77).

Another relevant aspect related to the dimension of professionalism is the normative role of journalists in fragile states (Putzel and Van der Zwan, 2007). Here, journalists fight for their autonomy against instrumentalization, especially by funders and media owners. Nevertheless, they also face a crucial conflict of interest between their specific ideological and group affiliation inside their organizational hierarchy (like serving their ethnic group that owns the media) and their public role in serving the state (Relly and Zanger, 2017). In addition, in the context of a fragile state, the professional watchdog role of journalists is not straightforward. Since fragile states already suffer from impotent institutions, being so critical of the government can backfire and weaken it more. Against this background, a debate has been opened up over the concept of 'development journalism', which directs the media towards helping the government in the development process and focusing on the positive projects of the state, especially in rural areas (Anand, 2014: 224; Shafer, 1998).

Finally, concerning state intervention, due to the weakened institutions of the state and its impotence, the media in many fragile states becomes deregulated with very limited interference from the state (Deane, 2013; El-Richani, 2016). Nonetheless, there is a relevant repeated pattern that is worth mentioning here. When a non-state actor or the ruling regime achieves total military victory and reaches complete control over one area during an intrastate conflict, they tend to start a repressive campaign to (re)dominate the media in this particular region (Badran, 2021; Winkler and El Damanhoury, 2022).

As a reaction to this autocratization and instrumentalization of the media in certain areas and the general challenges resulting from the intrastate conflict, many journalists in fragile states decide to leave the country and establish new platforms in the diaspora (Ogunyemi, 2017). By capitalizing on digital technologies, these diasporic journalists start to use their platforms to establish a transnational network with their local sources and audience vis-à-vis the autocratic regimes and actors in the conflict (Arafat, 2021). This network plays a vital role in the intrastate conflict and constitutes a pivotal element of the media system.

Methodology

Since this study examines a recent conflict and its consequences within an under-researched field, i.e. the effects of intrastate conflict on media systems in fragile states, it took an exploratory approach. Accordingly, a qualitative approach was chosen to answer the research questions: semi-structured, in-depth interviews. A total of 21 interviews were conducted with editors and journalists from various media outlets. The semi-structured interviews were chosen as a methodology because they allow for exploring the complicated and contextual details of the studied topic (Brennen, 2017). One of the main tasks of the semi-structured interviews is to develop the questions in a way that enables connecting between the theoretical framework and the empirical analysis (Meyen et al.,

2011). This task can be achieved by utilizing the theoretical framework as a starting point to reach the main broad categories in the semi-structured interview questions (Kaiser, 2014).

Accordingly, the analytical framework of the literature, in particular Hallin and Mancini's (2004) four dimensions, was used to compose four main question categories in the interviews, which are: (1) the different roles of social media and traditional media; (2) factors affecting the work of the media; (3) the relationship between the media and conflict; and (4) the professionalization of the media. The first category corresponds with Hallin and Mancini's dimension of the media market and media usage patterns. The second category is connected with the dimensions of political parallelism and state intervention as it strives to comprehend the extent of the effect and control of each political actor on the media. Concerning the third category, it directly focuses on the dynamic relationship between the conflict and the media system (El-Richani, 2016; Gilboa, 2009). Finally, the last category illustrates the professionalism dimension of Hallin and Mancini (2004).

In choosing the interviewees, we tried to maximize the diversity of their media outlets. Also, to incorporate the role of digital outlets in the media system, we focused specifically on reaching online media outlets, especially the diasporic ones, to explore the diasporic journalists' citizen network (Arafat, 2021). Thus, of the 21 interviewed journalists, eight work in an online media outlet, three in private TV channels, one in state TV, two in news agencies, three as freelancer journalists writing in online outlets and four in private radio stations. About half of the interviewees work in editorial positions in their outlets, while the other half are working as freelancers, presenters, or journalists. After successful contact through different personal networks of Afghan journalists, the interviews were conducted via encrypted messaging services to ensure the safety of the interviewees. In addition, we tried to protect the identity of the interviewees as much as possible by avoiding any mention of personal information in the quotes.

Mayring's (2010) qualitative content analysis technique was applied to analyse the interviews. A deductive–inductive approach was used to build the qualitative category system. The first deductive categories were the four broad ones from the interview questions, and the inductive sub-categories were developed from the interview transcripts while coding. Thereafter, the coding and analysis processes were conducted using MAXQDA. Although some of the quotations had many grammatical mistakes due to the hard emotional effect of the topic, we decided to leave some of the mistakes to keep the authenticity of the first-hand experience.

Results

The results of the empirical analysis are presented chronologically according to the conflict situation in Afghanistan in three phases: phase one is for the period before the conflict escalation in 2021, phase two is for the first eight months of the conflict escalation in 2021 until the Taliban took over Kabul, and phase three is for the period from August 2021 until now, i.e. Afghanistan under Taliban rule. In each phase, the main characteristics and dimensions of the media system and the interplay between the media system and the conflict are elaborated. In phases one and three, the four dimensions of Hallin and

Mancini (2004) are illustrated, and then the interplay between the media and conflict is discussed, while phase two only focuses on the role of the media during the escalated conflict.

Phase 1: Media system before 2021

Concerning the media market generally, and specifically the role of social media before 2021, the results confirmed the already existing depiction in the literature about a fragmented media market (Hamidi, 2015). Nonetheless, the interviewees illustrated a nuanced description of this fragmented market. One important factor in this fragmentation is geography. In that regard, the strong influence of radios and local TV in rural areas was highlighted. Within this category, interviewees (from radio and other outlets as well) postulated that, due to low literacy rates and limited communicative infrastructure, newspapers are not popular in Afghanistan generally and in rural areas specifically. At the same time, radio and local TV stations are the main sources of information. Interestingly, the limited infrastructure in rural areas mainly affected the spread of national TV and satellite channels in these areas; however, social media, in particular Facebook, was still influential in those areas. This corresponds with the previous surveys' results concerning the pivotal role of radio in rural areas and the rising use of mobile phones as a source of information (Page and Siddiqi, 2012: 6). Moreover, it corresponds with studies about media consumption before the Taliban's takeover, which showed how radio is popular in rural areas, while TV is the main media in cities, and that digital media, especially Facebook, is gradually expanding as a central source for information (Khalvatgar, 2020). As one of the journalists highlighted:

> Due to the higher cost of internet prices in Afghanistan compared to neighbouring countries, Facebook, with lower data usage, has more functions . . . Facebook has become popular among Afghan people, and all the layers of society . . . have Facebook. (OS05, 00:08)

From a social class and generational perspective, the young educated elite depended heavily on social media as a source of information. However, that pushed towards more fragmentation in the media market as the audiences' geographic, literacy and generational differences played a huge role in determining what exactly to watch. On a broader national level, with the exception of the evening news on Tolo News, there was hardly any media outlet used commonly across the diverse Afghan audiences as the main source of political information. Although the big traditional media channels like Tolo and Arianna can arguably be the most watched outlets, the credibility of traditional media, in general, was hugely questionable among the audiences, as many saw them as not independent in comparison to social media. Nevertheless, there was a general impression that this independence of social media had its dark side, incarnated in the spread of disinformation and more aggressive political content:

> Well, you also know that social media has given the opportunity for everyone to be a media themselves. Sometimes, it is not good that everyone can be a media because they cause rumours and disinformation. (JG110112, 00:19)

Within this fragmented market, state intervention was relatively low. While the general sentiment among our interviewees was the existence of freedom of expression and positive media laws before 2021, some highlighted that this freedom was partly limited, as the government sometimes censored content with the excuse that it was defaming it or against the law. In addition, there have been some incidents of journalists being attacked, especially investigative ones. Furthermore, the donors and owners of different outlets attempted to control the media discourse and make the media dependent on them, leading to a high level of political parallelism.

This high political parallelism and violence against journalists – six journalists were murdered in 2020 (RSF, 2020) – doubled by the financial pressures imposed on the whole industry and the journalists individually, hurt the journalists' professionality. When asking the journalists about the biggest obstacle against professionalism, the most mentioned category – especially from the journalists working as freelancers and in online outlets – was the high level of political parallelism. The interviewees elaborated that most media outlets are strongly affiliated with a party, ethnic group, foreign donors, or at least just the owners. The second most mentioned obstacle was the low quality of education generally and journalism education specifically. Nonetheless, nine journalists argued that the Afghan media achieved positive developments towards professionalism in the period from 2001 to 2021, despite the limited educational resources and the difficult political situation in the country:

> Before the coming of the Taliban, I think the media freedom and the media in Afghanistan was [the] biggest achievement of recent 20 years. And the media became professional 20 years ago. (JG110109, 01:15)

Regarding the media system's interplay with conflict, or more precisely, the pre-conflict phase, the deep affiliation between some media outlets and the ethnic groups fostered intrastate divisions. To further elaborate, some media outlets were constitutively associated with ethnic groups and leaders, so they articulated an ethnocentric discourse against the other ethnicities, which in turn deepened the ethnic divisions. For example, one of the interviewees explained how the media sowed hatred and escalation when there were any attempts to hold peace talks by using insulting words to describe the other parties (OS02). On the other hand, many media outlets pushed hard towards promoting peace between the various fighting groups. Also, they were able to utilize the (limited) freedom to inform people about their rights and highlight the major social problems.

In addition, some outlets acted as a watchdog for the republican government and exposed their corruption, especially the investigative reports of the newspapers. Although most interviewees depicted this watchdog role as a positive one pushing towards a democratic, accountable political system, a few of them crystallized the dark side of it within a pre-conflict phase. The contra argument takes a pragmatic, realistic approach in the sense that it simply postulates that the republican government was the main local barrier between the Taliban and power so, when the media focused heavily on exposing its corruption, that weakened its legitimacy and capacity, which consequently helped the Taliban defeat it. Instead, the few interviewees who held this opinion argued that the media should have helped the government to consolidate its control. These two points of

view highlight the relevance of the debate about the normative professional role in fragile states between the classical watchdog role and taking a 'development journalism' position. An interviewee used the following metaphor to describe this notion:

> The Afghan government was like a plant that was planted some time ago and was becoming stronger, and it was a new plant. Unfortunately, they (media) knocked in the kidneys of this newly matured plant as much as they could. (OS11, 01:14)

Phase 2: Media within the 2021 intrastate conflict escalation

When the conflict escalated in 2021 and the peace talks in Doha were deciding the fate of the country, the repercussions of the pre-conflict fragmented media system played a major negative role in paving the way to Kabul for the Taliban. The media outlets hardly had any first-hand source of information from the battle areas. The difficulty of having correspondents in those areas facilitated the informational isolation from the urban cities. Meanwhile, the Taliban misinformation apparatus utilized this fractured media system to spread their fake news and destroy the morale of the fighting soldiers and groups. To illustrate this pattern, the interviewees gave some examples: But [the] Taliban, every time they used fake videos, fake photos from that provinces and released that photos through social media to . . . to make people believe that this provinces failed by Taliban and that the governments cannot control this provinces. (JG110109, 00:21).

> For example, soldiers who were at the height of the clashes in Helmand province learned that Badghis province fell (to the Taliban) when that had not happened. That just caused the soldier to lose his morale. (OS11, 00:31)

Making matters worse, since most of the media could hardly get any reliable source of information, some of them unintentionally spread the Taliban's fake news, promoting more panic and a general sense of defeat.

Another structural problem, which was highlighted by journalists who worked in traditional outlets, was the communicative chasm between the government and the media. Throughout the conflict in recent years, journalists suffered from the government's refusal to share information with them (Relly and Zanger, 2017: 1243). This chasm reached its peak during the Doha peace talks when the Afghan correspondents hardly obtained any insights concerning the negotiations with the Taliban. Consequently, the public learned about the negotiation results through the politicians' social media accounts. As an expected result, when the truth became unreachable, rumours and misinformation flourished. The Taliban utilized this informational chasm to propagate that the government had already agreed to hand them the power, which in turn destroyed what was left of the soldiers' morale:

> I mean if I come to the social media, unfortunately, there was some agreements made that like Taliban would have some meeting with Afghan officials and they will officially hand over / there would be an official transition of power like from this government to Taliban with the

mediation from international community like US. But unfortunately, the social media started to see 'oh the Taliban has arrived, and they are already in the city' but there was no Talibs in the city. So, the social media played a very / I mean the biggest role in the collapse of the government during the August 15, unfortunately. (JG110106, 00:50)

During the conflict, the Taliban had a clear and successful communicative strategy. They flooded social media with the fake news that they had already taken the cities before attacking them. The pattern was simple but very effective. The Afghan soldiers and citizens were suddenly receiving a flood of misinformation that the Taliban had already defeated the army and entered the city. When the citizens got out onto the streets, the Taliban were not there. However, the soldiers were already psychologically defeated and, hours later, the Taliban fighters entered the city without much resistance. The Taliban sometimes spread fake, or even real, photos of defeated captured army personnel.

In the absence of institutionalized nationwide strong media, particularly state media, or any form of experienced military media, the Taliban cyber army dominated the informational sphere. The commercialized private urban media and the local outlets in rural areas were unable to confront the Taliban misinformation. It was a psychological war par excellence, and the Taliban won it.

Even up to / starting from 10 am in the morning on August 15, which I was at the office, they are saying that Taliban are inside the city. (..) I had to walk to my house. And I couldn't see one single Talib until one o'clock in the afternoon. And then Taliban had to enter at four o'clock in the evening saying that "We entered to the Kabul city because there was no army, there was no government, and we are trying to prevent a looting and disorder in the city. (JG110106, 00:53)

Phase 3: The media system under the Taliban's rule

After the Taliban took over Kabul in August 2021, they launched a quick campaign to transform the media system into an authoritarian one (Karimi, 2023). Theoretically, within this authoritarian media system, the state intervention dimension, or more precisely, the *proto-state* intervention, dominated all the other elements of the system. Nearly all the participants spoke about the Taliban's control over media as this category dominated the interviews, being the most mentioned one by far. The major tool in the Taliban's campaign to fully control the media was their new censorship apparatus. Firstly, the Taliban sent all the journalists a list of accepted and forbidden media content, where almost everything except pro-Taliban news is forbidden. The omnipresent list of taboos encompassed music, entertainment and movies. In addition to this list, the Taliban took over the Information and Culture Ministry, instrumentalizing it in an Orwellian fashion:

For example, the Information and Culture Department invited all journalists and collected their phone numbers and details, (..) to easily arrest them at any moment if they violate the Taliban rules. (OS04, 00:42)

Whenever any journalist breaks the Taliban's repressive rules, or whenever they feel they are doing so, this journalist receives a warning/threatening letter. The second time, the

journalist will be arrested and maybe tortured. Unsurprisingly, this repression led to self-censorship. Journalists and ordinary citizens are afraid to express themselves even on social media.

Another relevant constituent of the Taliban censorship order is the expanded restriction on information flow. The Taliban restrict any information flow to journalists by intimidating people or officials against talking to the media. One interviewee depicted the current situation in the following terms:

> I should tell you that there has been no authentic information shared on media for the past months . . . And all journalists say the sources do not respond or comment. (OS04, 00:20).

In addition, the advertisement market was contracting due to the economic crisis, which was escalated by the consequences of conflict and the Taliban's crackdown, which in turn worsened the financial situation of the journalists. As a result, journalistic professionalism was almost exterminated. Most of the journalists left Afghanistan, even if they had not already done so. Among our interviewees, nearly half of them had already left. The Taliban aimed to not only create an autocratic media system but to kill journalism as a profession and suffocate the public sphere.

Nevertheless, the new digital technologies opened the door for some limited resistance. Due to the expanded censorship and control over traditional media, people started to lose trust in it. The demand on social media for authentic anti-Taliban content increased and, consequently, a new major journalist network emerged as a central player in the media market. This network depends on the diasporic media and operates as follows: local journalists and anti-regime citizens share information about what is happening on the ground via social media to the diasporic media, which in turn create journalistic content out of this information. Sometimes this content is in English and targets the international community or Afghan diaspora while, in other cases, it is in the local languages for the local audience. This network is reformatting the Afghan media market as it is technically hard for the Taliban to control all the digital media and censor this content. One of the major editorial policy rules for the media now is to protect the identity of the local citizens who give them information. Nonetheless, the political mobilization effect of such diasporic media is questionable as there is no evidence that they can create an expanded movement against the Taliban.

Discussion

Through the scrutinization of the transformation of the Afghan media system throughout the period surrounding the Taliban takeover, this article aims to extend the media systems analytical framework of Hallin and Mancini (2004) to make it applicable to fragile states suffering from armed intrastate conflict. The first step for such a theoretical extension was to rethink the reciprocal relationship between intrastate conflict and the media system. Secondly, we highlighted the need to elucidate some dimensions that characterize media systems in fragile states.

In Afghanistan, this variable of fragmentation was significant in phase one, as the media market was fractured by geographical, generational and media format factors.

Within such a fractured commercialized media system, the political parallelism and instrumentalization of the media by the fighting actors increased while the state regulatory role decreased significantly (El-Richani, 2016). In phase three, the variable of the authoritarian grip of the proto-state of the Taliban dominated the media system, causing significant damage to the journalism profession.

The transformation from a fragmented media system to an authoritarian proto-state one was mainly a result of the Taliban's victory in the intrastate armed conflict. Such a pattern of autocratization of the media system crystallizes the limitation of the democratization convergence hypothesis in non-democratic fragile states and shows that the transformation process is not unidirectional in regard to democracy (Hafez, 2015; Hallin and Mancini, 2017). In addition, this transformation process emphasizes the relevance of the intrastate armed conflict in shaping the media system as, ultimately, the victorious actors in the battles control the media in an authoritative pattern, leaving no room for independent journalism (Al-Shami, 2021; Badran, 2021). The shift of political and military power from the state – represented in the government – to the Taliban reshaped the power constellation within the media system (Stremlau, 2013). This shift took place from the official institutions into the hands of a non-state group trying to capture the state institutions, including its private and public media.

On the other hand, the media structure influenced the conflict as the fragmented system in phase one facilitated the Taliban takeover in phase two through their capitalization on the communicative geographical chasm between the urban and rural areas, and the political one between the government and the media. In addition, the structure of social media as a less regulated medium compared to traditional outlets paved the way for the Taliban to use them for their propaganda and psychological warfare objectives, which affected the results of the intrastate conflict. While phase one entailed some non-democratic traits of media control by the government and private media owners, it was relatively free compared to phase three. In phase three, the Taliban uses all the possible tools, from autocratic laws to physical oppression, to control the media. Nonetheless, in phase three, the diasporic media and its transnational network are playing a vital role in resisting the Taliban. This dynamic interaction highlights the reciprocal relationship between the media and the intrastate conflict.

To sum up, Hallin and Mancini's framework can serve as a helpful starting point for analysing the transformation of the media system in fragile states, but it needs some theoretical extensions. The dynamic interaction with the intrastate conflict should be considered beyond the deterministic unidirectional postulations about democratic transitions. Through the bottom-up approach to studying the case of Afghanistan, this study aims to contribute to our theoretical understanding of intrastate conflict as a driver of (1) the transformation of the political system and power constellations therein, and (2) the transformation of the media system according to the new power constellations between the different actors. Whereas our study focused only on Afghanistan, an extensive theoretical advancement for the relationship between intrastate conflict and the transformation of media systems warrants a comparative approach between other similar countries such as Libya, Sudan, Yemen and Syria.

Finally, it is worth noting that our study focused only on the journalistic perspective of predominantly anti-Taliban journalists (also in exile) on the Afghan media system. For instance, our results pertaining to phase three did not include enough

perspectives from journalists working inside Afghanistan in media controlled by the Taliban or media that manifest limited resistance against the Taliban. Due to the current political structure under the Taliban, we could not include the perspective of the audience and the ruling regime of the Taliban. This limitation stems from the difficulty of obtaining data about the media within fragile states and conflict regions. Another relevant limitation pertains to international involvement and media intervention from outside. While it was outside the scope of our study to expand on the debate about the best strategies to conduct such interventions, our analysis highlights the complexity of the media system during intrastate conflict.

Declaration of conflicting interest

Funding

Ethical considerations

The Central Ethics Committee at Freie Universität Berlin approved our interviews (approval: ZEA24035) on 18 December 2024. Respondents gave written consent or recorded approval before starting interviews.

Consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained verbally before participation. The consent was audio-recorded in the presence of an independent witness.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

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Data availability

Data are available on request due to privacy/ethical restrictions.

Notes

1. It is worth noting here that it is hard to gauge the exact start of this intrastate conflict. Nonetheless, since the Taliban takeover in 2021, the political system of Afghanistan has been

evolving rapidly.
2.   Although the conflict in those countries was intrastate, there have been many transnational interventions from different countries. Thus, intrastate conflicts are not geographically and politically isolated from the regional and international actors.

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