



A survey of media consumption in Afghanistan

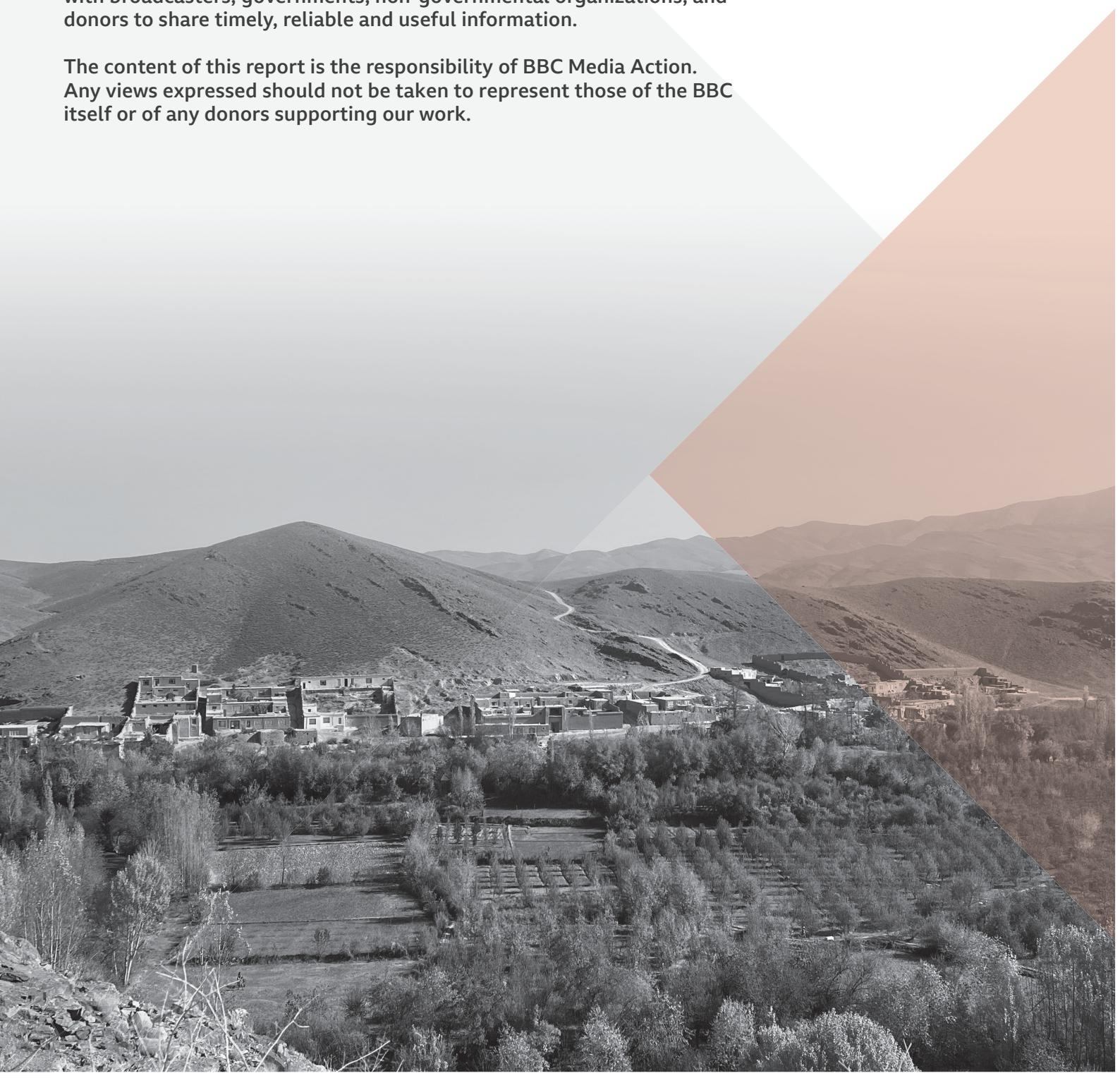
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CONTENTS

ACRONYMS	4
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
INTRODUCTION	7
Methodology	7
RESEARCH FINDINGS	7
Chapter I: Current and emerging trends in media access and content in Afghanistan	9
1.1 Media access	9
1.2 Media usage	11
1.3 Times people listen to radio, watch TV or use internet	13
1.4 Social media apps used	14
1.5 TV and radio content currently accessed	15
1.6 Language preferences	17
1.7 Content preferences	17
Chapter II: How do media operate to minimise the impact of limitations?	19
Chapter III: Current state of public access to information	21
3.1 Afghans' sources of information	21
3.2 News consumption	22
Chapter IV: Attitudes towards media in Afghanistan	23
Chapter V: Mis-, dis- and mal-information (MDM) in Afghanistan	25
5.1 Frequency of coming across misleading or false information	25
5.2 Concerns about false or misleading information	27
5.3 Sharing of misleading information on social media / in person	27
5.4 Countering MDM	28
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	30
Conclusion	30
Recommendations	30
APPENDIX - Profile of study respondents	32

ACRONYMS

BBC	The British Broadcasting Corporation
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency (USA)
DFA	De facto authorities of Afghanistan (Taliban)
FGD	Focus group discussion
GDI	General Directorate of Intelligence (Taliban)
IDI	In-depth interview
IDP	Internally displaced persons
KII	Key informant interview
MDM	Mis-, dis- and malinformation
RDD	Random digit dialing
RTA	National Radio Television Afghanistan (currently run by the Taliban)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report summarizes research that aimed to understand Afghans' access to and preference for different media content and platforms, their trust in media, how people use and share mis- and disinformation and ways to counter these.

Methodology

The data was collected using a mix of research methods between August and September 2023 with Afghan adults, media experts and media practitioners operating inside and outside Afghanistan. A total of 2,620 quantitative interviews were conducted with women and men across 34 provinces. Fifteen focus group discussions (FGDs), including two with Kuchis and one with internally displaced people (IDPs) in a camp in Herat. Five key informant interviews (KII) were conducted with media experts and 20 KII were conducted with Afghan media content makers and broadcasters inside and outside the country.

Findings

Media access and usage

- Most adult Afghans have access to a mobile phone or at least one media platform (TV, radio, newspaper, internet), but only around one in three have access to the internet, with less than half of mobile phone users owning a smartphone.
- The small proportion who are not accessing media or have a mobile phone tend to be older, women and illiterate, while urban residents and people with higher education have more access to smartphones and/or the internet.
- The vast majority of respondents use at least one of TV, radio or the internet. Men exhibit higher usage of radio and internet compared to women. Use of TV, however, is nearly identical among men and women.
- There are gender differences in when people use media - men are most likely to use media in the evenings between 7 and 10 pm while women use media during the day.
- WhatsApp and Facebook are the most popular digital media platforms amongst Afghan adults who have access to internet.
- Afghans watch a variety of TV channels, both national and international. Tolo TV is the most popular Afghan private channel and Afghanistan International is the most popular international television channel.

- BBC is the most popular radio station amongst Afghan radio audience, followed by Arman FM. Taliban controlled RTA is listened to by 34% of radio listeners.
- A quarter of Afghans read news sites or newspapers. BBC, Hasht-e Sobh, Etilaat-e Roz, and Afghanistan Times are the most popular news sites among Afghan readers.

Ways that media is operating

- Afghan media organisations are restricted in their ability to produce entertaining content now, which has caused them to struggle for advertising revenue as audience figures are reduced with people turning to international media for entertainment.
- Afghan media outlets have continued producing and broadcasting content that is less sensitive and is still tolerated by the Taliban which includes educational, health and agricultural related content that provide useful information to audiences.
- Women are finding creative ways to continue working in the media, including behind the scenes as producers; content is most often presented by men.
- Lack of access to information is a serious issue that media face under the Taliban. DFA officials are not willing to share information with the media or respond to their queries about issues and incidents. Still, media practitioners have managed to address this and access information – to some extent – through mediators and trusted sources who have good connections inside the Taliban.
- With increased use of internet – particularly among youth – and to reduce Taliban scrutiny of their content, some media outlets, including radio stations have started to produce content for social media.

Current state of public access to information

- Traditional media (radio and TV) are the main source of news and information amongst Afghan adults, followed by friends/family. Rural, older people, and women are more likely to depend on family, friends or relatives for their news.
- In line with the content available on the media, news is popular, both on TV and radio. Over half of Afghans spend at least 15 minutes each day consuming news. Men and older people (45+) spend the most time, often spending more than an hour doing so. Men watch or listen to news content more than any other kind, while women prefer entertainment content.

- People are missing entertainment content with over half of Afghans thinking there is not at all or not enough entertainment content (movies, music, fashion related programs) available on TV and radio. People, particularly women, watch international channels (such as GEM) or channels run by Afghan diaspora (such as Faza and Amu TV) to access entertainment.

Public trust in media

- Afghans' trust in media under the Taliban is mainly articulated through how they perceive the media to be autonomous from the Taliban, and capable of disseminating impartial and uncensored information and news regarding events and lives of the people.

Attitudes towards media in Afghanistan

- The majority of Afghans agree that the media they access cover diverse topics, provide them with all information they would like, and provide accurate and reliable information. The majority of respondents also agree that they check multiple platforms to ensure the accuracy of the news and information.
- The positive attitudes towards media in Afghanistan highlights the fact that Afghan audiences acknowledge the limitations media face under the Taliban and are still happy that media are active and provide information.

Mis-, dis- and malinformation (MDM) in Afghanistan

- Around half of Afghans have come across misleading or false information.
- Over three-quarters of Afghans are concerned about false and misleading information on traditional and social media. Under a fifth of Afghans stated they have ever shared misleading information on social media, with a slightly lower proportion saying they had ever shared misleading information in person.
- Despite widespread sharing of false and misleading information in traditional and social media in Afghanistan, media and audiences believe there is little they can do to counter it. While most of the people do nothing – or even trust the false information – when they come across false information, some have mentioned they check other credible sources of information – such as a trusted TV or radio channel, journalists or friends or verified social media accounts – to verify the information
- Some journalists believe domestic media in Afghanistan or even international media are unable to counter MDM. There are different reasons given for why media channels share mis and disinformation. Domestic media struggle due to not being able to access information on how the country is being run or fear of covering issues that are not allowed by the Taliban, while international media do not have a presence on the ground to verify a news story.

INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of a media study conducted by BBC Media Action Afghanistan between August and September 2023, as a part of a project funded by USAID to understand the current media landscape in Afghanistan. It is particularly focused on understanding how media outlets, including those established by the Afghan diaspora, have adapted to the evolving context in Afghanistan, and the consequential impact on the quality and credibility of media content, including the prevalence of mis-, dis- and malinformation (MDM) in the Afghan media landscape.

This work summarizes the findings from research conducted with audiences, including a survey of 2,620 Afghan adults aged 15+, media practitioners of organisations operating inside and outside Afghanistan, interviews with key experts.

A nationally representative study conducted by BBC Media Action in 2022 found that television and radio are the most popular platforms among Afghans, while internet and social media have also gained increasing popularity among Afghans living in the country and the diaspora community. Print media, including newspapers and magazines, are also part of the country's media landscape, although its reach is relatively limited compared to other platforms.

The fall of Kabul to the Taliban on 15 August 2021 radically changed the media landscape.ⁱ Since taking power, the Taliban has eroded gains made in terms of media freedom, leaving the future of free media in Afghanistan unclear. Over the past two years, the Taliban have shut down and restricted media organizations, detained journalists and imposed harsher restrictions on female reporters. According to Reporters Without Borders, 40 percent of media outlets have closed, and 60 percent of Afghanistan's journalists have either left the country or have lost their jobs, including a steeper decline in women journalists.ⁱⁱ

The Taliban have also put multiple restrictions on media content and banned music and other content which they deem to be inappropriate and un-Islamic. For now, the Taliban do allow women to continue working in the media, including as TV and radio journalists and presenters. However, women are barred from working in the state media and the 'Voice of Sharia' is back on air (though now being transmitted by the state broadcaster to the Kabul region).

Despite these limitations, media organisations are continuing to produce content for their audiences. BBC Media Action's media landscape study in January 2023 identified 209 active local media outlets in the country (BBC Media Action, 2023). Additionally, several media organizations have started their operations outside the country producing content for audiences inside Afghanistan and the diaspora community. The Taliban, in the meantime, also use media to promote their agenda and control the narrative around events at home and abroad (ABC News, 2023). The Taliban authorities have taken a different approach to the high-profile independent media, despite its close associations with the past, allowing them to continue operating – albeit under tight restrictions. Senior Taliban figures have subsequently put themselves up for questioning on these channels in front of live studio audiences. Many independent outlets have closed, but mainly due to lack of funds.

Social media has emerged as a significant platform for news dissemination and public engagement inside and outside Afghanistan. Platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat and Twitter have gained popularity, providing a space for Afghan citizens to share news, express opinions, and engage in discussions on various issues.ⁱⁱⁱ

The use of social media, however, has increased sharing of mis- and disinformation among Afghan audiences. A *Deadline* report highlights that misinformation and disinformation continues to soar by both opportunistic social media sharing and structured propaganda initiatives, both inside and outside Afghanistan. The report also indicates this situation is more likely to hurt those suffering than help them.^{iv}

This report will outline in more detail the current state of access to, preference and trust of different media amongst 15+ Afghan population. It will also present the findings on how media outlets have adapted to the changing context.

Methodology

Research methods

This research was conducted between August and September 2023 using a mixed methods approach with adult (15+) men and women from across the country, Afghan media practitioners working in and outside of the country, and media experts. Table 1 shows the specific research methods deployed and their objectives.

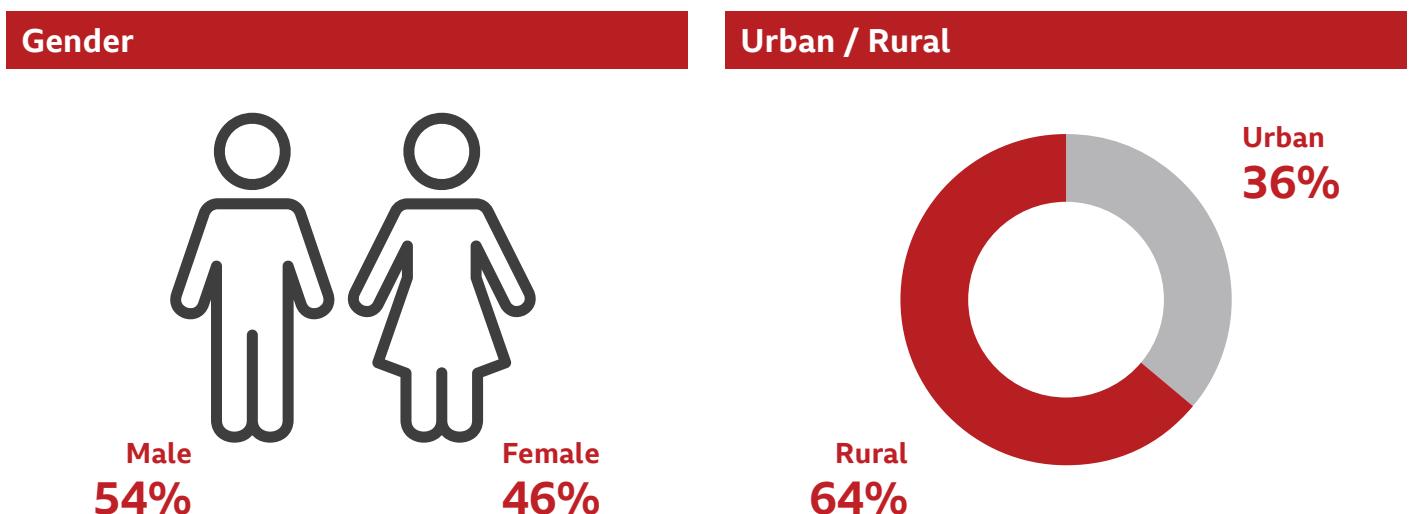
Table 1: Research Methods used

Method	Objective
General population	<p>1. Quantitative survey. A total of 2,620 women and men across 34 provinces of the country were interviewed. The quantitative survey was conducted using a mix of telephone random digit dialing (RDD) and face to face. 58% (1,512) of interviews were conducted using RDD, and the remaining 42% (1,102) of interviews were face to face.^v</p> <p>2. Focus group discussions (FGDs). 15 FGDs were conducted with Afghans. Two FGDs were conducted with Kuchis, and one was conducted with IDPs in a camp in Herat.</p>
Media content makers and broadcasters inside and outside Afghanistan	<p>3. Key informant interviews (KIs). 20 KIs were conducted with media content makers and broadcasters working inside and outside Afghanistan.</p>
Media experts	<p>4. KIs. 5 KIs were conducted with media experts.</p>

Quantitative survey: sample distribution

The survey data was collected using official census figures and used quotas to ensure that it was representative of gender, age, region, and ethnicity as possible. Whilst we were looking to achieve a gender split of 50:50, of the 2,620 respondents interviewed, 46% are female and 54% male highlighting a good gender balance given the circumstances.

The rural and urban context of Afghanistan has also been well reflected in this data with just under two thirds residing in rural areas (64%), and over a third (36%) in urban areas. Please see Appendix 1 for more detail on the sample distribution.



RESEARCH FINDINGS

Chapter I: Current and emerging trends in media access and content in Afghanistan

1.1 Media access

Most adult Afghans (95%) have access to a mobile phone or a media platform (TV, radio, newspaper, internet), with only around one in three accessing the internet.

95% of respondents access at least one form of media or phone, with 5% stating they have no access. The data shows an increase in access to mobile phones, from 58% reported by the CIA Factbook data about mobile subscription in

Afghanistan in 2021 to 64.7% in 2023. This reflects the network-providing companies – such as Roshan, Afghan Wireless, Etisalat and MTN – widening their network coverage to most parts of the country. Previously, their antennas were targeted by the Taliban, which is no longer the case.

With the increased limitations on women's movement, work and education, women talked about how media and internet have become a more important part of their lives and a lifeline as their main source of news and information.

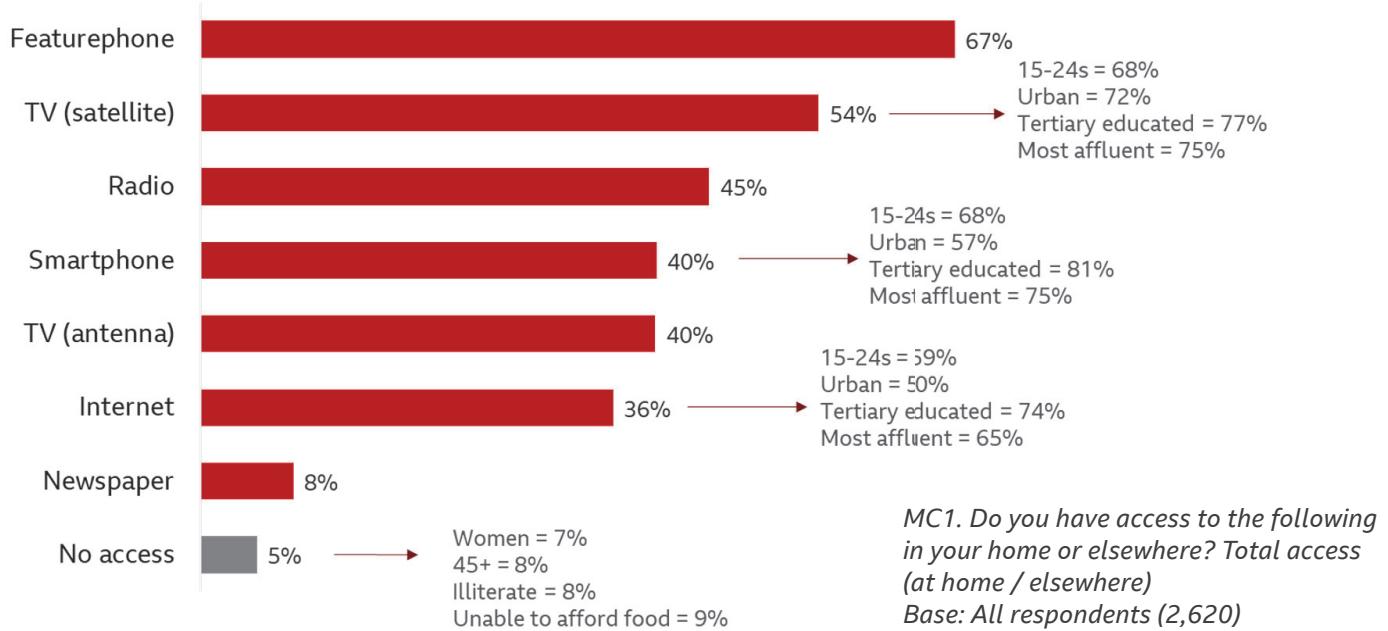
“ I cannot spend my day without using my mobile phone as I use internet and get information... I also watch TV for news and important information ,”

A 19-year-old woman from Badakhshan province



Media preferences interview, Ghor province

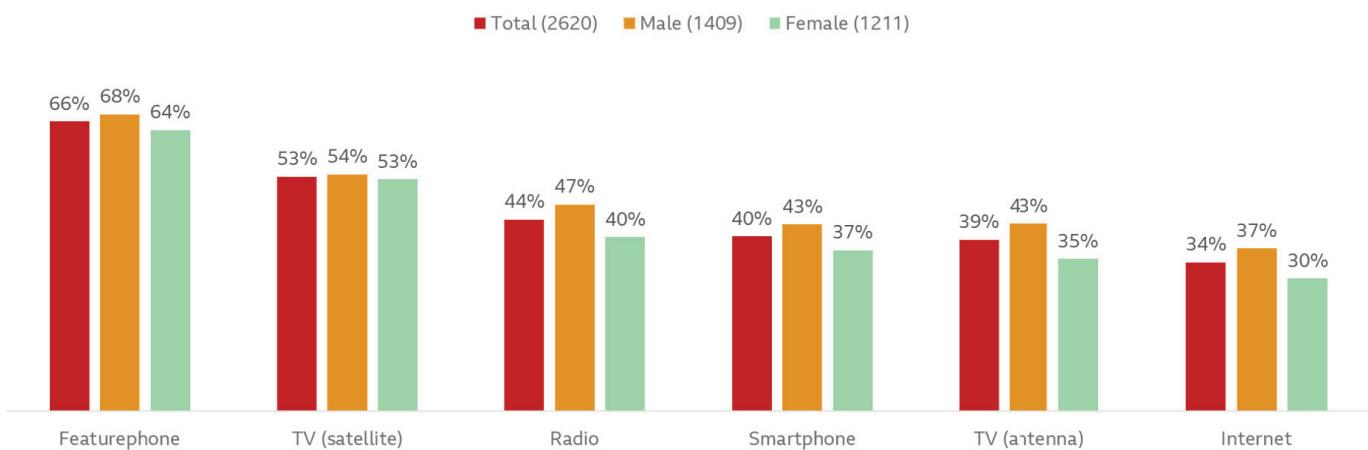
Figure 1.1 – Media access



The groups least likely to have access to any media or mobile phone were females (7% vs 3% for men), older people (8% compared to 3% for younger people), and illiterate (8% compared to 4% males,

and below for other categories). As expected, urban residents and people with higher education recorded higher access to smartphones and the internet.

Figure 1.2 – Media access by gender split



MC1. Do you have access to the following in your home or elsewhere? Total access (at home / elsewhere)
Base: Respondents who access any media and mobile phone (2,489)

“ Now that I am at home, I mostly use mobile to access internet and social media to get information. I also watch TV and read books ,”

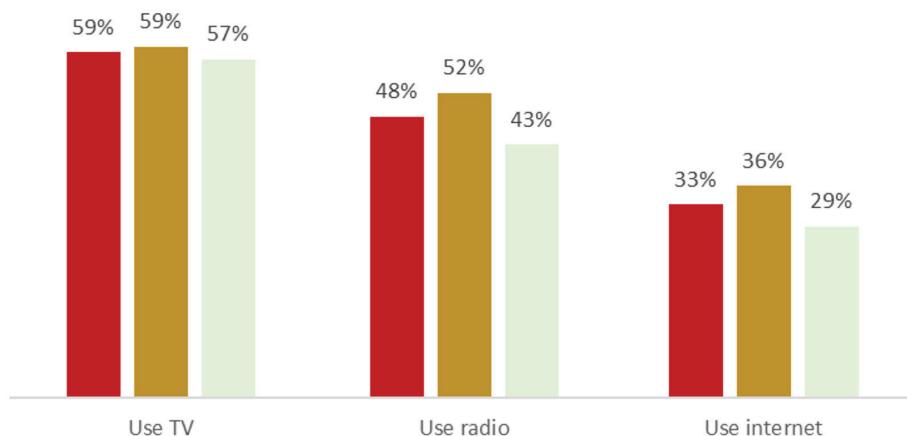
A 30-year-old woman from Herat province

1.2 Media usage

Men exhibit higher usage of radio and internet compared to women (52% male vs 43% female for radio and 36% vs 29% for internet). Use of TV, however, is nearly identical among men and women.

Figure 1.3 – Media use by gender split

■ Total ■ Male ■ Female

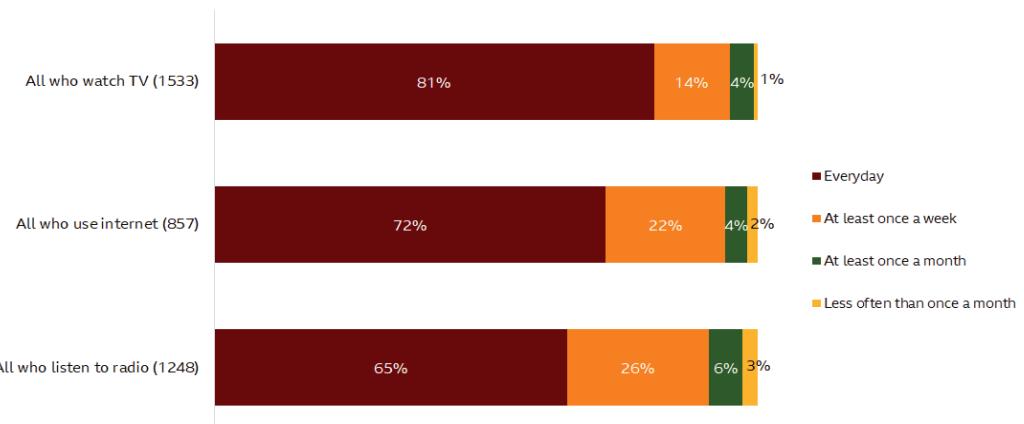


MC2. Do you use any of these media platforms?

Base: Respondents who access TV, radio, or internet (2,227)

The majority of Afghans use media every day and media are a regular part of people's daily lives. TV is the most frequently used media with 81% using it every day, followed by internet (72%) and then radio (65%).

Figure 1.2 – Media use frequency



MC2. How frequently do you do the following?

Base: Respondents who access TV, radio or internet (2,227)

The vast majority of respondents (85%) use either TV, radio or the internet

We have looked at media usage by high, medium and low. High media use is defined as daily use of at least two of TV, radio, and internet, medium media use as daily use of any one of these media and low media use as using any media less than daily.

Figure 1.3 – Media use

	33% High usage	50% Medium usage	18% Low usage
Profile	Male, aged between 15-24, Urban, high school and above	Male, aged between 25 and 44, rural, illiterate	Female, aged between 25-44, rural, illiterate
Use of media platforms	Daily use of at least 2 media – mainly TV and internet	Daily use of any of the 3 media – mainly TV	Less often use of media – mainly radio (male)
Content	News (88%) Entertainment (67%) Religious (10%)	News (90%) Entertainment (60%) Religious (8%)	News (82%) Entertainment (51%) Religious (10%)
Consume international media?	Yes (96%)	Yes (90%)	Yes (88%)

High use – daily use of all 3 or at least any 2 media **Medium use** – daily use of any of the 3 media

Low use – less often than daily use of any of the 3 media

Social media users, Wardak province.

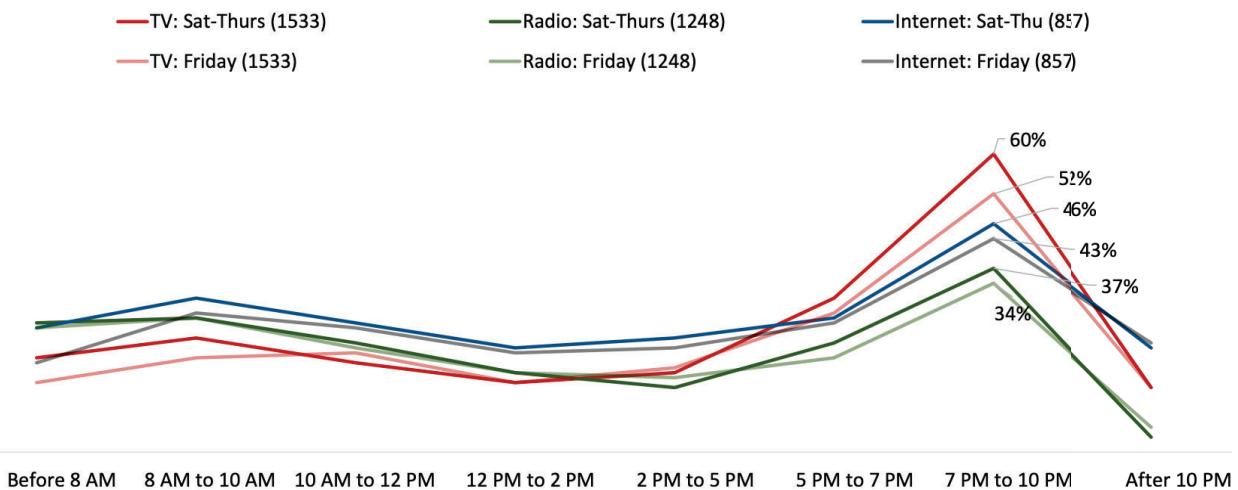


1.3 Times people listen to radio, watch TV or use internet

Men are most likely to use media in the evenings between 7 and 10 pm while women use media during the day

The study results indicate distinct patterns in the usage of TV, radio and internet throughout the day, with a notable peak in activity the evenings between 7-10pm. Notably, there is a gender-specific variation in the times people use media - women use media mostly during daytime hours, while men use media more in the evening. Compared to previous survey (conducted in March 2021), women's use of TV has increased during the day.

Figure 1.4 – Time of day media is accessed



MC3a. When you watch TV, at what hours of the day do you usually watch during Saturday to Thursday? MC3b. And what about on Friday? MC4a. When you listen to the radio, at what hours of the day do you usually listen to during Saturday to Thursday? MC4b. And what about on Friday? MC4a. When you listen to the radio, at what hours of the day do you usually listen to during Saturday to Thursday? MC4b. And what about on Friday?

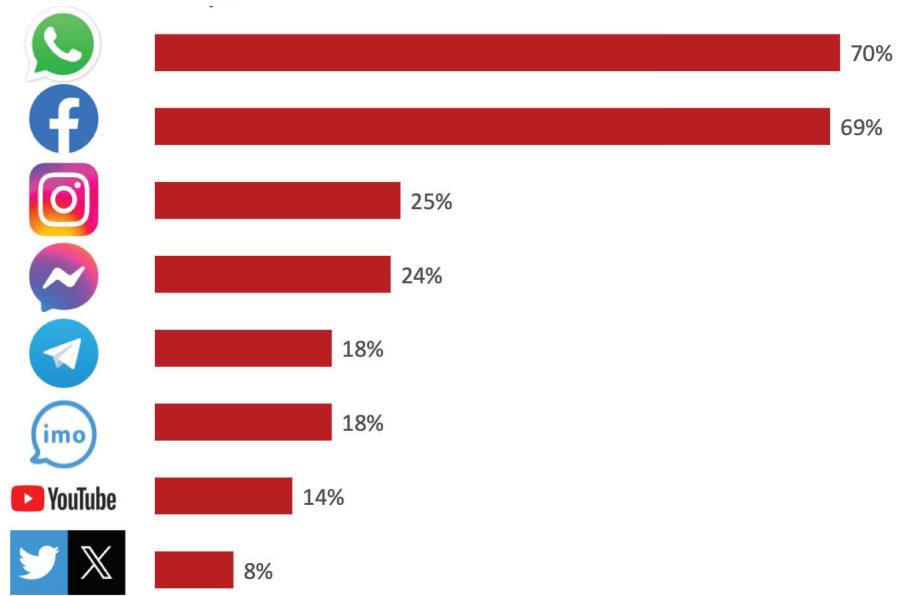


1.4 Social media apps used

WhatsApp and Facebook are the most popular digital media platforms amongst Afghan adults.

Amongst people with internet access, WhatsApp and Facebook are the most popular and widely used app among men and women. Facebook is popular as they can post photos and videos to potentially large numbers of people at the same time, and also express their views about certain issues. There are some gender differences with Twitter more popular among male social media users and Snapchat more with females.

Figure 1.5 – Social media / messaging apps used (prompted)



SM1. Could you tell me which of the following social media or messaging apps or platforms you use?
Base: All who use the internet (857)

Despite Afghans being able to use Facebook and other social media platforms under the Taliban, social media users expressed their concerns and fear of these platforms being monitored by the Taliban.

They were worried that they could be in trouble because of a post they make on social media. As a result, some stated they only post religious content.

“In the past I felt free to post about everything, but now I am very cautious even to comment. I am scared about getting in trouble.”

A 62-year old man from Herat province

“It is about 2 years that I only post some hadith [religious content].”

A 44-year old man from Balkh province

1.5 TV and radio content currently accessed

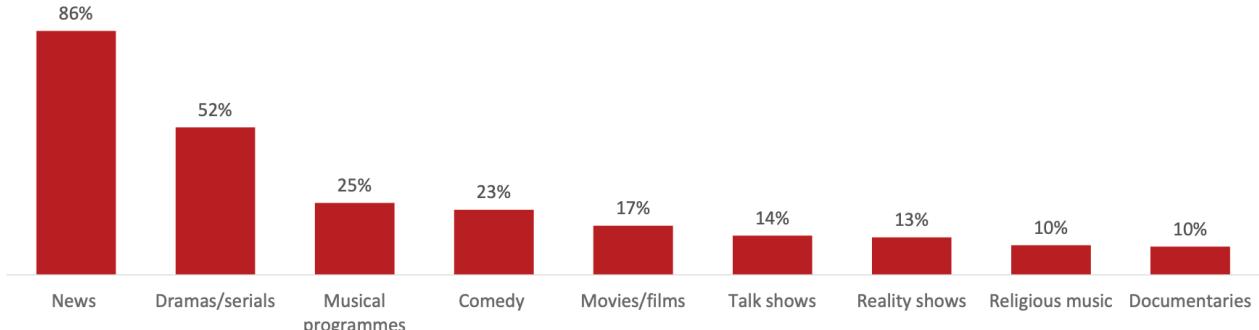
On TV and radio, Afghans consume news most, followed by entertainment content. Men watch or listen to news more, while women watch or listen more to entertainment.

Content analysis of seven most popular national TV channels (including RTA) showed that 32%

of content during the day was religious (Quran readings, speeches, Q&A and religious *naat*), and 24% was news or current affairs – making up more than half of the content available.

In line with this, news is the most popular type of TV programme watched by 86% of TV viewers, followed by dramas/serials (52%). Much lower proportions watch entertainment content that includes musical programs (25%), comedy (23%) or movies (17%).

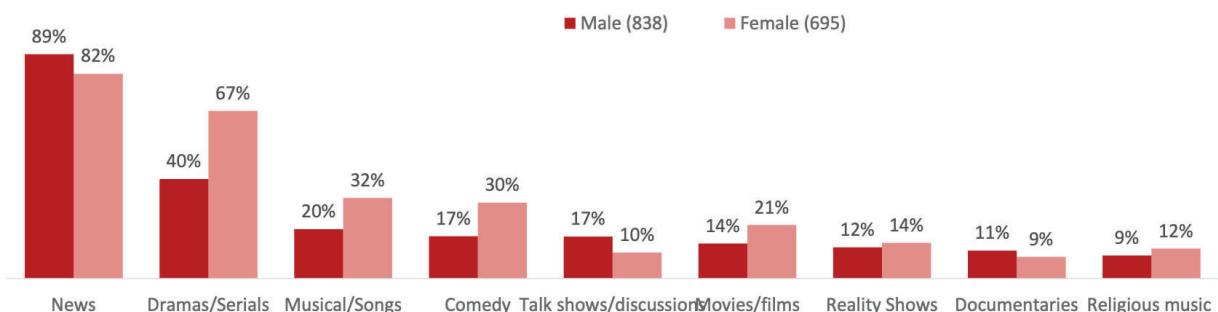
Figure 1.6 – TV content usually watched (prompted)



TV4a. What types of programs do you usually watch on TV? Base: All who watch TV (1533)

Women tend to look for entertainment content and watch a wider range of TV programs watched compared to males who mostly watch news and current affairs.

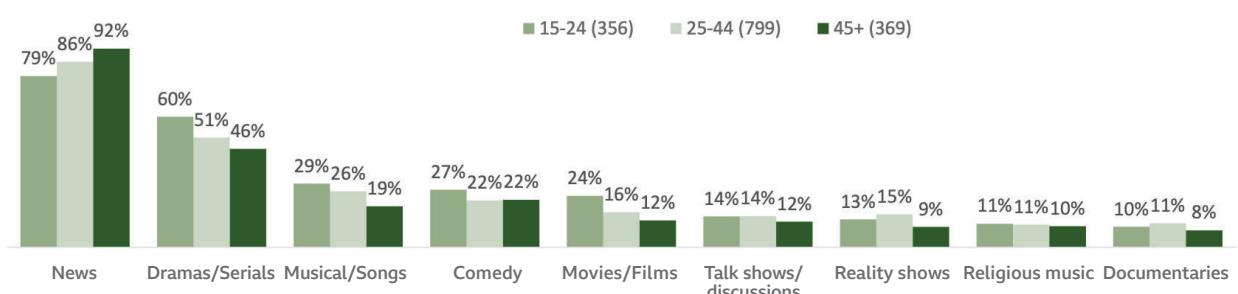
Figure 1.7 – TV content usually watched (prompted)



TV4a. What types of programs do you usually watch on TV? Base: All who watch TV (1533)

Similarly, younger Afghans are interested in watching entertainment programs as they usually watch dramas, comedies, music and movies, while elder Afghans are more likely to watch news.

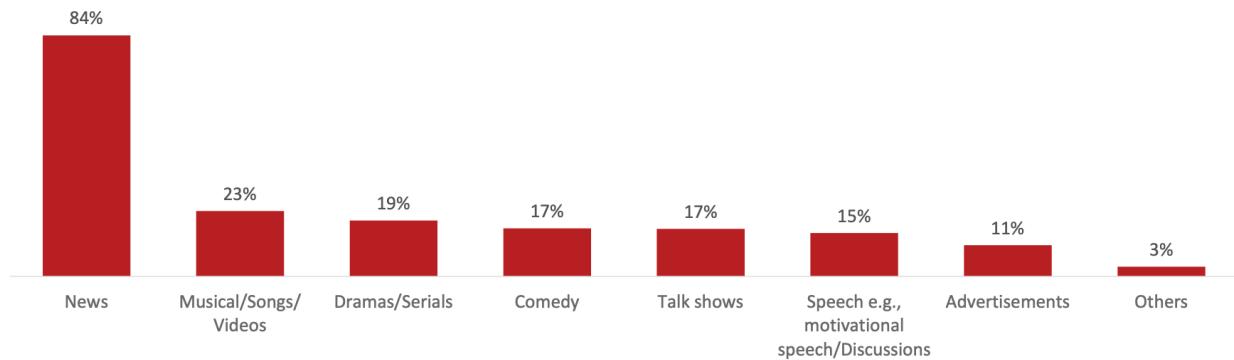
Figure 1.8 – TV content usually watched (prompted)



TV4a. What types of programs do you usually watch on TV? Base: All who watch TV (1533)

Similar to TV, news is the most popular content on radio, listened to by 84% of radio listeners. These results highlight that radio is predominantly listened to for news, with much lower proportions mentioning they listened to music (23%), dramas/serials (19%), comedy (17%) or talk shows (17%). Like the programmes watched on TV, more female and younger audiences listen to entertainment content compared to men, and elders are also most likely to listen to news.

Figure 1.9 – Radio content usually listened to (prompted)



R4a. What types of programmes do you usually listen to on radio? Base: All who listen to the radio (1248)

Radio listeners, Wardak Province.

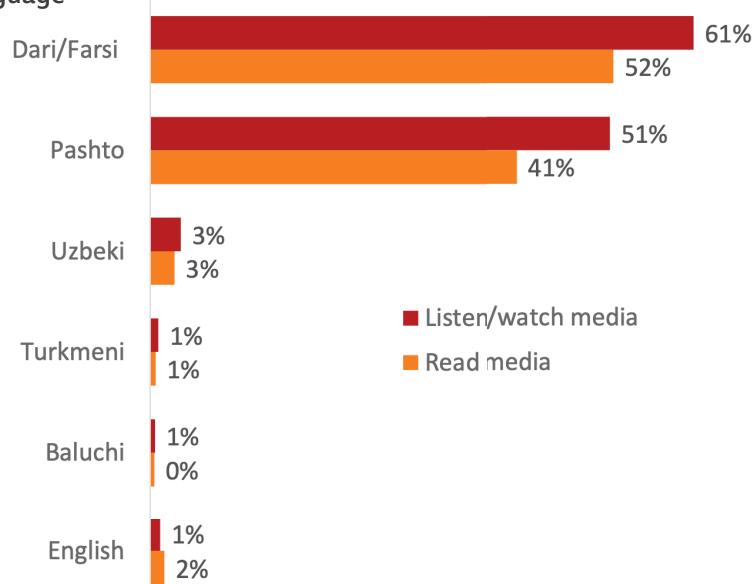


1.6 Language preferences

Media in Dari/Farsi and Pashto languages are most popular amongst Afghans.

Most respondents tend to watch/listen/read in Dari/Farsi, followed by Pashto, with much lower proportions saying they ever consume media in Uzbeki, Turkmeni, Baluchi or English.

Figure 1.10 – Media language



D6. Which of the following languages do you mostly listen to/watch media in? D7. And what about reading media – which languages do you mostly read media in? Base: All respondents (2620)

1.7 Content Preferences that Afghans would like to see

Over half of Afghans believe there is not at all or not enough entertainment content (movies, music, fashion related programs) available on TV and radio.

“ Media has completely changed after 15 August 2021. In the past, media content was entertaining, and women and girls would appear on TV. For example, there were good female presenter in Bamdade Khush [on Tolo TV] and girls could sing in the Afghan Star show [on Tolo TV]. We would watch these programs. Now, TV stations do not have entertainment content and women are not allowed on TV ,”

A 19-year-old woman from Badakhshan province

Echoing limitations by the Taliban on entertainment content on media, the study results highlight that majority of respondents said there were not any/enough movies (55%) or music (55%) or fashion programming (52%) available on media in Afghanistan. The qualitative research further demonstrates that many audiences struggle to find content they want on the media operating inside the country, with much entertainment content banned.

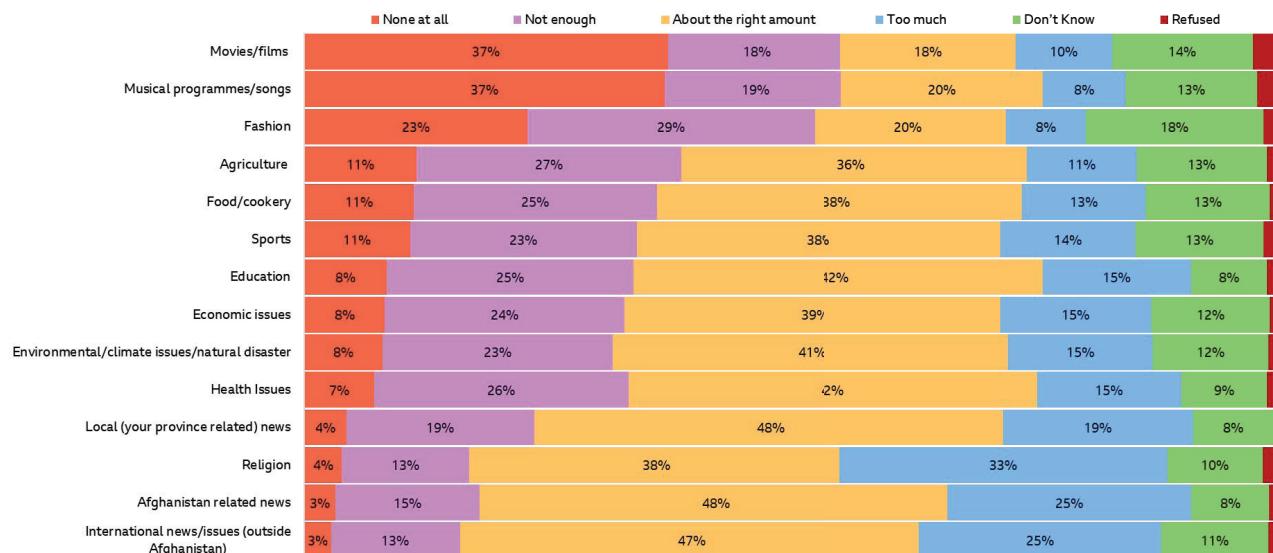
“ Most of the TV programs have been changed. Boring programs have replaced entertainment ,”

A 20-year-old woman from Ghor province

“ I like music a lot and we don’t have it in any media. Now we can see only a Mullah who speaks, and we don’t like it ,”

A 56-year-old man from Herat province

Figure 1.11 – Thoughts on TV and radio content



TVR1. Thinking about the content on TV and radio in Afghanistan, do you think that there is too much, about the right amount, not enough, or no media coverage on...? Base: All respondents (2620)

In contrast, around half of respondents felt there was the right amount of religion and news content, although a third (33%) said there was “too much” religious programming (more affluent and younger) and a quarter “too much” international (25%) or Afghanistan related news (25%).

The qualitative research also found that there was a group – mainly men who were happy that the content is now more Islamic as they thought the Afghan media was westernised before and did not follow Islamic rules.

“ Some of the drama series and entertainment programs were only wasting time. Now the content of media is Islamic ,”

A 36-year-old man from Nangarhar province

Females, young Afghans and more educated were more likely to feel underserved. The qualitative research showed that women were feeling cut out

by the media, for example no longer being able to participate in TV and radio discussion programs.

“The topics were diverse in the media before the regime change. Now media don’t have any topic to discuss except hijab. All are talking about hijab. That is very interesting.”

A woman from Badakhshan province

“This situation has negatively impacted women in the media. We cannot work freely. We used to have discussion programs with women participants who would speak about women related issues. Now we don’t have these. Also, we used to receive calls from women in our programmes. They would request for music. Most of these callers were young girls. They used to follow our entertainment programmes. We have lost our audience.”

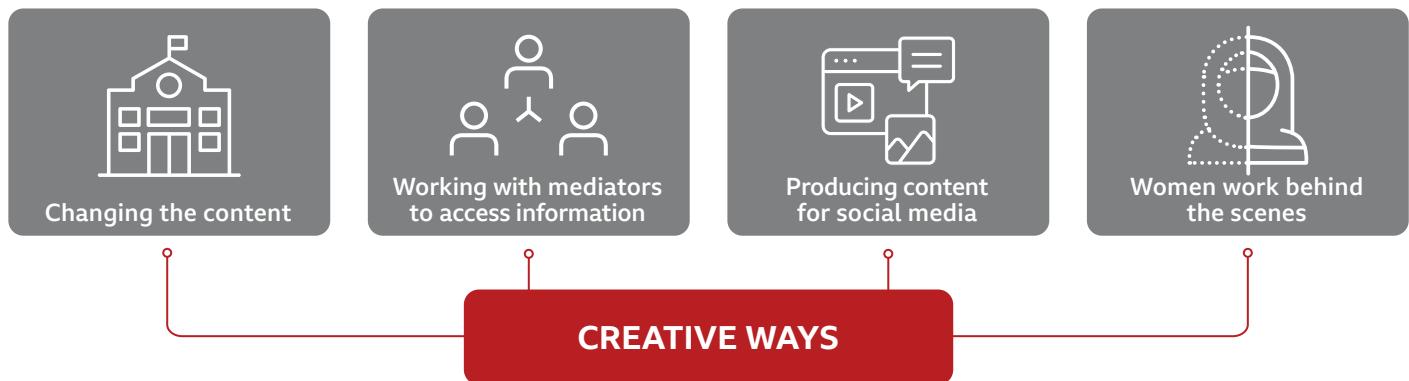
A female media owner working in Afghanistan

Chapter II: How do media operate to minimise the impact of limitations?

Despite restrictions imposed by the Taliban on media inside the country, media organisations have coped with this situation and continued producing content and sharing information for their audiences.

Based on key informant interviews with media experts and content developers, this study has identified four approaches taken by media organisations that have helped them continue their operations.

Figure 2.1 - Ways of working: how media address restrictions?



Afghan media struggling for advertising revenue as people turn to international media for entertainment

The ban on certain media content has forced audiences (who have access) to watch and listen to international media for particular types of content – mainly entertainment, music, drama and movies. Chapter III of this report highlights that GEM and Faza TV channels have become popular among Afghans, particularly women, for their entertainment content.

It has also negatively impacted media outlets' ability to get advertisements and generate income.

However, media outlets have continued producing and broadcasting content that is less sensitive and is still tolerated by the Taliban that include **educational, health and agricultural related content** that provide useful information to audiences.

“ Entertainment content such as music, film and series are banned and there is an increase in the production of Islamic content. In addition to its impact on audiences, it has also impacted the media’s ability to get advertisements and generate income ”

An independent female journalist working in Afghanistan

“Before the regime change, entertainment programs were mostly presented by women and girls. Entertainment content is no longer available with the same content, musical entertainment is banned completely, youth entertainment is also banned. However, local media navigate the restrictions on entertainment content by broadcasting educational programmes which have male presenters.”

An independent male journalist working in Afghanistan

“We have educational programs that are aimed at helping girls who are not able to go to school. We also have health-related content that discusses nutrition and mothers’ health. These are helpful as very few women in Ghor have access to health centres.”

A female media owner working in Afghanistan

Women finding creative ways to still work in the media

While media outlets operating in the provinces face far more restrictions, media outlets in Kabul are able to still employ women and have women’s contributions in their programs. Media outlets in the

provinces have spoken about the limitations they experience that are not publicly announced by the Taliban, such as the ban on women working (in general, not in the media) or the ban on the voice of women in the media.

“We used to have reports produced by female presenters and journalists. After August 2021, the Taliban warned us not to have a female voice in any of our programmes. The only thing I can do is to work from home. I prepare the reports and to not create trouble, my husband or one of our male colleagues now reads the report and we produce programmes.”

A female media owner working in Afghanistan

Difficulties accessing information

Lack of access to information is another issue that media face under the Taliban. DFA officials are not willing to share information with the media or respond to their queries about issues and incidents. Many of the media practitioners we spoke to mention these issues. Still, they have managed to solve this and access information – to some extent – through mediators and trusted sources who have good connections inside the Taliban. An independent female journalist explains this below:

With increased use of internet – particularly among youth – and to avoid Taliban scrutiny of their content, some media outlets including radio stations have been **developing content for social media**. An article published on BBC Afghan Service website indicates that producing and sharing of content on social media, particularly YouTube, has become popular among Afghans inside and outside the country, as they can share diverse content while the Taliban have imposed restrictions on TV and radio content. The report also highlights that sharing of content on YouTube has become a source of income for some young Afghan YouTubers.^x

“In the Taliban government, access to information is extremely difficult. They are not willing to share anything. In some cases, there are still trusted sources and informants who help gather information and arrange interviews with Taliban officials”

An independent female journalist working in Afghanistan

Chapter III: Current state of public access to information

3.1 Afghans' sources of information

Traditional media is the main source of news and information amongst Afghan adults, followed by friends/family

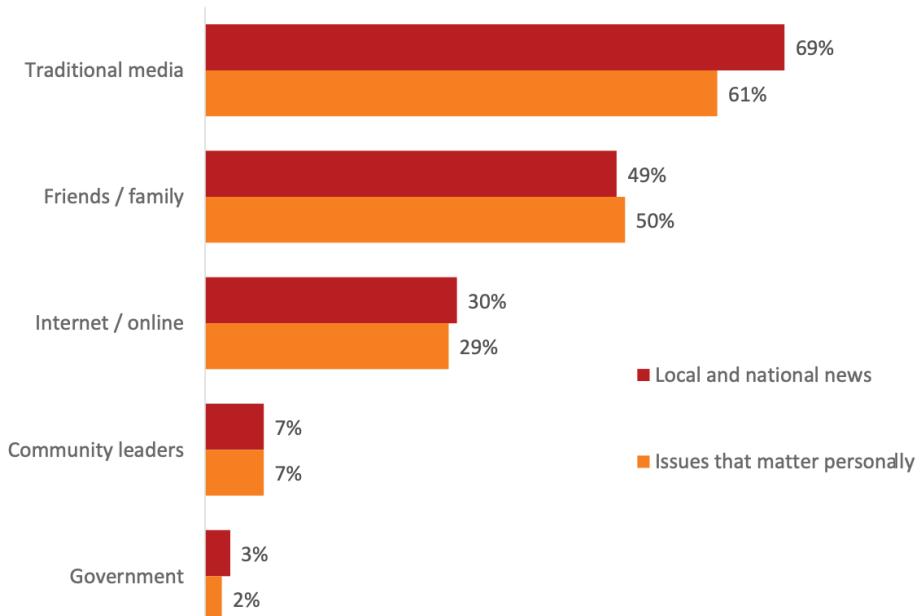
Traditional media – TV and radio – remain the main sources of information for the Afghans, as they refer to these platforms to get information about both local/national news (69% combined for TV and radio) and for issues that matter personally to them (61%). Consistent with this, respondents during qualitative interviews mentioned radio and TV as the main sources of information, though some were aware that these media forms are often restricted, and journalists often censored.

At slightly lower levels, around half of respondents mentioned friends/family (49% for local/national news and 50% personal matters), indicating that friends/family continue to be an important source of information.

Only three in ten mentioned the internet as an information source (30% for local/national news and 29% personal matters). These results further highlight that the internet is only a source of information for a minority of Afghans. Facebook is the main social media platform mentioned as an information source.

These results also show that there is little difference in the information sources used regardless of the purpose, with similar results for both local/national news or for issues that matter to respondents personally.

Figure 3.1 – Information sources (unprompted)



12. Where or from whom do you get information about local and national news? 13. Where or from whom do you get information about issues which matter to you personally? Base: All respondents (2620)



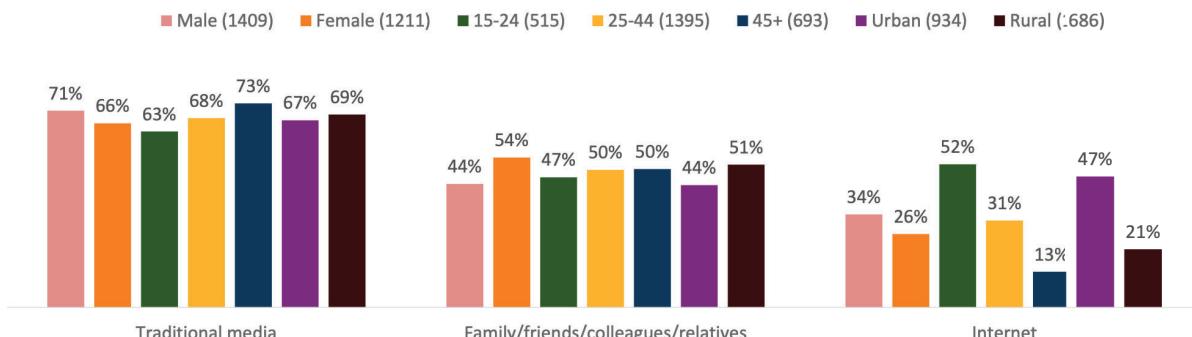
FGD on media consumption, Kandahar Province

Rural, older people, and women are more likely to depend on family, friends and relatives as the source of news.

Traditional media is the top source of local/national news cited across all sub-groups, followed by friends/family and then the internet. There were some notable differences, however, for example a higher proportion of males said traditional media was the source (71% compared to 66% females), whilst a higher proportion of females cited family/friends as the source of news (54% compared to 44% males).

Younger Afghans (aged 15-24) refer to internet for news, while older Afghans (73% compared to 68% among 25-44s and 63% among 15-24) are more reliant on traditional media.

Figure 3.2 – Information sources for local/national news (unprompted)



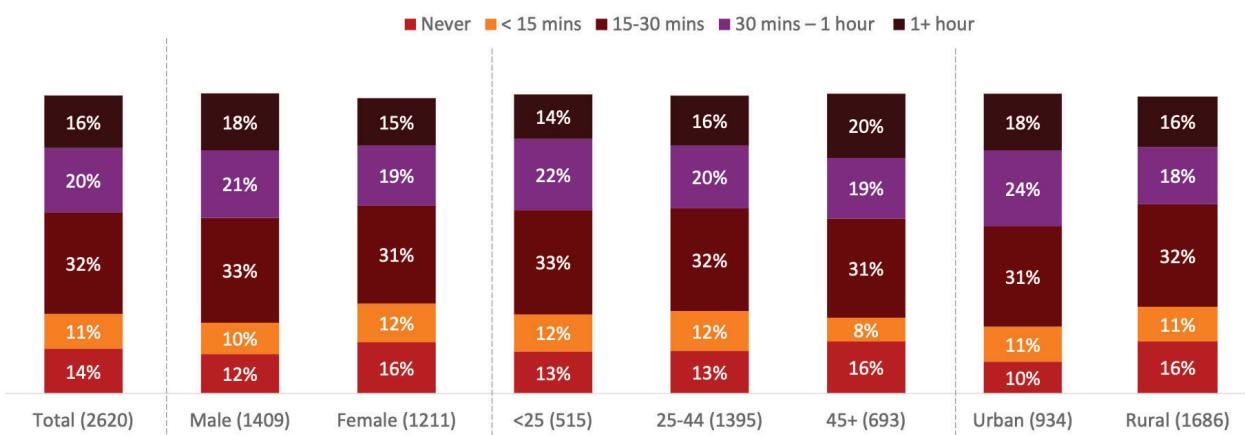
12. Where or from whom do you get information about local and national news? Base: All respondents (2620)

3.2 News consumption

Over half of Afghans spend at least 15 minutes consuming news. Men and older people (45+) spend the most time, often spending more than an hour doing so

The majority of Afghans invest between 15 minutes to an hour daily in consuming news to stay updated of current affairs. And 16% dedicate more than an hour to this pursuit, underscoring a keen interest in staying well-informed. The results were similar across the demographic groups, with women also spending considerable time watching or listening to news.

Figure 3.3 – Time spent watching / listening / reading news in a typical day



11. In a typical day, how long do you normally spend watching/listening/reading news? Base: All respondents (2,620)

Chapter IV: Attitudes towards media in Afghanistan

Over half of Afghans state that they check multiple sources to ensure accuracy of information.

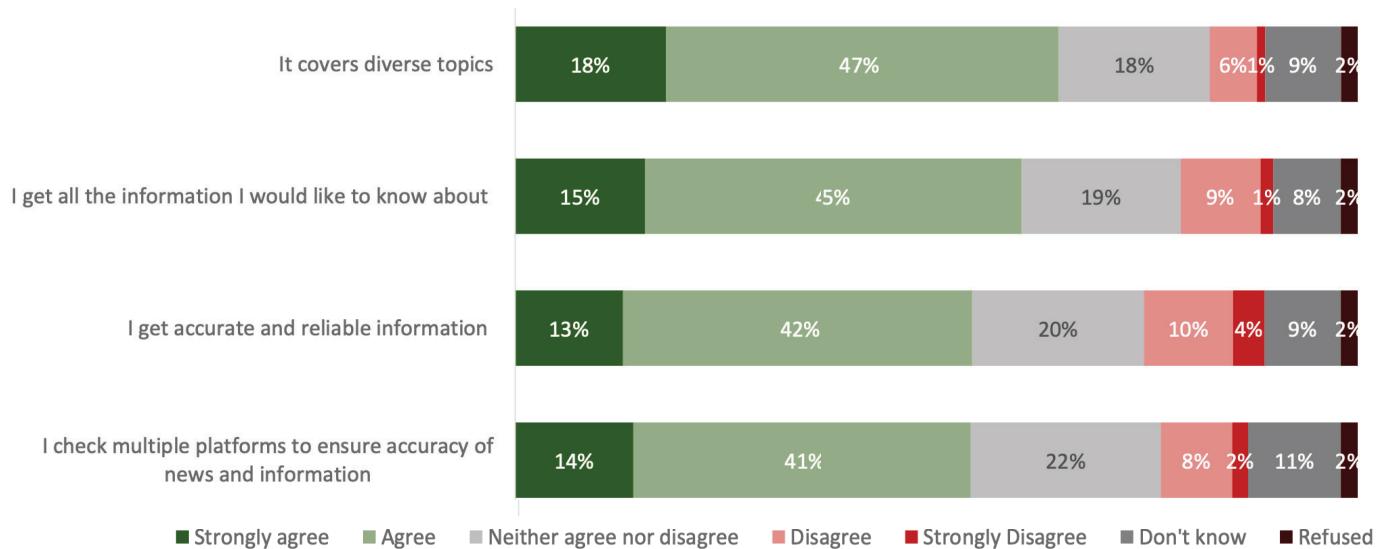
When asked about their attitudes towards media in Afghanistan, respondents were generally positive. The majority agree that the media allows them to get all the information they would like to know about (60%) and is accurate and reliable (55%). The positive attitudes towards media in Afghanistan highlights the fact that Afghan audiences acknowledge the limitations media face

under the Taliban and are still happy that media are active and provide information.

In line with this, most respondents (55%) agreed that they check multiple platforms to ensure the accuracy of the news and information.

Respondents were also asked how much they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements regarding the different individual media outlets: **DFA controlled, private and international media**. Overall, respondents expressed positive attitudes towards these media outlets indicating that they share accurate and unbiased information and tell the whole story. However, females, younger people, educated and those who live in urban areas were more critical.

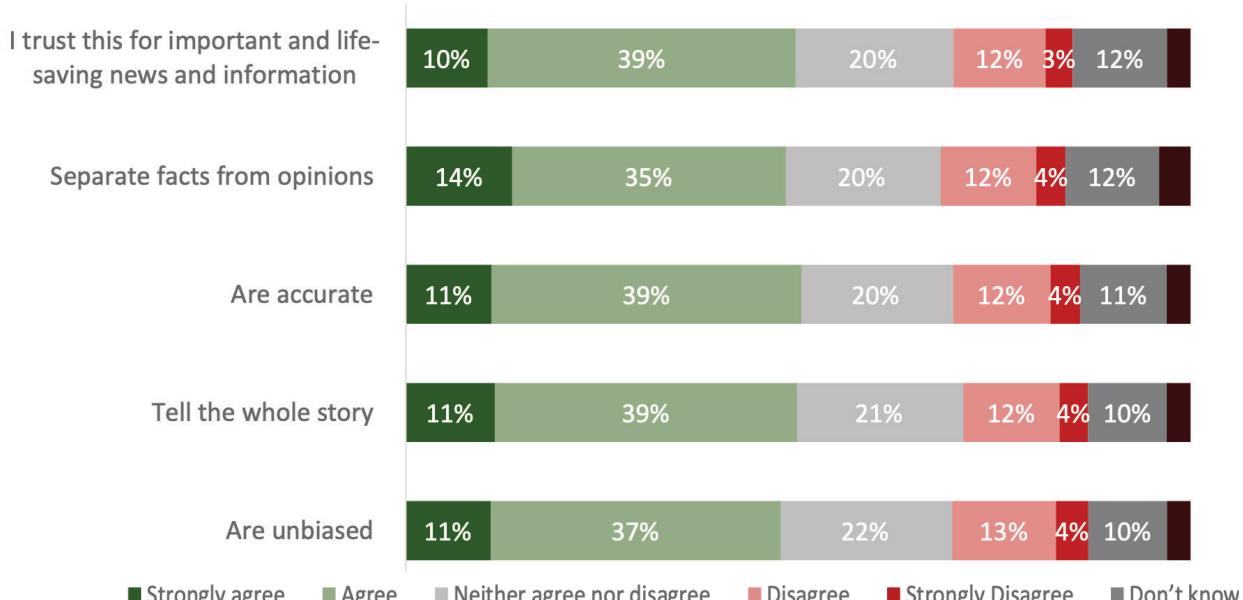
Figure 4.5 – Attitudes towards media in Afghanistan



M1. Thinking about the media in Afghanistan, please tell me to what extent do you agree or disagree that...
Base: All respondents (2620)

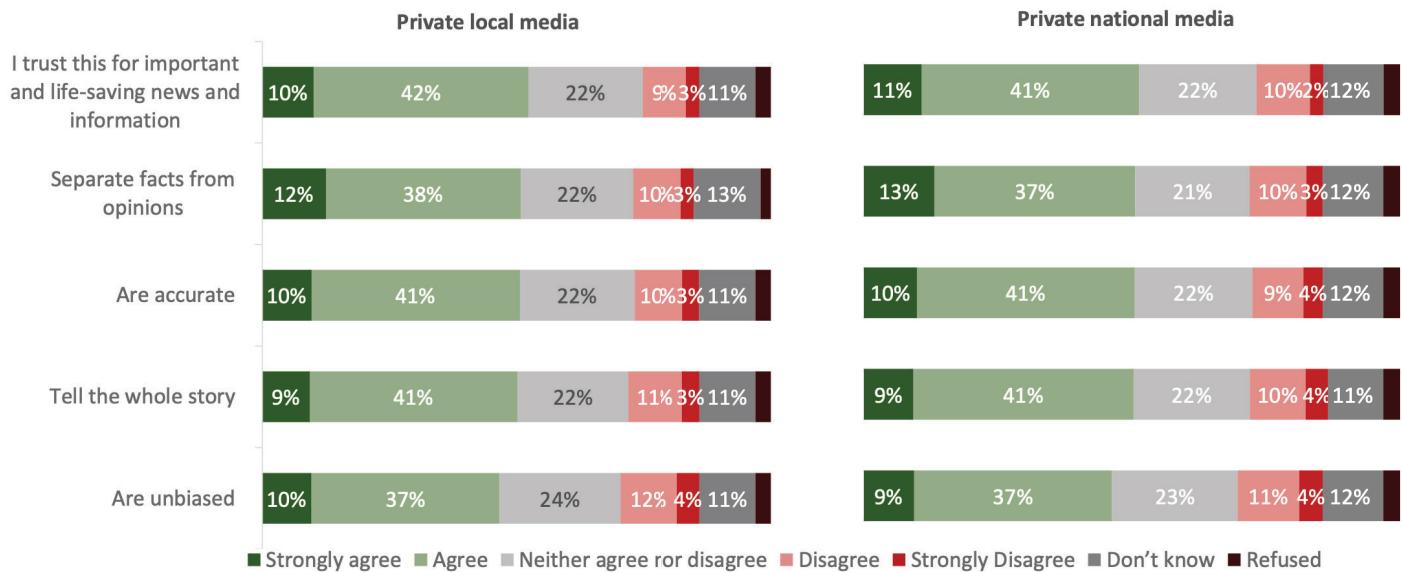
Figure 4.6 – Attitudes towards DFA controlled media

DFA sponsored media



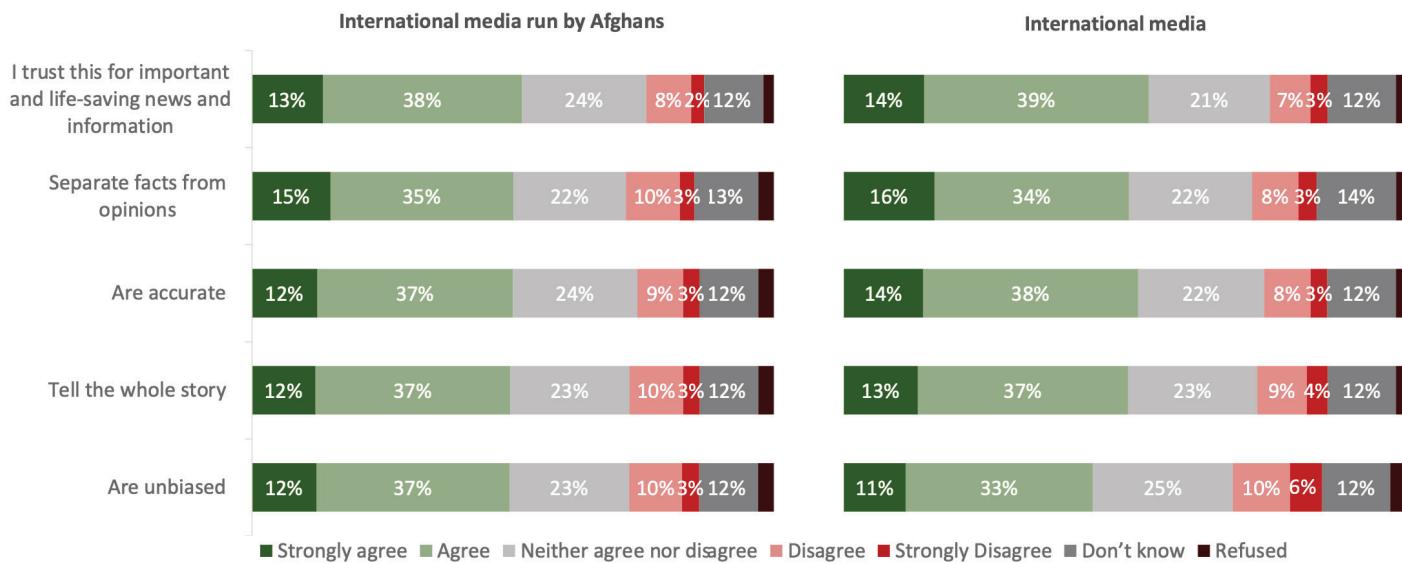
M2. Thinking about news, please tell me to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements for each of these media outlets. Base: All respondents (2620)

Figure 4.7 – Attitudes towards private local and national media



M2. Thinking about news, please tell me to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements for each of these media outlets. Base: All respondents (2620)

Figure 4.8 – Attitudes towards international media



M2. Thinking about news, please tell me to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements for each of these media outlets. Base: All respondents (2620)

Chapter V: Mis-, dis- and malinformation (MDM) in Afghanistan

“Mis- and disinformation are a significant problem in Afghanistan due to limited access to first-hand information and the restricted nature of the information available. Mis/disinformation circulates via social media platforms, causing panic and confusion among the population.”

A female media owner working in Afghanistan

“Taliban and news groups and journalists who support the Taliban are spreading disinformation. Meanwhile, some international media that want speed but not accuracy sometimes broadcast misinformation. People also spread disinformation. Social media is the main source of misinformation and disinformation. No one trusts but people still refer to social media. However, people trust verified accounts.”

An independent journalist working in Afghanistan

5.1 Frequency of coming across misleading or false information

Around half of Afghans have come across misleading or false information

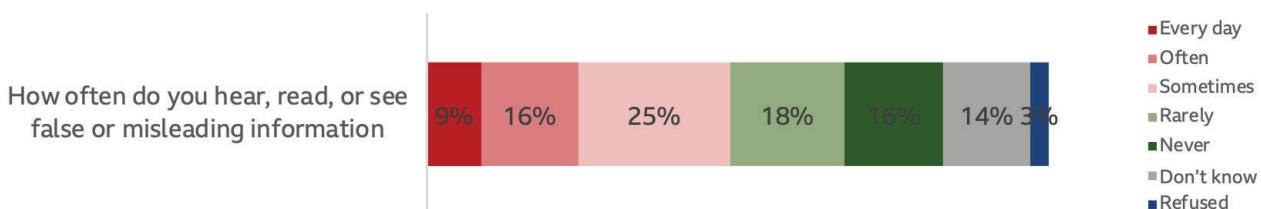
The quotes above summarise the spread and sources of MDM in Afghanistan currently. Survey findings indicate that around half (49%) have heard, read, or seen false or misleading information, whether online or in person or through any media, with a similar proportion (48%) saying they “rarely”, “never” hear/read/see it or they “don’t know” about it.

Younger audiences and those living in urban areas, who have higher access to internet, have come

across false or misleading information more. For example, 58% of 15-25s believe they come across it either “everyday”, “often” or “sometimes”, compared to 42% among 45+. Similarly, 53% of urban respondents believe they come across it either “everyday”, “often” or “sometimes”, compared to 47% of rural respondents.

Females, older people, rural and illiterate people were more likely to not know whether they had heard read or seen false or misleading information online, in person or through any media. These groups are more likely to have less access to media, particularly internet, and also show a lack of awareness about false and misinformation. They could have come across such information but failed to recognise it.

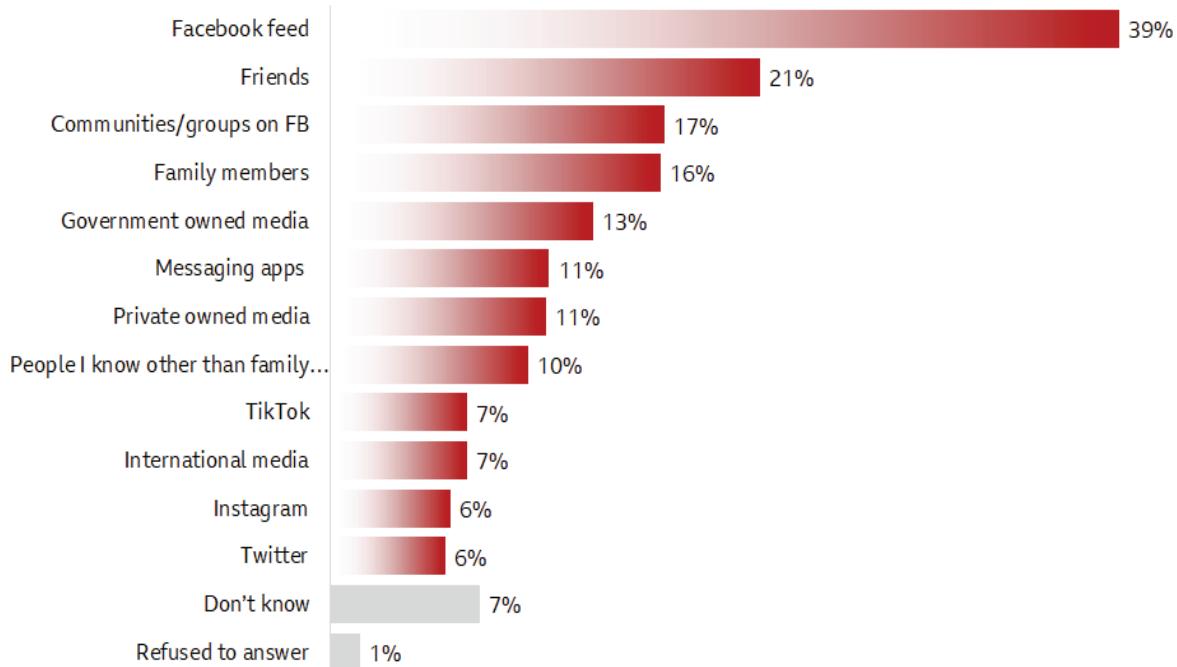
Figure 5.1 – Frequency of hearing / reading / seeing false or misleading information



ID3. How often do you hear, read, or see false or misleading information? It could be online or in-person or through any media. Base: All respondents (2620)

Facebook, friends and family members and Taliban-controlled media have been mentioned as the main sources of false or misleading information. This is concerning as social media, friends and family members are also the main sources of information for many Afghans.

Figure 5.2 – Sources false or misleading information (unprompted)



ID4. Where do you hear, read, or see it? Base: All who everyday / very often / sometimes hear, read or see false or misleading information (1283)

This finding is backed by the qualitative research as study participants have mentioned social media and Taliban as the main sources of misleading or false information. Some participants highlight that people share misleading information on Facebook deliberately in order to get popular.

“ People share false information on Facebook about interesting topics to attract more followers. They can earn money to have more viewers ,”

A 26-year-old woman from Ghor province

Some journalists who were interviewed believe that Taliban members or pro-Taliban social media users are the people who share MDM.

“ Taliban, through their members and pro-Taliban social media, are spreading some fake news ,”

A female freelancer journalist working in Afghanistan

5.2 Concerns about false or misleading information

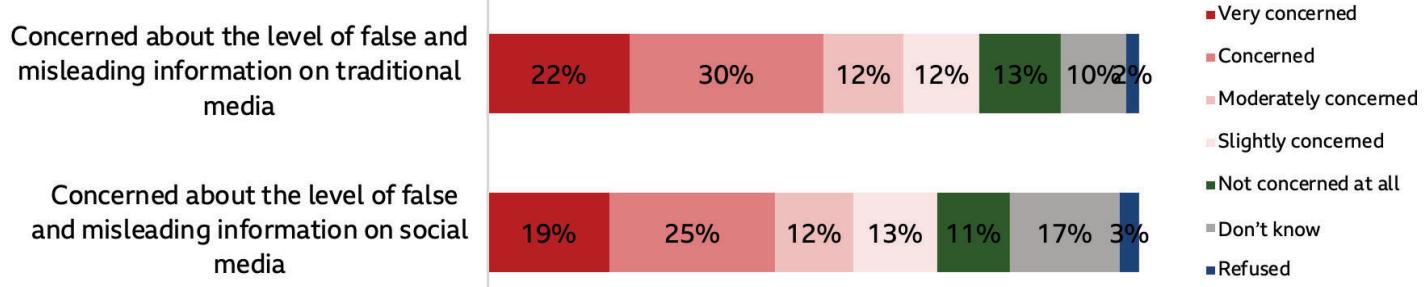
Over three-quarters of Afghans are concerned about false and misleading information on traditional and social media

76% of study respondents expressed “concerns” at some level about false and misleading information on traditional, whilst 13% were “not at all concerned” and 10% were not sure. As expected, respondents with higher access to any form of media – young, educated and urban residents – expressed

higher concerns. While female, older, illiterate people, and those living in rural areas recorded a higher percentage of “don’t know” that highlights their lack of awareness about false and misleading information.

Interestingly, a slightly lower percentage of respondents have expressed their concerns about false and misleading information on social media (70% compared to 76% for traditional media). This could be due to a belief that Taliban control content of TV and radio outlets in Afghanistan, while Facebook and other social media platforms are considered to be free of the Taliban control.

Figure 5.3 – Level of concern about false or misleading information on social media

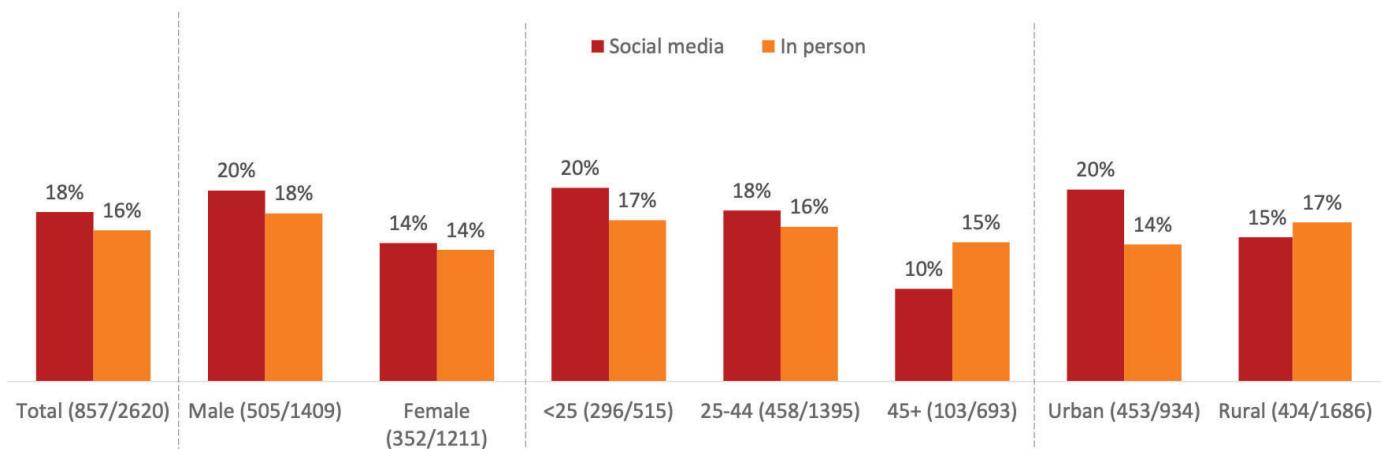


5.3 Sharing of misleading information on social media / in person

Under a fifth (18%) of Afghans have ever shared misleading information on social media, with a slightly lower proportion (16%) saying they had ever shared misleading information in person.

Men and younger people are more likely than women and older people to have shared information that they later realised was false or misleading on social media (20% compared to 14% females) or in person in-person (18% men compared to 14% women and 20% young compared to 10% old people).

Figure 5.3 – Ever shared information that you later realised was false or misleading on social media / in person



ID5. Have you ever shared information or news on social media or via messaging app that you later realised was false or misleading? ID6. Have you ever shared information or news in-person that you later realised was false or misleading? Base ID5: All who use the internet (base in brackets) / Base ID6: All respondents (2620)

Participants in the qualitative research shared instances they had come across and/or shared false information. They mentioned coming across false or misleading information about issues including

“We [women] are concerned about our right to education and work and therefore, follow news about these issues seriously. I saw a post from a trusted person in Facebook stating that Taliban have allowed women to work. I shared this in a WhatsApp group of women who follow women related issues. Later, I came to know that it was not true.”

A 20-year-old woman from Ghor province

“A few months ago, I saw some news about death of a singer. I posted it in my story. After this, I checked other sources and also saw a live programme of the singer. I understood it was not true and regretted sharing the false information.”

A 35-year-old man from Nangarhar province

5.4 Countering MDM

It is a lot harder now for media outlets to check and verify sources due to the lack of available accurate, trusted information to cross reference with.

Despite widespread sharing of false and misleading information in traditional and social media in

opening of schools for girls, women's work, news about death of a public figure (a singer or writer) and an announcement of Eid.

Afghanistan, most people do nothing about it. When they come across false information, some have mentioned they check other credible sources of information – such as a trusted TV or radio channel, journalists or friends or verified social media accounts - to confirm the information. could have come across such information but failed to recognise it.

“ When I hear some news, I ask about the source and check with my friends and classmates to ensure it is true. If I come across false information, I comment or post in social media to inform others that the news is not true ,”

A 23-year-old man from Kandahar province

“ To confirm a news item, I refer to social media accounts that are verified and have a blue tick. They never share false information ,”

An 18-year-old woman from Ghor province

“ When I hear a news item, I check most of the news channels such as BBC, Afghanistan International and ToloNews. If the news is true, all these channels will broadcast, and I can trust ,”

A 56-year-old man from Herat province

Journalists and media practitioners, on the other hand, have contrasting views about the media's ability to counter MDM in Afghanistan. Some journalists believe domestic media in Afghanistan or even international media are unable to counter MDM, and in some cases these media channels share mis and disinformation for different reasons. According to them, domestic media in Afghanistan does not have access to information, and in most cases, the media cannot cover sensitive issues because the Taliban do not allow them. This is while the international media do not have a presence on the ground to verify a news story.

These participants also mentioned that media channels operating inside Afghanistan are afraid of the Taliban and therefore do not verify or reject rumors about sensitive issues.

Some media owners we spoke to mentioned they take the necessary steps to ensure news and information they broadcast is correct. They have deployed journalists and are working with freelancer journalists to get updated information from different parts of the country and verify news before they broadcast.

"In the past proper fact checking was taken in place with regards to information, for instance from people, NGOs and relevant authorities. Now people worry about their safety if sharing information so don't want to share information and Taliban authorities give vague and unreliable data."

A female media owner working in Afghanistan

"We do not broadcast any information or news until we are sure that the information is correct. We have journalists and freelance journalists in most of the provinces. In one instance, we broadcast a news story about the death of a person, but later came to know that it was not true. We apologised."

An editor of a national media channel

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

While there are still many sources of information and news available to Afghan audiences, the range of voices being heard, and the subjects being covered have decreased since the fall of Kabul and the return of the Taliban. Many radio and TV stations have closed for financial reasons or restrictions by the Taliban, while others are censored or in most cases are self-censoring for fear of breaking a written, spoken or unknown decree. Audiences are keenly aware of this, as they are aware of the rise of MDM, though at the same time they are knowingly consuming and, in some cases, sharing it.

Media access and usage

Despite increasing levels of poverty, there is a clear interest in reliable and independent (non-DFA) sources of news and information. Access to news and information via social media continues to grow, particularly among younger audiences.

Trust in the media

Despite this level of interest in news, there is a fairly high level of mistrust in many media outlets. This is truer of Afghanistan-based media than international ones.

Media's role in accountability

Despite censorship and Taliban control and almost no room for investigative journalism by local journalists, domestic media – to an extent – enjoy relative freedom to cover important issues, such as reports by human rights bodies, arrest of human rights advocates, and invite DFA representatives to respond to these reports or criticism raised by human rights bodies. Some national radio outlets have call-in programmes with DFA representatives as guests, where people call and raise their concerns. For instance, *Safay-e-Shahr* (voice of city) is the most popular show on radio network Arman FM where they invite a DFA representative to answer to questions from the audiences on different issues. These programs contribute to some level of accountability of the DFA.

Media preferences

This survey clearly shows that audiences are missing the variety of programming now forbidden by the Taliban. Music, drama and other types of entertainment programming has severely reduced on both TV and radio, to be replaced by more factual and in some cases more religious programming.

Mis-, dis- and malinformation

Mis-, dis- and malinformation are rife in Afghanistan, and there are increasing levels of awareness of these issues. Many people report being aware of these possibilities and are verifying news stories with other sources. Some also report receiving misinformation from, and/or sharing it with friends and family.

Women's access to media

Since the virtual ban on women working, many of them find they are at home during the day and have taken to watching more TV at that time. Women also state that they particularly miss the former variety of programming, especially entertainment.

Recommendations

With these points in mind, it is clearly very important to continue supporting media outlets to help them produce **high quality news and information** programming through traditional and social media platforms. There is great demand for this, though unfortunately the difficult economic situation is causing many private media houses and small independent stations to struggle. Given that many media houses are using social media to distribute their stories, more attention should be given to this as an area of support – mobile journalism and safe use of social media in particular.

Countering mis-and disinformation will be very important as it is clearly on the rise in Afghanistan. AI-generated misinformation is also likely to increase with the great ease of using AI apps and platforms at virtually no cost. The existing Digital Media Literacy and Digital Safety courses created and run by BBC Media Action should be continuously updated to keep this in mind.

Media run by Afghan diaspora play an important role as a source of uncensored and credible information as well as entertainment content. They need to be supported to continue programming and to invest in accessible channels for in-country audiences.

With the greatly reduced **variety of programming** being broadcast, and the severe reduction of entertainment programmes, creative ways of reaching audiences who are less interested in news will have to be found. Programming broadly labelled 'educational' is still allowed and being produced. This approach will be vital to provide various audiences with information they can use in their increasingly difficult daily lives.

Women have been particularly hard hit by the changes to what is allowed in the media, both as contributors and as audiences. Continuing to support women's media which are still producing content, including news and information programmes, will be greatly appreciated by media houses and

women's audiences alike. It is possible that the currently difficult situation will deteriorate further, as decrees on women's rights are produced frequently and usually with no notice, so media support programmes like ASP should pay special attention to the situation of women. Due to being forced to stay at home during the day, there is an opportunity to reach more of them through daytime programming, on both radio and in particular TV.

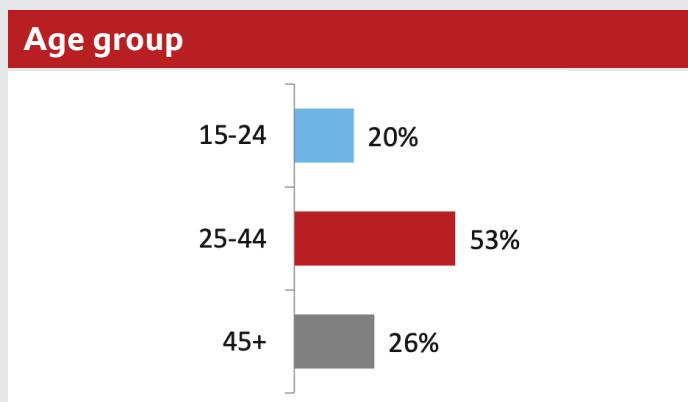
Finally, as the media situation continues to change on a monthly basis, particularly in terms of what is and is not allowed, it is recommended to **run similar surveys** to this at regular intervals. It would also be possible to create a shorter 'snapshot' survey in response to a particularly difficult change arising.



APPENDIX

Profile of study respondents

Across age groups, the majority of the sample (53%) was aged 25-44, a quarter (26%) aged 45+ and a fifth (20%) 15-24. Seventeen respondents (0.6%) did not know their age.

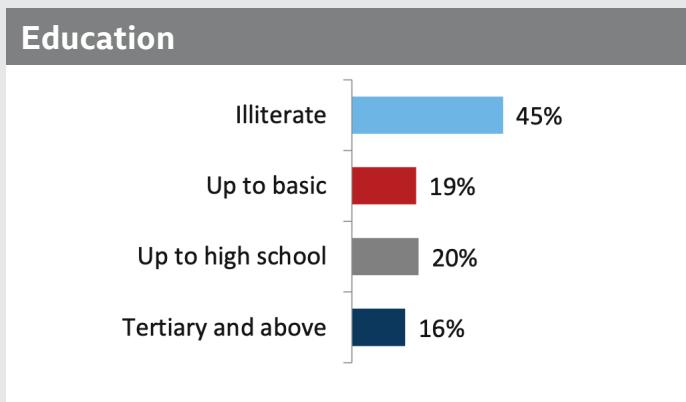
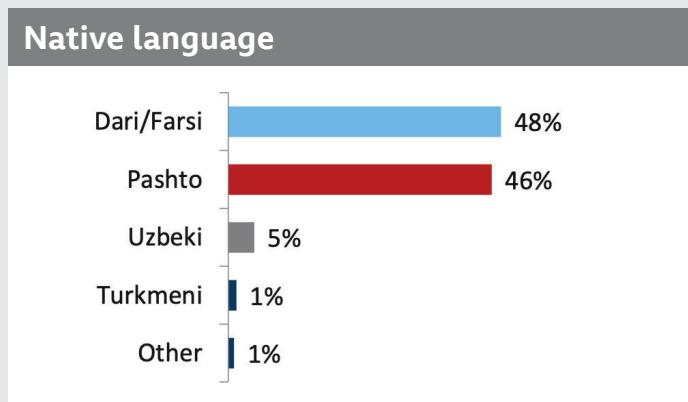
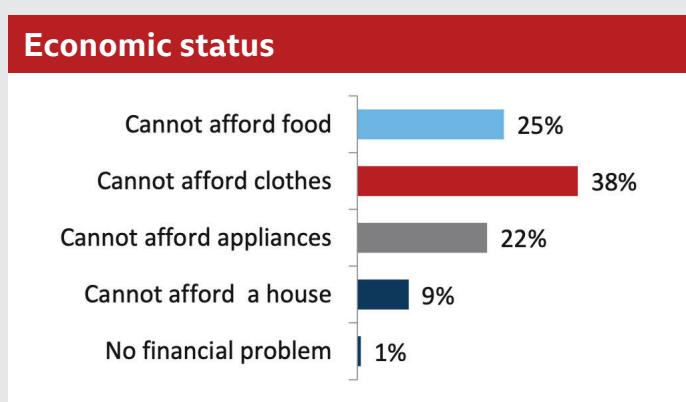
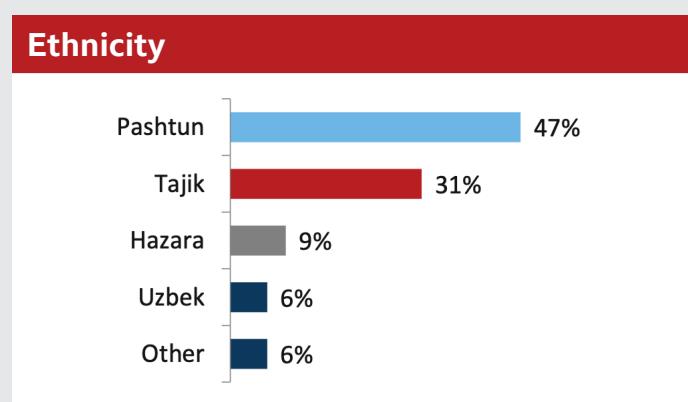


The survey also achieved a good level of ethnic representation compared to the estimated distribution in Afghanistan – Pashtuns make up just under half of the total sample (48%) and Tajiks just under a third (31%), followed by Hazaras (9%) and

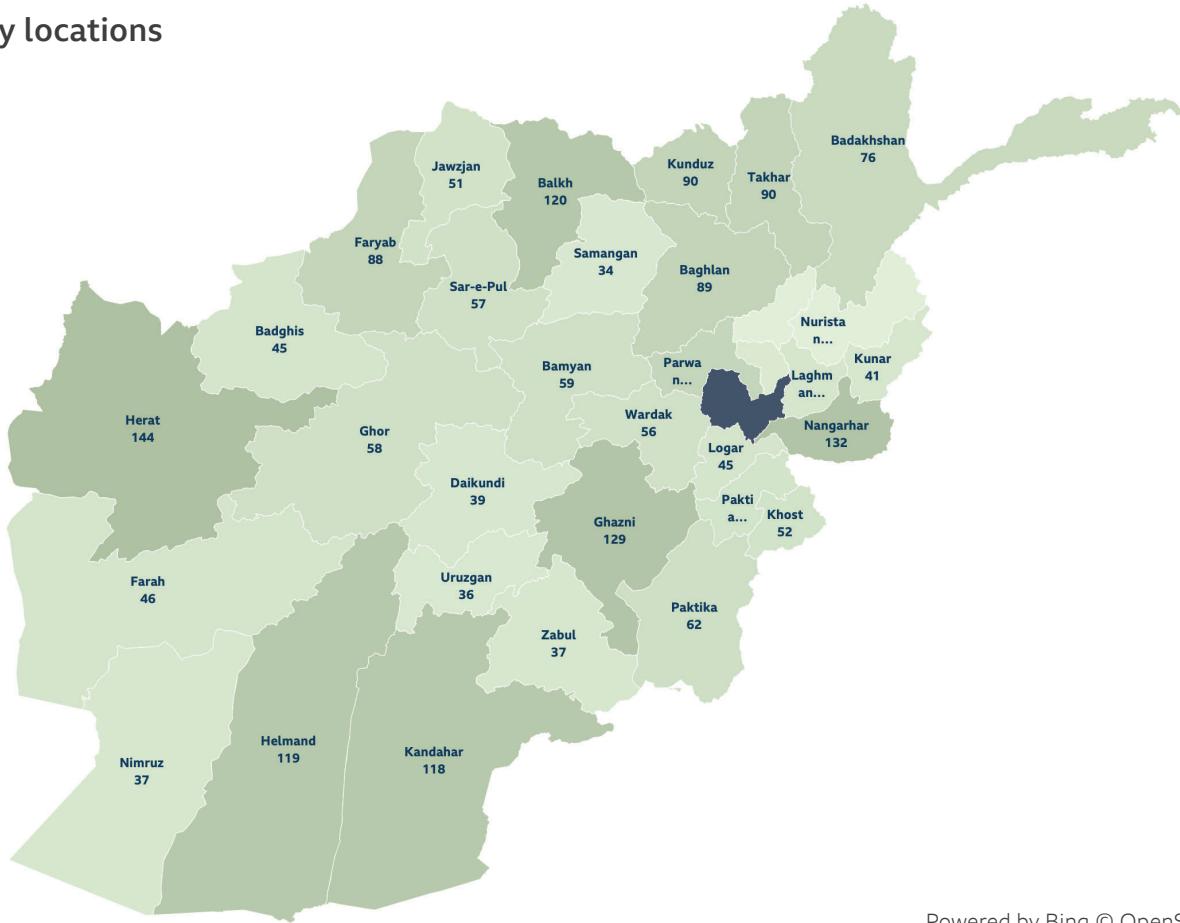
then Uzbeks (6%). Linked with ethnicity, the survey also reveals a significant dominance of Dari/Farsi and Pashto languages, with these collectively accounting for 93% of the respondents' native language.

The income distribution achieved in the survey highlights the high levels of impoverishment in Afghanistan with a quarter (25%) of the 2,620 interviews saying they cannot afford to buy basic necessities such as food. Making up the largest proportion of the sample, 38% said they can afford food but are not able to afford clothes, with just a fifth (22%) of the sample saying they can afford food/clothes but are not able to afford appliances such as a TV or fridge.

Highlighting the lower levels of education in Afghanistan, among the total sample, just under half said they are illiterate (45%), with a fifth (19%) having completed only a basic education. A fifth (20%) had completed high school whilst the lowest proportion (16%) had finished tertiary or above education.



Survey locations



Powered by Bing © OpenStreetMap

- i USIP. (2023, January 25). *Afghanistan's Media Landscape Amid Taliban Rule*. Retrieved from www.usip.org/publications/2023/01/event-extra-afghanistans-media-landscape-amid-taliban-rule
- ii Reporters without Borders. (2023, April 10). *Afghanistan*. Retrieved from <https://rsf.org/en/country/afghanistan>
- iii BBC Media Action. (2023). *Afghanistan Media Landscape*.
- iv McKay, H. (2021, September 21). *Afghanistan Has Its Own Fake News Problem – Special Report*. Retrieved from <https://deadline.com/2021/09/taliban-afghanistan-fake-news-media-propaganda-1234838702/>
- v According to CIA data, as of 2021, there were an estimated 57 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 inhabitants in Afghanistan. For details, refer to: Afghanistan - The World Factbook (cia.gov)
- vi Telephones - mobile cellular - The World Factbook (cia.gov)
- vii <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-afghanistan>
- viii *Bamdade Khush* which means happy morning is a morning show broadcasted on Tolo TV. The show includes social, cultural, Islamic and health topics. care topics.
- ix Afghan Star was a reality TV show competition on Tolo TV that featured singers across Afghanistan. The show premiered in 2005 and ended in 2021 after the Taliban took over Kabul.
- x Haidari, M. (2023, August 25). The expansion of the YouTube market in Afghanistan amid restrictions imposed by the Taliban. Retrieved from BBC Persian: <https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/c3gwnjrm20o>

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