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## **Afghan journalists in a balancing act: Coping with deteriorating security**

**Kurzfassung:** Die Situation afghanischer Journalisten hat sich infolge einer Vielzahl von Bedrohungen verschlechtert. Sie arbeiten in einer Situation, die durch geringe Bildung und Medienkompetenz der Bevölkerung geprägt ist. Bedrohungen durch die Taliban und andere Aufständische lassen viele Journalisten, in ständiger Angst zu leben. Dieser Artikel basiert auf Interviews mit 28 afghanischen Journalisten. Sie berichten, dass sie weniger bereit sind, Risiken einzugehen, als zuvor, und ihre Redakteure sind dies noch weniger. In Medieninstitutionen sind Routinen bei weitem nicht immer vorhanden, und etliche Journalisten haben keine notwendige Sicherheitsausrüstung erhalten. Fast alle berichten von einem posttraumatischen Belastungssyndrom, einige haben sogar körperliche Schäden erlitten. Abschließend stellen wir fest, dass sich afghanische Journalisten in einem Balanceakt zwischen gewalttätigen Aufständischen, unterdrückenden Behörden und Medienbesitzern befinden.

**Abstract:** Afghan journalists have been experiencing a deteriorating situation, due to a multitude of threats. They operate in a situation of low popular literacy, as well as low media literacy. Threats from Taliban and other insurgents cause many journalists to live in constant fear. This article is based on interviews with 28 Afghan journalists. They report that they are less willing to take risks than before, their editors even less so. Routines are far from always in place in media institutions, and quite a few journalists have not received necessary security equipment. Almost all report experiencing post-traumatic stress syndrome, some have even experienced physical harm. We conclude by stating that Afghan journalists are caught in a balancing act, facing powerful violent insurgents, oppressive authorities and media owners.

### **1. Introduction**

Afghanistan has become one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists and media workers.<sup>1</sup> In Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) Press Freedom Index for 2017, the country is ranked number 120 out of 180, the same as in 2016.<sup>2</sup> Media workers receive threats from officials and face a situation where there is a lack of access to information to assure accurate reporting, not least on sensitive issues such as corruption.<sup>3</sup> Extremists threaten journalists, as they increasingly want them silenced and their media closed.

The current situation calls for more research on how Afghan journalists cope. This article first presents an overview of the situation for journalism in Afghanistan, including the media landscape and its history, then summarizes relevant studies of Afghan journalists, and third, gives the results of this study, based on interviews with 28 reporters from a variety of regions, ethnicities, and media outlets, including both female and male professionals. Our main research question is the following: *How do Afghan journalists view their professional safety?* We conclude by summing up the challenges faced by reporters in a country where the security situation has gone from bad to worse, while experiencing closures of media outlets and an exodus of media workers.

### **2. Background**

The first newspaper published in Afghanistan, *Shamsunnahar*, was established in 1873. The ten years from 1874-1883 witnessed an initial growth of media in Afghanistan. The country gained full independence from Britain in 1919, and during the rule of King Amanullah (1919-1929) the first press law was passed, radio broadcasting started, and the first publication for women, *Ershadun-naswan*, was established. Starting in the 1940s, some independent media appeared, and during the democratic decade from 1964 to 1973<sup>4</sup>, political parties set up their own newspapers, private media grew, and independent media were recognized by the Press Law (1964). The Soviet occupation imposed its particular partyline censorship (Majrooh 1987). After a period of post-Soviet civil war (1992-1996), the Taliban (1996-2001) introduced a period of darkness with hardly any mass media at all.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.dailyinfographic.com/10-most-dangerous-countries-for-journalists> Afghanistan is one of the ten most dangerous countries, based on statistics from 2000-2015. In 2017, it was ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> by RSF.

<sup>2</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/afghanistan> Accessed 20.10.2017

<sup>3</sup> Afghanistan ranks 177 out of 180 on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index 2017: <https://www.transparency.org/country/AFG> Accessed 20.09.2018

<sup>4</sup> Afghanistan introduced universal suffrage in 1964, and elections were held in 1965.

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, free media and freedom of expression have largely been regarded as a success story.

But the realization of such values depends on a safe environment where journalists do not live in constant fear of reprisals when doing their work. The media environment is changing, however, in an "extensive transition process involving politics, economics – and digitization" (Carlsson & Pöythäri 2017:13). Part of these changes are due to the ways global powers – be they military alliances between states or terrorist networks – worsen the security situation for citizens in different countries. Media researchers should take these contexts into account in their analyses of journalism performance (see also Freedman & Thusu 2012). "Achieving 'press freedom' and developing 'independent media' are not necessarily interchangeable concepts" (Kalathil 2011). As donations dry up and media houses subsequently close their doors, prospects for independent media diminish, while formally, press freedom may at least partly survive. This seems to be the case in Afghanistan. More than 200 media outlets, including TV and radio stations, news agencies and newspapers, have been shut down since 2014, mostly due to security and financial problems.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Forty years of war

Afghanistan has been ravaged by violent conflict and war for almost forty years since the coup d'état by the PDPA (People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, the pro-Soviet communist party) in 1978. More than two-thirds of Afghanistan's population are less than 25 years old.<sup>6</sup> This means that the overwhelming majority of its citizens have not experienced a peaceful period in their lifetime, although they may have heard nostalgic accounts from their parents and grandparents, recalling particularly the last period of the long reign by King Mohammad Zahir Shah (1933 – 1973).<sup>7</sup> The violent conflict, however, has lasted much longer, partly due to the country's geopolitical situation and more recently to its valiant struggle against colonialism in three Anglo-Afghan wars (Eide & Skaufjord 2014).

It would be preposterous to label Afghanistan a 'post-conflict country' (Eide 2016a). Currently, a variety of different 'opposition forces' threaten the country's stability. The Taliban, being the largest group (including the partly independent Haqqani network), controls<sup>8</sup> large parts of the country, particularly in the South-East, but their presence is being felt in most of the country's 34 provinces. IS has gained control over pockets close to the Afghan-Pakistani border, mostly in Nangarhar and Kunar provinces, and have claimed to be responsible for violent attacks in Kabul and Jalalabad in 2018. In spite of extensive Western involvement to quell terrorism, post 9-11 (the US alone is said to have spent more than a trillion dollars<sup>9</sup>), the situation has developed from relatively hopeful to one of severe risk. Symptoms of this development are the large numbers of Afghans leaving the country each year. In 2015 and 2016, approximately 203,000 Afghans arrived in Germany alone.<sup>10</sup> The exodus of journalists is comparatively small, but according to estimates (Nai), around 500 have left the country since 2014. In addition, the number of international reporters based in Afghanistan is dwindling, and international news bureaus in Afghanistan are almost exclusively staffed by local journalists (O'Donnell 2018). More than 100 million dollars have been spent to support media infrastructure and training of Afghan journalists, according to Relly and Zanger (2016, numbers from 2012), and the number is probably higher now.

### 4. Media landscape

Although the biggest political support for media and freedom of expression in Afghanistan dates from the years after 2001, freedom of expression was already recognized in the 1964 constitution. But beginning with the 1973 coup d'état and throughout various wars, Afghan journalism has been subject to a variety of restrictions. The Afghan Constitution (2004) and the current Mass Media Law (2015) recognize freedom of expression and media freedom in Afghanistan.<sup>11</sup> In 2018, Afghanistan had 96 operational TV stations, including about 20 run by the

<sup>5</sup> According to Nai Supporting Open Media in Afghanistan, a media advocacy and training organization, which keeps track of media development and journalist safety.

<sup>6</sup> <http://afghanistan.unfpa.org/node/15227> Accessed 23.10.2017

<sup>7</sup> His cousin, Daoud, took power in a fairly peaceful coup d'état in 1973.

<sup>8</sup> NYT 23.08.2017: <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/23/world/asia/afghanistan-us-taliban-isis-control.html>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.thebalance.com/cost-of-afghanistan-war-timeline-economic-impact-4122493>;  
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2017/08/24/the-financial-cost-of-u-s-involvement-in-afghanistan-infographic/#540dddf61ee3>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/afghan-exodus-afghan-asylum-seekers-in-europe-3-case-study-germany/> Accessed 18.10.2017

<sup>11</sup> Article 34 of the Constitution states: "Freedom of expression shall be inviolable. Every Afghan shall have the right to express thoughts through speech, writing, illustrations as well as other means in accordance with provisions of this constitution. Every Afghan shall have the right, according to provisions of law, to print and publish on subjects without prior submission to state authorities. Directives related to the press, radio and television as well as publications and other mass media shall be regulated by law."

government; 190 radio stations and 231 print outlets, including 26 dailies around the country (Nai 2018). Many of them are controlled by political actors (Relly & Zanger 2016, Cary 2012), some by warlords with their particular agendas. Media outlets such as the *Sepehr*, *Watan* and *Watandar* TV stations are currently owned by warlords, including the famous extremist leader Gulbudin Hekmatyar.<sup>12</sup> According to the Afghan Mass Media Law, ownership is either governmental or private.

As for media consumption in the country, 70 per cent report using radio for news and information, 66 per cent TV, 42 per cent mobile phone, 12 per cent Internet, and many report obtaining news from mosques (48 per cent) or the community shura<sup>13</sup> (39 per cent) (Warren et al. 2016, 133). Only 11 per cent of all households do not possess a mobile phone, and only 27 per cent of those who have such phones have Internet access on them (ibid., 136). Another finding is that the more TV citizens watch, the less confidence they seem to have in the current government (ibid., 138). More than half the TV viewing population, according to this research, feel that the National unity government (2015-) is doing a "somewhat bad" or "very bad" job. Afghanistan seems to be a country whose people greatly distrust their rulers. This is, admittedly, not an unusual phenomenon, but in a country where the war-weary population has repeatedly been given hopes of better prospects by various external and internal actors, it may play a more important role than elsewhere.

## 5. Deaths and threats

Since 2016, at least 40 journalists and media workers have been killed, mostly by Taliban or ISIS (Daesh).<sup>14</sup> Although a procedure for journalist security and safety was being developed by the authorities in 2017, it has not yet been properly implemented. Cases of violence against journalists increased during 2018, and many cases are attributed to the National Unity government, which took power in 2015.<sup>15</sup> Journalists are often treated with verbal contempt in press conferences hosted by the president and his aides, and this has provoked strong critique from journalists. In one incident, on a TV show (Ariana TV) the president's spokesperson called journalists potato-sellers. In reaction, many journalists hash-tagged their comments with #yesIamapotoseller.

After Syria and Mexico, RSF (Reporters without Borders) reported Afghanistan to be the "third deadliest country in 2017 for violence against media workers".<sup>16</sup> When it comes to threats and assassinations, figures vary, according to the criteria used by monitoring organizations. Recent developments call for a reassessment of who is considered a media worker or journalist (Carlsson & Pöyhäri 2017, Eide 2017). When media *institutions* are targeted, attackers do not distinguish between journalists and other employees, as shown by the fatal Taliban attack on the Moby group/Tolo TV in 2016.<sup>17</sup>

According to RSF, "By sowing terror, the Taliban and IS/Daesh have created information 'black holes' in many regions since 2015". It is relatively new that terrorists explicitly target *media institutions* with their threats and attacks. At the end of 2015, the Taliban sent 'advice' to journalists in Afghanistan:

The Islamic Emirate deems it necessary to once again remind all media outlets operating inside the country to refrain from biased reporting in their disseminations. Avoid holding a negative attitude [...] Stop scandalous libels against the mujahideen. (As quoted by Lees, 2016)

Lees also reports large-scale self-censorship due to the general risk situation, and adds that local journalists fare worse and face more threats than international correspondents (ibid.)

An earlier study (Khalvatgar 2014) states that security threats come mainly from Taliban and armed opposition groups, but also mentions "Shadowy armed groups with unverifiable links" and the government. Relly and Zanger specifically mention Afghan security forces: since they "are not aware of the legal rights of journalists while they work on their stories", they behave reprehensibly and attack them physically (2016: 11). Their informants, interviewed in 2015, state that "most of the perpetrators of violence were government employees, usually police, military, and other security forces", what they also call "proxy actors", since politicians themselves are rarely involved in such encounters (ibid. 10). According to these researchers, Taliban, together with other insurgent groups, represented a "close second". An IFEX report (2016), based on AFJC (Afghan Journalists Center) figures, states that government "officials and elements of the Afghan military accounted for many of the attacks [against

<sup>12</sup> Hekmatyar, leader of the Hezb-e-Islami party for several decades, recently moved to Kabul and was received there by the government, after fighting the center since 2001, in close cooperation with the Taliban.

<sup>13</sup> "Shura" means local council, traditionally consisting of village or district (male) elders, somewhat similar to Indian *panchayats*, but there are differences, for example, some include women and younger members.

<sup>14</sup> Numbers from RSF, but including some recent killings, as per the end of September 2018. <https://rsf.org/en/news/who-persecutes-journalists-afghanistan>

<sup>15</sup> By September 2018, 94 cases of violence had been registered with Nai. See also <http://nai.org.af/blog/freedom-of-speech-status-went-worst-in-nug-comparing-to-pervious-government-2/> Accessed 20.10.2017

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.tolonews.com/afghanistan/afghanistan-third-deadliest-country-reporters> Accessed 18.09.2018

<sup>17</sup> See New York Times, 21 Jan 2016: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/22/world/asia/afghanistan-tolo-tv-bombing.html> Accessed 18 April 2018

journalists]”, i.e. 43 percent (82 cases), while Taliban and other “unidentified armed persons” were behind 52 and 34 incidents respectively.

An in-depth study of Afghan photojournalists working for international media outlets, concludes that Afghan photojournalists perceived that they faced more physical dangers, as well as other material and intangible disadvantages compared to international photojournalists, and revealed conflicts between ‘locals’ and ‘globals’ over how to cover events in the country (Mitra 2017). Of 18 photojournalists interviewed, 17 reported lack of security as “part and parcel of being a photojournalist in Afghanistan” (Mitra 2017: 44). Furthermore, the study revealed five different threats to photojournalists, illustrating in particular the dangers for those who have to provide visual coverage, often of extremely violent situations. However, some of the points cited below also seem relevant for ‘ordinary’ journalists, as they often work on several platforms and also provide visual coverage.

The first source of threat perceived by respondents stemmed from their routine work as photojournalists in a conflict zone, e.g. being vulnerable to injury and death due to their proximity to the many acts of violence – such as suicide bombings and attacks – that they photographed. The second source of security threats they identified was Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan. Third, they perceived the Afghan military, intelligence personnel, as well as police as threats to their security. Officials working for the Afghan national government were perceived as a fourth source of threat. Finally, respondents identified the general population in Afghanistan as a source of threat to them because of the distrust of photography and photographers in Afghan society. (Mitra 2017: 44)

Interestingly, when threats are ranked, the Afghan security forces and Taliban receive about the same number of confirming statements (ibid.: 45). Some respondents in Mitra’s study report having to go closer to sites of violence than their foreign colleagues, confirming that ‘local’ journalists are more at risk than foreign reporters, although the latter receive more general media attention (UNESCO 2017).<sup>18</sup>

The vulnerability of Afghan journalists is demonstrated by Relly & Zanger’s study of Kabuli journalists, which reports that one of their informants stated:

I am sure that if our political situation worsens with Iran, three or four media outlets will be paralyzed, and hundreds of people are working there. If we get into trouble with the USA, seven or eight outlets will fail. [...] The same way, Pakistan has a lot of [leverage] (Relly & Zanger 2016:15)

Figures and assessments vary; in an overall view, it seems meaningful to speak of a “triple-threat” to journalism/journalists in Afghanistan: The economic basis for many media is weak and outlets disappear; journalists are threatened with violence by extremist opposition groups *and* by government bodies; and a security situation prompting the exodus of qualified individuals remains a threat to the quality of journalism itself.

## 6. Methodology

The main team behind this research consists of one researcher based in Afghanistan working with Nai (which does research on the media situation in Afghanistan) and on his Ph.D. there (Khalvatgar), one exiled refugee with journalistic training and experience from Afghanistan, now based in Oslo (Shirzad), and one researcher with longstanding experience from travels in and studies of Afghanistan as a writer, journalist and PEN activist (Eide). This combination illustrates in at least a small way how transnational collaboration is vital and necessary when it comes to journalist safety (Hanitzsch 2016).

As mentioned above, our main research question is: *How do Afghan journalists view their professional safety?* Sub-questions are: *Has the security situation led to more withdrawals from conflict reporting? Have individual reporters faced violent situations, and how have they responded to them? Do editors/managers offer any support/routines to aid staff with experiences of violent conflict?*

To enable us to obtain assessments from a variety of journalists, we developed a questionnaire where respondents (selected through the snowball effect) could choose between alternatives, and also add their own statements. This seemed the most adequate methodology, as it was not too hard for a group of research assistants to work with. The questionnaire was developed based on a related project (Høiby & Ottosen 2015), but modified to fit the Afghan context (annex 1). In hindsight, we see that clearer questions of self-censorship could have been included, although some responses may indicate degrees of self-restraint. The questionnaire was translated into Dari and Pashto, and journalists in Afghanistan’s five zones<sup>19</sup> were consulted about the content. The groundwork was done by Nai workers, who had contacts with journalists in the respective zones (Balkh in the North, Herat in the West, Kabul in the Center, Kandahar in the South and Nangarhar in the East). The criteria for selection of interviewees were that journalists had some work experience, preferably in conflict/violent situations. Furthermore, journalists who tended towards self-aggrandizement were to be avoided. The selected journalists

<sup>18</sup> According to UNESCO’s World Trends report, 92 per cent of journalists killed between 2012 and 2016 were local reporters.

<sup>19</sup> Afghanistan is officially divided into five zones, although it has 34 provinces.

would have to be confident enough to enter into an interview situation, while granted full anonymity. They should also work for independent news outlets or be freelancers or stringers. The interviewers should not have a close relationship with any of their interviewees. The interviews were conducted either through e-mail, phone-calls or face-to-face during the early autumn of 2017. They were then collected and translated into English. Some of the interviewees agreed to be interviewed on condition of giving less detailed answers for different reasons, including time constraints. This means that with questions where respondents were asked to elaborate more, results were sometimes disappointing.

Some of the research assistants may have had only limited experience with such research, and more experienced ones might have been able to obtain more elaborate answers from respondents. Some questions generated very similar reactions, such as nearly all claiming to have suffered from PTSD, but perhaps not all of them completely understood this syndrome. On the other hand, in a war-ravaged country such as Afghanistan, we do not think these answers deviate too much from lived reality.

### **5.1 The 28 journalists**

Of the 28 interviewees, 25 per cent (7) are women. This is a rather high proportion and considerably higher than in another report, where only two of 30 respondents were women (Relly & Zanger 2016). In general, the ratio of women employed in the media sector in Afghanistan is about 20 per cent.

Nine interviewees are from Kabul, four from Balkh, and six from Herat, while five are from Kandahar and Nangarhar respectively (see map in attachment 2). Age-wise, 75 per cent are in their 20s, while the rest (7) are in their 30s. This indicates that almost all field reporters in Afghanistan are young. Older journalists either manage large media or at least hold higher editorial positions. It is also a fact that due to a lack of independent media in Afghanistan for a long period before 2001, journalists working with government agencies were not anxious to work for independent media, or in some instances independent media outlets were not keen on employing journalists with government experience. Thus, they either work with the same outlets (governmental media) or have retired.

As for journalistic experience, 25 percent (7) report having more than 10 years of professional experience. Of these, three were (still) in their 20s, some having started as volunteers in media while they were (less than) 18 years old, hoping to gain work experience and later be hired as professionals. This arrangement offers a clear advantage for media managers and owners, since they can have journalists working for them on a volunteer basis. Ten interviewees have worked from 5-10 years as journalists, while 11 have 1-5 years of experience.

A clear majority had a rather stable, full-time position, while three were in management positions, and six were either freelancers/stringers or working with fixed-term contracts. As for education, the majority (17) reported having a BA, mostly in journalism, but a couple had other BAs (literature, law, political science). The other participants had a lower level of education, one only between 8-10 years of schooling. Several had participated in shorter trainings, by the BBC, Nai or others. Since the groundwork was done by Nai contacts/staff, this might affect results in the sense that respondents would mention Nai favorably. We see a more differentiated picture though, where some complain of not receiving training from this organization, while others express their satisfaction with Nai, which has trained a large proportion of media staff members in Afghanistan.

Half the informants (14) declared to be "all-arounders", while nine indicated conflict/war as a field of coverage. Ten stated that they covered educational/social affairs, while five claimed to focus on the economy and two on foreign affairs. The informants could here select several fields. Those who ticked all were counted as "all-arounders", as well as those who only reported being all-around. A majority uses Dari as their main language (mostly spoken in Herat, Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif), some use both Dari and Pashto, while ones from Nangarhar and Kandahar were more likely to use Pashto.

As for media (several options could be ticked); 15 worked for TV/video producers, seven for digital publications, 11 for radio, four for newspapers, and three claimed to be working on a multi-platform level, which is becoming more common. Moby, the largest media company in Afghanistan, has three TV stations, two radio stations and one online publication. Thus they use journalists for several outlets.

Relly & Zanger's report (2016) included 30 journalists, mostly in Kabul. A majority of these informants also had a BA degree, and in their sample the media distribution was rather similar to ours, with only a minority working for newspapers, and many working multi-platform. A difference, however, is that their sample was slightly more diversified age-wise, but the average was still as low as 27 years.

## 6. Results: many threats, few remedies

### 6.1 Previous experiences

A slim majority (15 out of 28) reported having covered conflict *previously*. Here is how a 26 year old male journalist describes his experiences: "I have participated in the battles between security forces and the armed opposition, and I have a lot of experience in coverage of the first line of battle". Another 30 year old colleague is more specific about what he has covered and mentions an attack on one of the foreign embassies in Kabul: "During the reporting, the clashes were ongoing". He states that he has become much more restrictive in covering violent conflict. Another 30 year old male journalist characterizes his working life thus:

Afghanistan is a country that has been involved in war for about half a century, and it is not possible to stay out of the coverage [...] In Afghanistan, especially in the current situation, the hottest headlines in the news are dedicated to war, and this subject is part of the news.

This resonates both with recent decades of Afghan history, and with the logic of journalism itself: A country at war will have journalists who cover the symptoms of this war, sometimes they will also analyze the roots – as one reporter says he does.

A female reporter (31) has covered "the gatherings that led to violence and murder" and mentions both a demonstration (where approximately 300 were killed or injured) and a funeral procession, where one was killed and three injured.

A young male journalist (20) reports having been kidnapped "by a gunman" for a day and a night and would like to see educational programs on how to cope with such experiences and challenges. A female reporter (24) describes the situation in general: "[...] since fighting and conflict are part of our lives, [these are] the sort of things that need to be covered". Other reporters mention covering "the fall of" certain districts or "ethnic conflicts" and "clashes between government forces and the [...] armed opposition". And, with a trace of resignation, one male reporter (30) concludes: "In Afghanistan, most of the news is about war. Unwillingly, seven out of ten days are about conflict news".

### 6.2 Risk willingness

When asked how the risk involved in conflict reporting had affected their own willingness to cover violent conflict/violence during recent years, the same number (15) reported having become "much more restrictive/careful" or "a little more restrictive/careful. Six informants reported being "slightly more willing" or "much more willing" to cover violent conflict than before, while five did not know. The material is too limited to look at determinant variables behind these choices, but there seems to be no significant gender variety; nor do those who have covered conflict previously agree unanimously that they have become more restrictive.

As shown in Table 1, a majority of those who assessed the question seems to have recently become more careful. It comes as no surprise that the informants indicate in answering the next question that their editors have become more restrictive than they themselves, as 18 informants believe they have, and only in two cases do they think their editors are willing to take *more* risks than previously.

	Much more careful	Somewhat more careful	Same	Slightly more willing	Much more willing	Do not know, no reply
Reporters	8	7	1	4	2	5/1
Reporters' view of editors	5	13	5	1	1	3

*Table 1:* Risk involved in conflict coverage/willingness to cover violent conflict/violence during recent years; assessment of editor's willingness to send reporters to conflict zones (N=28)

As for *why* their editors have become less willing to send reporters to conflict zones, 14 name *security* as the main reason, while six mention *financial* reasons. Two point to either *political* reasons or *desk* priorities, while six did not reply to this particular question. It is obvious to us that editors' sense of responsibility for their reporters' lives is an important factor. They have ample reason to feel this responsibility, due to the increasingly threatening situations. In Højby and Ottosen's work on the security of journalists in several conflict-ridden countries, both editors and journalists "have become more reluctant to send reporters to conflict zones" (2016, 185).



### 6.3 Threats

The informants were all asked whether they had, over the last five years, experienced violence in their work which threatened their safety. Only four answered *no*, three reported *one occasion*, 11 *2-5 occasions*, three from *5-10 occasions*, while seven reported *more than ten* (Table 2). Of these seven, four were women. These are small numbers, but may indicate that in a conservative patriarchy such as Afghanistan, female journalists are endangered more by threats and abuse than their male colleagues.

Type of threat	Physical threat	Threat with weapon	Social clash, unease	Verbal threat	Social media threat	Threat to family	Other/ none
Numbers	17 (2)	6 (1)	11 (4)	14 (1)	8 (2)	5 (1)	2

Table 2: How did the threat situation come about? Number of females out of the total in parenthesis (respondents could select more than one alternative) (N=28)

This also agrees with findings from interviews with female journalists in certain other countries where conflict is more the rule than the exception (Orgeret 2016). The informants told about a variety of threats and were able to select several alternatives if applicable. Surprisingly, perhaps, two alternatives were not selected by these journalists: bomb attacks and accidents.

Regarding the consequences of violent confrontation, three said they had been hospitalized with serious injuries, another three had wounds that required treatment by a doctor, and two had suffered minor injuries which they treated themselves. Eight were not physically injured, but needed psychological support. Taking into account the large numbers of people traumatized by war, potential psychological support is minimal in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> Besides, cultural conventions might prevent some from even considering treatment by a psychiatrist/psychologist.

### 6.4 Reliance and follow-ups

In such cases, then, who would they rely on for their safety and follow-up? A variety of options were offered on the questionnaire. Seven mentioned *editors*, another seven *colleagues*, while nine relied mostly on *themselves*, and the rest on family/friends. The low reliance on editors (25 per cent) may have something to do with the relative lack of routines in the editorial rooms – either in the form of discussion or debriefing – to help reporters who have been exposed to threatening situations, but this response deviates somewhat from the responses about editors being more careful, as mentioned above.

Ten informants answered that they do not know whether such routines exist or not, while nine confirmed that routines existed, and another nine said there were no routines. A high proportion though (16), when asked about routines, mentioned *security courses* as offered to them, but some elaborated this by stating that they were not offered by the news institution itself, but rather by *external organizations*. Five said they had been offered security equipment (first aid kits, body armor), only one mentioned insurance, and another specified being debriefed by the editorial management. These results differ from those of transnational research, where a larger group of journalists had insurance, received debriefing, etc. (Høiby & Ottosen 2016: 189). In this research, Norway was also included.

“None of these [security courses, equipment, first aid courses, insurance, debriefings, etc.] are [offered] by media officials, but by some [...] supporting institutions [...] that] provide some training programs on first aid, communications, and body armor.” From this and similar statements, it seems that security measures (if taken) are largely *outsourced* to NGOs which receive external funding. As one informant stated: “There are journalist helping committees and associations”. As editorial staff members are mostly aware of these, their existence might in the worst case cause them to disengage from such vital issues as journalist security.

One TV journalist elaborates more in-depth how even complaining about security could endanger his position in his medium. As a “war correspondent” he has personally “been threatened several times, and now I am in danger. But when I start sharing my threats with my boss, he is totally unconcerned”. He adds, if [I go] there “and start the discussion again [...] then I must resign from the position”. This respondent seems to be one who, despite his youth, has experienced many threatening situations.

### 6.5 Late effects and rights

A majority (19), including the person cited above, stated that they had experienced late effects of their confrontations. This is a larger proportion than in a related, transnational study, where 45 per cent reported

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.who.int/mental\\_health/evidence/Afghanistan\\_WHO\\_AIMS\\_Report.pdf](http://www.who.int/mental_health/evidence/Afghanistan_WHO_AIMS_Report.pdf) Accessed 17 Sept 2018

having suffered after-effects (Høiby & Ottosen 2016: 187). All those with after-effects mentioned post-traumatic stress disorder, five also sleep disorders, while two mentioned “other” psychological problems and misuse of medications respectively.

Even if the security threats are not much followed-up, there seem to be at least some discussions in the editorial rooms (Table 3). Not surprisingly, psychological warfare and propaganda score high. In a war-torn country with many (hostile) stakeholders, propaganda is widespread, and in the case of Afghanistan this is due to the unceasing Taliban (and other) threats and warlord ownership of media. “Rights of journalists and media professionals working in conflict zones” also receives a high score. One explanation may be related to a complaint shared by several interviewees: lack of access to authorities and lack of general access to information, which seriously hamper their work. The relatively high number ticking “No discussions” partly indicates the proportion of freelancer respondents.

	No discus- sions	Psychological warfare, propaganda	International human rights law	Professional rights of journalists	Human rights	Other/ don't know
Numbers	9	11	2	10	8	2

Table 3: Discussions with editors or colleagues on certain topics?

## 6.6 Access to information

Starting in 2016, some media expected a positive development, since for the first time an Access to Information Act was issued by President Ashraf Ghani. Simultaneously, committees have been set up to regulate the establishment of media, journalist immunity, etc. However, in practice the situation for access to information in Afghanistan has worsened. Two years ago, Taliban attacked the largest military hospital in Kabul, but still no information is accessible about how many doctors, nurses or patients were killed and how the attack could have been carried out in a heavily guarded area only 200 m from the U.S. Embassy.

As one respondent puts it: “We don’t have access to information, we only have slogans. No one enforces the law. [...] There should be immunity and safety for journalists”. Several others also mention the problem with lack of law enforcement: “Constitutional law is available, but there is no enforcement of Law”. Yet another respondent: “We have lots of problems regarding access to information, because we want information from governmental officials, but unfortunately, they don’t give us the information. Also, workshops should be held on journalist immunity”. This statement pretty much summarizes the situation for access to information.

As Warren et al. note: “[...] the National Unity Government (NUG) strives to make good on its inaugural promise of an open, transparent government, but journalists say there is uneven enforcement of laws governing access to information and freedom of the press”. (2016: 131). Access to information in Afghanistan is more of an analogue process, and most information is controlled by communications directors in organizations or ministries. Websites are often not updated for months, and this holds true particularly for governmental web sources. Access to information should be granted by the communications advisors, who are often unavailable. Sometimes the president himself refuses to answer a question from a journalist at a press conference. Furthermore, much violence against journalists is committed by government authorities when journalists are trying to access information.<sup>21</sup> According to Nai’s media watch monthly newsletter, three per cent of cases of violence against journalists happen when journalists request information from governmental organizations.

That the alternative *Professional Rights of Journalists* also scores high comes as no surprise, for a variety of research studies (including this one, MSF, Freedom House, AJSC and Nai reports) clearly show that these are under serious threat.

## 6.7 The *neutral* journalist

When asked which role they see as most suitable for journalists covering conflict, the 28 reporters overwhelmingly subscribed to this alternative: “Neutral/balanced: Report on conflict without taking sides”. This is a universal journalistic ideal, distinctly different from advocacy journalists, who would argue that areas exist where there is a need to take sides openly. One example is in climate journalism, where there is a global consensus of 97 per cent of climate scientists on the fact of human contributions to global warming (Boykoff & Boykoff 2004). But no such consensus exists in this case. In Afghanistan, and particularly among journalist communities, it is very common to speak of neutrality and balance, but in practice, this ideal is hard to uphold.

<sup>2121</sup> <http://8am.af/1394/02/14/restrictions-on-freedom-of-expression-in-the-torus/> accessed 22.10.2017



A more specific question regarding their 'neutrality' when confrontations occur between Taliban (or IS) and government forces might have elicited another result, for two reasons: One is the way reporters have been blamed and sanctioned for speaking to these 'opposition forces' (Eide 2016b); another is perhaps that reporters – at least in certain areas – due to threats – would be afraid of openly reporting too negatively about these forces.

## 6.8 Uncertainties

As a rule, killers of journalists in Afghanistan are not brought to justice, but enjoy impunity. This, as well as harassment by government officials, has led to many uncertainties faced by domestic reporters (Khalvatgar 2014). The uncertainties have to do with whether to venture into insecure provinces or whether to go near sites of terror attacks. Reporters also face the challenge of whether to report on the Taliban, who have proven to be more easily accessible – at least through communication tools such as mobile phones and/or email – than government officials. As stated by one informant from a related project: "I can say that the anti-government groups are much better at giving information than the government [...] they answer right away, but when we call the government, we have to try 10 times to reach a spokesperson or an official" (Relly & Zanger 2016: 12). This does not, however, mean that the Taliban provide correct and accurate information.

Other uncertainties have to do with investigative reporting, or the danger of local powers creating media to serve their narrow interests (Khalvatgar 2014). When donations to news outlets dry up, political parties and individual politicians, rather than commercial interests, have filled the void (Relly & Zanger 2016: 12). Journalists within these media are probably more prone to self-censorship than broad-based media, even if one should not underestimate the level of threats employees are subject to in the latter media.

## 7. Conclusions

This research study shows that Afghan journalists view their security situation as threatening, and that they are somewhat less willing to take risks than in the past, their editors even less so, but the picture is not one-sided.

A clear majority have faced violent situations and threats, and half of them have relied on their colleagues or editors for support, while an alarming third seem forced to rely mainly on their own resources. Routines are not always in place in editorial rooms, and far from all have received security equipment. Thus, this research speaks of the need for Afghan journalists to tread carefully. Being "neutral", which most respondents adhere to as an ideal, in a situation where they receive threats from both insurgents and government quarters, requires a balancing act when facing dangers, for which many of them have not been properly trained. Taliban, with their growing media proficiency and willingness to speak to reporters, combined with officials who bar journalists from information and access to office holders, are contributing to this difficult situation. Not least, the majority of informants, albeit quite young, speak of post-traumatic stress syndrome, and some also of physical harm.

Their experiences differ somewhat from those of photojournalists, because taking photos in Afghanistan is a very sensitive issue, photojournalists are required to move closer to places where violent events occur, and additional threats oftentimes arise when taking pictures of women (Mitra 2017: 54).

Reporters have to balance the need for covering harsh, often violent situations against their own fears, as well as editors being less willing for them to take risks. They confirm that there is a worsening security situation, which has not been adequately met with measures by leadership. Many have had terrible experiences and need debriefing and counseling. Nevertheless, it seems that *care for journalist security* is to a substantial extent outsourced to organizations such as NGOs. This is, globally speaking, not a unique feature, but may be more precarious in Afghanistan than in many other countries, due to the everyday challenges facing journalists.

Afghan media professionals navigate in a country where there is a very limited degree of media literacy. Despite existing laws and regulations, they face problems including recognition of the rights and duties of journalists to fair and free reporting, to immunity, access to information, and merely survival in the profession. Another factor, which should be addressed in future research, is the discrepancy between the rapidly changing journalism profession in Afghanistan, NGO training courses – and the traditional education offered by academic institutions.

While the study did not explicitly ask about self-censorship, there is no doubt that with the worsening security situation and record numbers of reporters being killed in 2016-2018, the degree of self-censorship is bound to increase. Government offers of relatively safer positions – which may be seen as a process of co-optation – may work in the same direction.

The lack of media literacy may be due both to the low general literacy rate<sup>22</sup> and educational levels in the country. Among officials there is indeed limited experience with the function of media in a democracy. This shortage also seems to be encouraged by many political leaders and government officials, as well as by those who are broadly labeled “the opposition” or “insurgents”. Furthermore, even among those who may be counted as media literate, there are people who are against free media and freedom of expression. Journalists in this survey seem to some extent aware of their rights, and that is an absolute necessity if they want to secure their own survival in the profession. In the foreseeable future, though, due to the ongoing war as well as dwindling subsidies, Afghanistan is likely to lose more of its journalists and media outlets, a prospect which will also sadly contribute to undermining professionalism. The counterforces to this negative development may be found in educational undertakings meant to enhance professionalism as well as security and rights, in spite of obstacles at many crossroads.

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<sup>22</sup> According to recent UN statistics, the literacy rate of the adult population (>15 years of age) is 31 per cent.  
<http://www.unesco.org/new/en/kabul/education/youth-and-adult-education/enhancement-of-literacy-in-afghanistan-iii/>  
Accessed 18.09.2018

## Annex 1: Questionnaire

### QUESTIONS TO JOURNALISTS

Conflict reporting is in this survey understood as reporting on situations within *armed or violent social conflict*; any type of reporting in which the journalist is putting her or his security at risk for the job based on a potential threat from actors involved in the conflict. The participant's identity will be kept confidential.

#### 1. Background

Gender

Age

Reporting language (pashto, dari, other, foreign, several)

(For those who work as correspondents or stringers for international media) Country in which your employer is based:

#### 2. How long have you worked as a journalist?

1. 1-5 years
2. 5-10 years
3. More than 10 years

#### 4. What is your employment status?

1. Fully employed
2. Vacant position or engagement (short term contract)
3. Freelance/stringer
4. Leadership position
5. Other

#### 5. What is your highest educational level?

1. 8-10 years of school
2. High school/college
3. Journalism training (specify)
4. Other higher education (specify degree level)
5. Other

If you have education/courses especially relevant for your work covering conflict/war; specify

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#### 6. Which field(s) do you cover (you may tick more than one area)?

1. Conflict/war
2. Culture/Sport
3. Education/social issues
4. Foreign affairs
5. Economy
6. All-round journalism (most areas)
7. Other (mention)

#### 7. What kind of media are you (mainly) working for?

1. Newspaper (digital and/or print)
2. Digital publication/blog etc.
3. Television/video journalism
4. Radio
5. Several platforms (multimedia)
6. Other

**8. Have you covered conflict, violent or war-like conditions earlier, in your country or abroad?**

1. No
2. Yes (explain how, where)

**9. How has the risk involved in conflict reporting affected your own willingness to cover violent conflict/violence during recent years?**

1. Become much more restrictive/careful
2. Become a little more restrictive/careful
3. Same as before
4. Slightly more willing to carry out risky investigations
5. Much more willing to carry out risky investigations
6. Don't know

**10. Do the editors/leaders you work for send journalists to conflict zones/ or to cover sensitive topics to a larger or smaller extent than before?**

1. Become much more restrictive
2. Become a little more restrictive
3. Same as before
4. Slightly more willing to carry out risky investigations
5. Much more willing to carry out risky investigations
6. Don't know

**11. If the answer is that they have become more restrictive (1 or 2), what do you think is the reason? (You may check one or two)**

1. Financial constraints
2. Security issues
3. Political restraint
4. Desk priorities
5. Other

Please specify any given answer if possible:

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**12. Have you, over the last 5 years, experienced violence in relation to you work where your safety has been threatened?**

1. No
2. 1 time
3. 2-5 times
4. 5 - 10 times
5. More

**13. If answering alternative 2-5 in the previous question: how did the threat situation appear? (You may check all the applicable.)**

1. Physical (violent) offence to yourself
2. Threatened with weapon or other potentially harmful device
3. Bomb attack
4. Social clashes or unease in the area (others being attacked physically)
5. Accidents or similar
6. Verbal threats in direct encounter
7. Threats via e-mail, SMS, voicemail, mail or similar indirect form (social media)
8. Threats via or towards friend, family member or alike
9. Other (please specify)

**14. If applicable, what were the consequences of the violent insult?**

1. Serious injuries demanding hospitalization
2. Smaller injuries demanding medical care with a doctor
3. Smaller injuries which I was able take care of myself
4. Not wounded, but I needed psychological support
5. Other

**15. Who do you mostly rely on for your safety as a journalist?**

1. Your editors/leaders
2. Your colleagues
3. Your family and friends/contacts
4. Yourself

**16. If threatening situations occur, are there any routines for debrief/dialogue between leaders and the involved employee, or does the individual reporter/journalist handle such incidents by her/himself?**

1. Yes, there are routines for incidents
2. No, there are no routines
3. Don't know

If yes, please describe the routines:

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**17. Does the editorial staff have routines for any of the following in order to prepare employees for working in a conflict area and/or covering a potentially conflictive topic? (You may check all applicable)**

1. Security course (title and location?)
2. Introduction to security items such as security vest, navigation systems, communication tools etc. (please specify)
3. First aid course (please specify how extensive)
4. Insurance for own employees (please specify)
5. Debriefing with professional experts (please specify content and duration)
6. Debriefing with the editorial leadership (please specify content and duration)
7. Other

Please specify any answer given to the question above:

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**18. Have you experienced late effects from working in conflict zones?**

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know
4. Other

**19. If yes, what kind of late effects? (You may check all applicable.)**

1. Post-traumatic stress
2. Other psychological problems
3. Sleeping problems
4. (Mis)use of medicaments
5. Other (specify)

Can you with own words describe the problems or hazards that you have experienced?

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**20. Have you experienced situations in conflict reporting/reporting from violent situations which have affected you especially?**

Open answer:

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**21. Is use of freelancers/ stringers common practice at the publication(s) you work for?**

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know

**22. If yes, what do you think is the reason for this? (You may choose one or two)**

1. Financial restraints
2. Security issues
3. Language
4. Lack of available or qualified staff
5. Other (please specify)

**23. If applicable, how are local journalists paid?**

1. By rates set by labor organization or similar actor/ system
2. Local salary rates paid per article or piece
3. Contracted arrangement (in case, for what time period)
4. Don't know

**24. Groundwork: do you discuss questions relevant for conflict reporting, for example psychological warfare, propaganda etc. with editors or colleagues? (You may choose more than one applicable.)**

1. No
2. Psychological warfare/propaganda (relevant also for organized crime)
3. International humanitarian law
4. Rights of journalists and media professionals working in conflict zones
5. Human rights
6. Other
7. Don't know

**25. If applicable, please specify in detail if it is literature, internal seminars, courses, continuing education etc.**

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**26. What role do you see most suited for journalists covering conflict (please select one or two):**

1. Cover the conflict from the perspective of the victims
2. Neutral/balanced: Report on the conflict without taking sides
3. Cover both sides of a conflict, but it is okay to take sides; objectivity is complex
4. Encourage military intervention if necessary (Responsibility to Protect)
5. Influence conflict by showing non-violent solutions (peace journalism)
6. Influence conflict by covering atrocities and violations
7. Report facts as they appear
8. Don't know
9. Other (please specify)

**27. Are there any question missing in this survey, or information you may like to add? Please specify.**

Open answer:

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**Annex 2: Grey: Taliban control; Red: Taliban presence, yellow: could not be verified**

