Afghan oppositional media and the strive for a better life under the Taliban's autocratic regime

Extended Abstract Submission

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft (DGPuK)

Research Problem

With the extensive development and proliferation of communication technologies, the expectations for improving humans' lives increased rapidly. In reaction, communication scientists started to investigate new interdisciplinary avenues to find an epistemic link between our knowledge about the digital public sphere and the concept of "good life" (Wang, 2015). However, much of the studies therein started from the micro-level perspective. This perspective overlooks the need for macro-social changes under inappropriate, for example, autocratic structures as prerequisites for achieving a better life on the micro-level. Within such authoritarian media systems, journalists shall primarily aim at democratization and emancipation from the regime's iron fist (Price et al., 2002).

Besides, this new field of research has been predominantly focused on technologically advanced countries, precisely democratic ones in the Global North. Hence, concerns have been raised about the need for a more global approach in that regard (Vorderer, 2016). Such an approach requires empirical studies investigating the mechanisms by which actors in public communication, like alternative media, can help people survive and flourish under hard conditions (Ling, 2015).

Against this background, our research aims to examine the role of oppositional media from outside (diaspora) in improving citizens' lives under extremely hard conditions, namely, the Afghan society after the Taliban takeover in 2021. Instead of studying the potential of digital communication technologies to improve people's lives within an already functioning democratic system, our study concentrates on using communication tools to survive and achieve social change under the autocratic, theocratic regime of the Taliban (Sakhi, 2022). Our theoretical aim is to have a comprehensive understanding of the usage of communication technologies within extreme conditions to achieve social change and a better life.

RQ: How do the anti-Taliban Afghan media strive to contribute to positive societal change under the first months of the Taliban's rule?

Methodology and theoretical framework

To achieve this goal, our research consists of two parts. Firstly, through semi-structured interviews with 21 Afghan journalists, we scrutinize the development of the Afghan media system under the

Taliban's regime and the agency of the anti-Taliban journalists and digital outlets within this system. In this step, we build on the theoretical framework of alternative media agency (Atton, 2002) within an authoritarian proto-state media system (Winkler & Damanhūrī, 2022). Secondly, we conduct a qualitative content analysis of two oppositional media outlets' framing of the Taliban takeover and the first weeks of their ruling. Herein, the communication science literature about alternative media framing vis-à-vis the hegemonic narratives of political power is utilized (Kenix, 2011). The objective is to gauge the oppositional media's organizational and discursive techniques to challenge the regime.

Findings and Discussion

The central theme emphasized in the interviews was the usage of digital alternative media and diasporic Afghan journalists to establish a transnational oppositional networked public (see also, Arafat, 2021). This network had the following modus operandi: Subordinated milieus, journalists, and dissident citizens inside Afghanistan sent information about the Taliban oppressing strategies to the diasporic digital outlets working beyond the regime's iron fist. Meanwhile, these diasporic outlets publish this information and frame it to the oppressed people inside the country. One of the central notions in that regard was the politicization of private issues, particularly women's rights. Since one of the main oppressing strategies of the Taliban regime is impeding any participation of women in the public sphere, calling for basic women's rights became a form of political opposition and challenge to the theocratic social model of the regime.

Within this theocratic context, digital alternative media seeks to open very narrow avenues for self-expression, calling for basic rights and trying to stand against the hegemonic oppressing script of the autocratic regime. Accordingly, our results reflect on the role of oppositional media within authoritarian media systems in striving for social transformation on the macro-level as an initial step to achieving a better life.

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