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Policy Paper

Protecting Media Freedom in Afghanistan in the Digital Age

Findings and Recommendations from the World Press Freedom Day Webinar

Organizers: Dialogue Hub for Common Ground & EU Hope e.V.

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1. Executive Summary:

This policy paper is based on a World Press Freedom Day webinar organized by Dialogue Hub for Common Ground and EU Hope e.V., bringing together Afghan journalists, media leaders, and human rights experts.

Since 2021, Afghanistan has experienced a severe collapse in media freedom. According to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the country now ranks among the lowest globally in press freedom. UN reporting and human rights monitors confirm a dramatic reduction in independent media outlets, with estimates indicating that more than half have closed or relocated and that women journalists have been disproportionately affected, with an estimated decline of over 80% in their participation in media work.

The discussion highlights that censorship in Afghanistan has evolved beyond restriction into systemic invisibility, where women, LGBTQI+ communities, and other marginalized groups are largely removed from public representation. Independent journalism has shifted toward exile and digital platforms, but faces major challenges including funding cuts, surveillance risks, and loss of institutional capacity. At the same time, Afghan journalists continue to demonstrate resilience through cross-border reporting, digital adaptation, and anonymous documentation of human rights violations.

The paper concludes that media freedom must be treated as a core international priority linked to human rights, gender equality, and counter-extremism efforts, and calls for urgent international action through sustained funding, protection mechanisms, and digital security support.

The central conclusion is clear:

Media freedom in Afghanistan is not only a human rights issue, but a foundational condition for social stability, accountability, and countering extremism.

2. Key Challenges Identified

2.1 Systemic censorship and forced invisibility

- Media is tightly controlled, producing a one-dimensional public narrative
- Marginalized groups (women, LGBTQI+ communities, minorities) are erased from public discourse
- Journalism has shifted from dialogue to controlled messaging

2.2 Expansion of self-censorship and surveillance

- Journalists face:
- Doxing
- Digital surveillance
- Arrest and intimidation
- This has led to widespread self-censorship and fear-based reporting

2.3 Collapse of independent media ecosystems

- Closure of outlets due to funding cuts and political pressure
- Loss of investigative journalism capacity
- Brain drain of experienced journalists

2.4 Funding dependency and instability

- Donor withdrawal has disproportionately affected:
- Human rights media
- Women-focused outlets
- Resulting in increased Taliban narrative dominance

2.5 Digital risks

- Increased exposure to:
- Phishing attacks
- Malware
- Account takeovers
- Limited access to secure, affordable digital tools

2.6 The Nexus Between Media Suppression and the Rise of Extremism

The webinar participants emphasized that media repression in Afghanistan is not only a freedom of expression issue, but also a growing risk factor for social fragmentation, radicalization, and the expansion of extremist narratives.

Forced migration of public discourse into unregulated private spaces

Due to widespread fear of arrest, intimidation, and surveillance, meaningful public discourse has increasingly shifted into private and encrypted communication spaces. While these spaces provide temporary protection, they also create environments where misinformation, radical narratives, and extremist ideologies can circulate without public scrutiny or counter-perspectives.

Erosion of society's self-correcting mechanisms

Participants highlighted that the systematic removal of diverse viewpoints from public life has weakened society's ability to critically question policies, challenge abuses, and engage in internal reform. The shrinking of independent debate has reduced accountability and limited opportunities for peaceful civic dialogue.

Loss of professional media capacity and institutional memory

The forced displacement and evacuation of experienced Afghan journalists has created a major professional vacuum. This loss of institutional memory, editorial standards, and local expertise has weakened the overall quality and sustainability of Afghan media ecosystems, increasing vulnerability to disinformation and ideologically driven content.

Collapse of public trust and increased reliance on disinformation

As public trust in heavily controlled domestic media declines, many audiences increasingly rely on informal information channels and unverified social media sources. The absence of editorial safeguards creates fertile ground for manipulation, false information, and extremist messaging.

Invisibility of emerging threats and abuses

The suppression of investigative journalism has significantly reduced public visibility into local abuses of power, corruption, and extremist activities. Participants stressed that many threats now remain undocumented and invisible, limiting both public awareness and international response mechanisms.

Silence should not be mistaken for stability

Participants strongly noted that current restrictions have not produced genuine social stability. Rather, they have imposed silence through fear and systemic pressure. The absence of visible dissent should not be interpreted as social cohesion or public consent.

3. Key Opportunities Identified

Despite challenges, the panel emphasized:

- Strong engagement of Afghan audiences with media
- Active journalism networks inside and outside Afghanistan
- Growth of digital tools enabling cross-border reporting

- Continued courage of women journalists and marginalized voices

4. Strategic Recommendations

4.1 Strengthen Afghan media as a unified ecosystem

- Avoid rigid labels such as “exile media” vs “inside media”
- Treat Afghan journalism as a single transnational ecosystem
- Support cross-border collaboration and resource sharing

4.2 Establish long-term, flexible funding mechanisms

International donors should:

- Move from short-term project funding to multi-year flexible support
- Prioritize sustainability of:
 - Human rights journalism
 - Women-led media
 - Minority-focused platforms
- Ensure funding includes institutional resilience, not only content production

4.3 Create protection pathways for at-risk journalists

- Develop emergency relocation and visa mechanisms
- Ensure safe relocation options through:
 - UN agencies
 - EU protection programs
 - Bilateral humanitarian visas
- Provide legal and residency support in host countries

4.4 Invest in digital safety infrastructure

Key priorities:

- Subsidized access to privacy tools (VPNs, encrypted platforms)
- Secure communication systems for journalists in high-risk environments
- Training programs in:
 - Digital hygiene
 - Surveillance resistance

- Phishing prevention
- Development of decentralized, user-controlled communication tools

4.5 Institutionalize media freedom in international mechanisms

Media freedom in Afghanistan should be integrated into:

- UN Human Rights Council resolutions
- Special Rapporteur mandates
- Universal Periodic Review (UPR) recommendations
- International donor conditionalities linked to human rights benchmarks

4.6 Strengthen documentation and accountability mechanisms

- Support continuous documentation of:
 - Human rights violations
 - Media repression
 - Gender-based censorship
- Ensure data preservation for future justice processes
- Fund investigative journalism capacity inside and outside Afghanistan

4.7 Invest in digital literacy and mentorship

- Implement one-to-one mentorship programs for journalists
- Strengthen understanding of:
 - Algorithms and information bubbles
 - Misinformation ecosystems
- Promote ethical journalism training based on “journalism fundamentals”

5. Cross-cutting Principles

All international engagement should follow:

- Do no harm principle
- Local ownership and Afghan-led media support
- Gender-sensitive programming
- Conflict-sensitive communication strategies
- Protection of identity and anonymity where required

6. Conclusion

Afghan media is currently operating under one of the most restrictive environments globally, where censorship functions not only as information control but as social and political erasure.

However, the panel strongly emphasizes that:

- Afghan journalism has not disappeared
- It has transformed into a resilient, transnational, and digitally adaptive ecosystem

The future of media freedom in Afghanistan depends on:

- Sustained international commitment
- Structural funding reforms
- Strong protection mechanisms
- Investment in digital resilience
- Recognition of journalism as a pillar of human rights and stability

7. Final Advocacy Message

Without media freedom, there is no accountability. Without accountability, there is no sustainable peace.