

Understanding and Addressing Mis-/Disinformation in the Afghan Media Ecosystem

March 2024



Funded by
the European Union



Internews
Local voices. Global change.

Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Methodology	5
Data Collection and Analysis	6
Key Findings: Part 1- Common Narratives	7
Anti-Taliban Narratives	8
Pro-Taliban Narratives	10
Afghan Women and Social Media	12
Key Findings: Part 2- Common Pitfalls	13
Challenges for Internal Media Outlets	14
Challenges for External Media Outlets	15
Journalistic Devices Driving Mis-/Disinformation	15
Presentation of Unverified Information as Fact	16
Imbalanced and Missing Sources	17
Recommendations	19
For Afghan Media	19
Strategies to Tackle Mis-/Disinformation	19
Safety and Security	19
Strategies to Tackle Mis-/Disinformation	20
Building Trust and Credibility	20
For Donors and Supporters	20
Funding Priorities	20
Capacity Building	21

Executive Summary

This report summarizes Internews' six-month social media monitoring research conducted in 2023 that aimed to better understand the online mis- and disinformation environment in Afghanistan.

The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase focused on identifying and analysing the themes and narratives in Afghanistan's online mis- and disinformation. This involved studying the sources, nature, and spread of false and misleading information in the Afghan digital media ecosystem. In the second phase, the research turned to the role of journalists and media outlets and sought to understand how journalistic practices and challenges can contribute to the spread of false news. A comprehensive verification process was employed, including source and author verification, cross-referencing and evidence checks, content analysis, narrative assessment, journalistic standards check, and context/completeness check.

The first phase of the study revealed key aspects of Afghanistan's digital information landscape. The research found four common narratives around mis- and disinformation including the Taliban/Taliban de facto authorities' threat to human and minority rights, loss of self-rule, the Taliban de facto authorities' legitimacy as a governing body, and opposition to their governance. Most of the associated mis- and disinformation associated with these narratives originated from the Afghan diaspora.

The research also found a gender imbalance in the digital discourse, with male-dominated discussions and limited female participation. Gender narratives on social media are mostly driven by men, often portraying women passively, and include disinformation tactics by the Taliban de facto authorities, such as falsely showing women's support for oppressive policies.

Anti-Taliban sentiments included former government figures who significantly shape digital discourse and contribute to spreading disinformation including exaggerations or fabrications of the authorities' actions. However, alongside anti-Taliban sentiments, there was a notable pro-Taliban commentary endorsing their governance and presenting them in favourable ways.

Our findings for the second phase reveal several troubling trends. Many news stories feature clickbait or misleading headlines that don't align with the actual content. A significant problem is the presentation of unverified information as fact, which fosters public mistrust. Approximately 40% of false news stories lack sources, and over half rely on just a single source, affecting the depth and reliability of reporting. Additionally, there is a tendency to use sensational headlines and emotionally charged content to increase engagement, often sacrificing factual accuracy. The rapid spread of misinformation is also facilitated by exploiting audience behaviours on social media. Afghan media, particularly those dependent on donor funding, struggle to balance accurate reporting with the need for high audience engagement. Complex reporting dynamics in Afghanistan include protecting sources, relying on second-hand information, and the difficulty of verifying claims made on social media. While some media outlets endeavour to use diverse sources, the challenges of fact verification and maintaining reporting integrity persist.

The report recommends establishing fact-checking initiatives, promoting digital literacy, and ethical journalism practices. For media outlets, transparency, audience engagement, and balance are key. Meanwhile, donors should prioritize funding for independent media, invest in technology, and support capacity building and collaborative reporting initiatives.

Introduction

The Taliban have undergone a significant transformation in their approach to modern technology since the late 1990s. Though they were originally antagonistic towards the internet, they have strategically adopted various platforms to disseminate their messages more effectively. This shift was guided by Qari Saeed Khosty, a former spokesperson for the Taliban Interior Ministry, who spearheaded an initiative to harness social media platforms like Twitter/X, WhatsApp, and Facebook to amplify the Taliban's voice in the digital arena. Despite Afghanistan's limited internet infrastructure, the Taliban [invested in data packages](#) for their social media teams and engaged in online battles using Twitter/X and Facebook, countering entities with access to television, radio, and verified social media accounts.

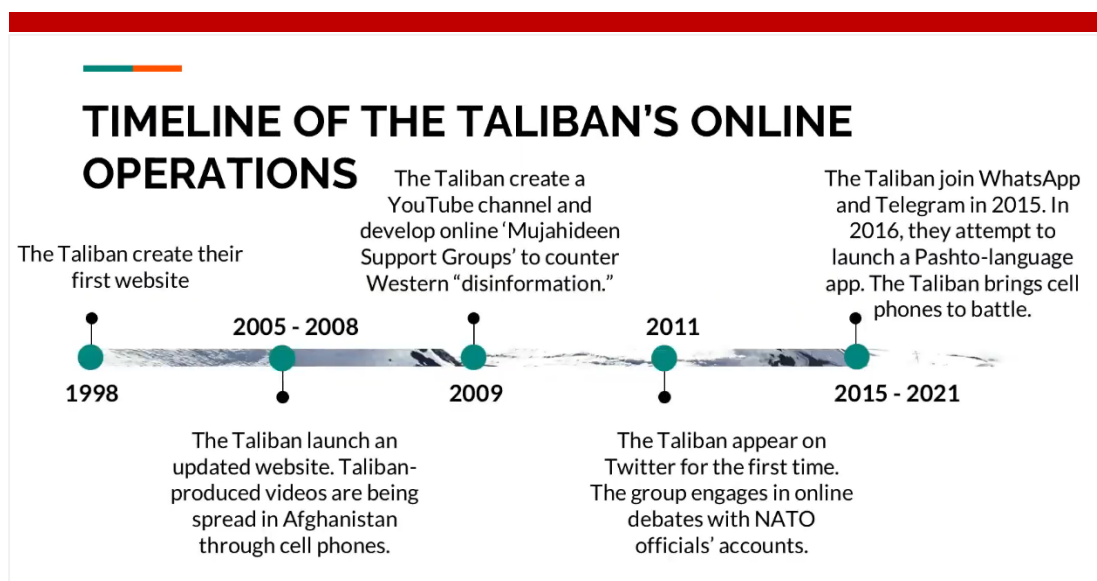


Figure 1: Timeline of Taliban Online Operations (Source: [Centre for Artificial Intelligence, Data, and Conflict, 2023](#))

This report uses the 'Taliban' to refer to the Taliban both as an insurgency group pre 2021 and in government as the Taliban de facto authorities post September 2021. This is to avoid confusion as many of the posts analysed as part of the research use only the name Taliban.

The Taliban aimed to mobilize people who were sympathetic to their ideology and encouraged active participation on social media platforms to propagate their message more broadly. This included the operation of multimedia studios to produce sophisticated propaganda videos. The [categorization of the Taliban as a "dangerous organization,"](#) on Facebook has limited their presence, prompting a strategic pivot towards Twitter/X and YouTube. This approach is part of a broader strategy to reshape international perceptions and secure legitimacy on the global stage. A member of the Taliban de facto authorities'

social media team explained to the BBC the [power of social media in altering public opinion](#), emphasizing their desire to transform their own image.

The period during the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 marked not only an escalation in the dissemination of misinformation but also a [verbal confrontation](#) between the Taliban and their adversaries. Both accidental misinformation and deliberate disinformation campaigns have proliferated, aimed at manipulating narratives in this volatile context. This battlefield of disinformation has extended into various domains, including political dynamics and human rights concerns, exploiting societal divisions, stoking fear, and swaying public opinion to serve specific interests. Fabricated stories, particularly regarding human rights and women's rights under Taliban governance, exacerbate societal rifts and contribute to further instability.

Regrettably, journalists frequently find themselves, whether intentionally or inadvertently, entangled in the escalating war of words, a situation that significantly impacts their credibility and professionalism. In the tumultuous landscape of information and disinformation, the distinction between unbiased reporting and narrative-driven content often blurs, compromising the integrity of journalism. This unfortunate reality not only challenges the core values of journalistic ethics but also raises questions about the role some media outlets play in either countering or perpetuating disinformation.

Recognizing this critical issue, Internews conducted a six-month social media monitoring research project aimed at better understanding the online mis- and disinformation environment in Afghanistan. The research was conducted in two phases. The first phase focused on unravelling the complex web of narratives that dominate the discourse, particularly in the context of the Taliban and their adversaries. The second phase aimed to uncover the mechanisms through which journalists may inadvertently become conduits for false narratives. By identifying these pathways, the study endeavoured to shed light on the intricacies of media manipulation and its implications for journalistic integrity in an era where the truth is often a casualty of conflict.

Methodology

Our research methodology was divided into two distinct phases and was designed to scrutinize and assess content from a wide range of Afghan media sources, journalists, and commentators.

The first phase categorized mis- and disinformation using [master narratives and narrative frames](#). Two Afghan researchers, with in-depth knowledge of the local media environment, selected and analysed 220 social media posts from more than 90 distinct sources. These diverse sources included posts from independent media outlets, state-affiliated media (including those under de facto authority control), notable present and former officials and renowned journalists. This approach helped us to identify major themes dominating false news, spot repeating patterns and expose the hidden motivations and power dynamics behind the spread of mis- and disinformation.

The second phase aimed to identify occurrences of mis- and disinformation, assess the general standard of reporting, and pinpoint common journalistic lapses that lead to the spread of inaccurate information. Researchers analysed 160 news articles and opinion pieces, shared via social media, that were suspected of containing mis- or disinformation.

This involved an exhaustive fact-checking process of the collected items. Once the verification of the information was completed, a detailed analysis was conducted on the journalistic techniques employed in each piece. This two-pronged approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of how mis- and disinformation permeate the Afghan media landscape and the role journalistic practices play in this dynamic).

Data Collection and Analysis

1. **Source Identification:** We categorized our primary sources into three main groups outlined in the table below and continuously updated our source list, adding new outlets and correcting any misclassifications.

	News Groups (examples)	Commentators/ Journalists/ Politicians/ Spokespersons (examples)
Independent news groups	<i>Etilaat Roz, Pajhwok, Kilid Group, Zan Times, Hasht-e-Sobh, Rukshana Media, Amu TV</i>	<i>Avoided singling out individual journalists, recognizing their challenging reporting conditions</i>
Anti-Taliban News Groups and Commentators	<i>Afghanistan International TV, Exile TV, Zawia News, HADIA News</i>	<i>Najib Nangyal, Qari Eissa Mohammadi, Mirwais Afghan</i>
Pro-Taliban News Groups and Commentators	<i>RTA, Bakhtar News Agency, Afghan Islamic Press, Lemar TV,</i>	<i>Abdul Qahar Balkhi, Zabihullah Mojahid</i>

2. **Assessment Criteria:** The quality of reporting was assessed against several criteria related to key journalistic ethics. We looked for evidence of clickbait, propaganda, biased/slanted news, satire, state-sponsored news, and misleading headlines. This assessment helped us to understand the tactics used by different media outlets and public figures to spread false information.
3. **Social Media Monitoring:** Focusing primarily on Twitter/X, we tracked and analysed content posted by these sources. Twitter/X served as a primary point for monitoring due to its accessibility and widespread use for political discussion by media and commentators.
4. **Verification:** To ensure reliability, we cross-verified information with reputable sources, distinguishing real from fake news. Our detailed content analysis scrutinized stories and social media posts for misinformation using indicators like unverifiable info, bias, and misleading headlines, evaluating adherence to journalistic ethics: accuracy, objectivity, clarity, and balance.
5. **Database Management:** All findings were systematically recorded in our database, which was accessible through a [dedicated submission form](#) and served as a central repository for all analysed content, allowing for efficient tracking and categorization of information.
6. **Critical Analysis:** Our team was trained to think critically and question the intent behind each piece of news. This involved considering factors such as the potential

emotional impact of the news, the reputation of the writer or outlet, and the use of evidence to support claims.

Key Findings:

Part 1- Common Narratives

Our research reveals a deeply entangled web of false news, manipulation, and propaganda that uses a range of disinformation tactics, including exaggerated portrayals of harsh punishments, distorted accounts of human rights abuses, false narratives of atrocities, and skewed representations of ethnic identities, foreign influences, and border conflicts. Additionally, the research noted the intentional misuse of images and hashtags that can fuel ethnic tensions.

During the first phase of the research, we analysed 220 social media posts sourced from over 90 different contributors and this analysis led us to identify 18 primary themes such as national politics, ethnic tensions, and gender issues. To streamline our analysis and make it more accessible, we organized these themes and their respective narratives into 10 distinct categories (see Fig. 2).

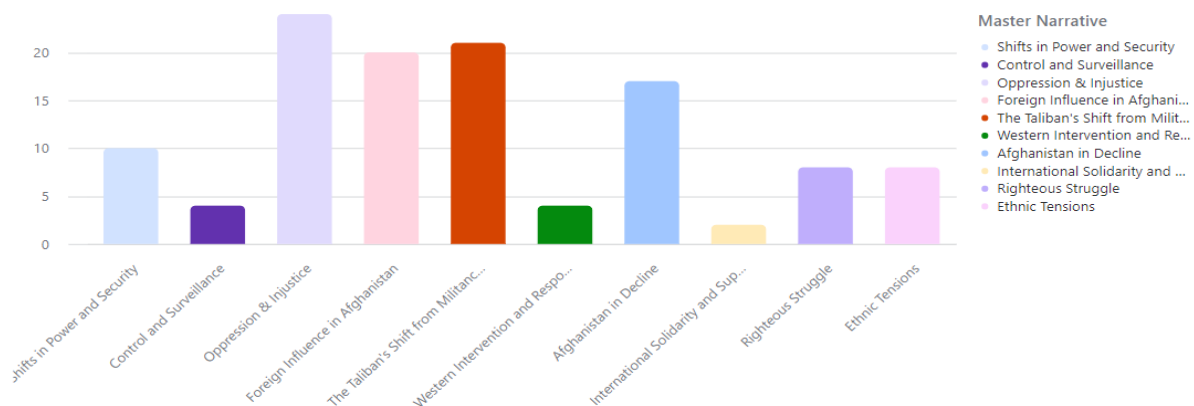


Figure 2: Most common narratives subject to false news in Afghan media

The patterns we uncovered are part of deliberate strategies, designed to influence public perception, direct narratives, and gain support. They illustrate the ongoing information warfare between the Taliban and their adversaries, exacerbating societal fear and mistrust. Contributing to this dynamic is the spread of unverified news by media sources from different factions.

A significant portion of the disinformation originates from Afghan citizens, journalists, and media outside the country - Internews' research found that 67% of identified mis- and disinformation originated from the Afghan diaspora (see Fig. 3). The primary authors are mainly former government officials in exile and spokespersons for the Taliban authorities in Afghanistan.

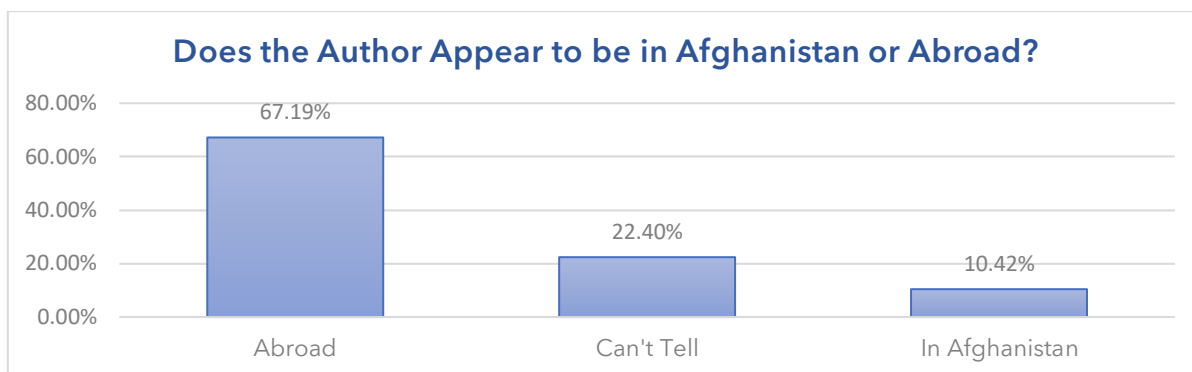


Figure 3: Breakdown of content authors' locations

Internews structured its research around ten key narrative themes, focusing initially on topics such as national politics and human rights. A notable finding was that most anti-Taliban disinformation consistently alluded to foreign influence, regardless of the topic. These narratives are crucial to understanding the broader landscape of information and the tactics used in spreading mis- and disinformation. This study provides insight into the complex and nuanced environment of false news in Afghanistan, reflecting the challenges and intricacies of information dissemination in the region.

Anti-Taliban Narratives

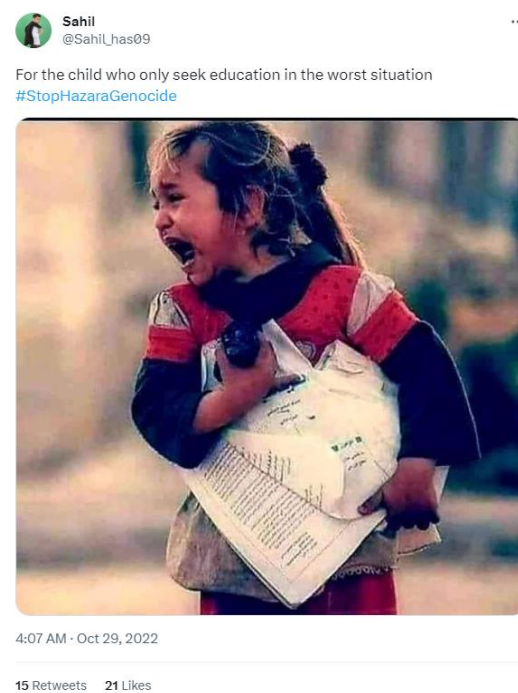
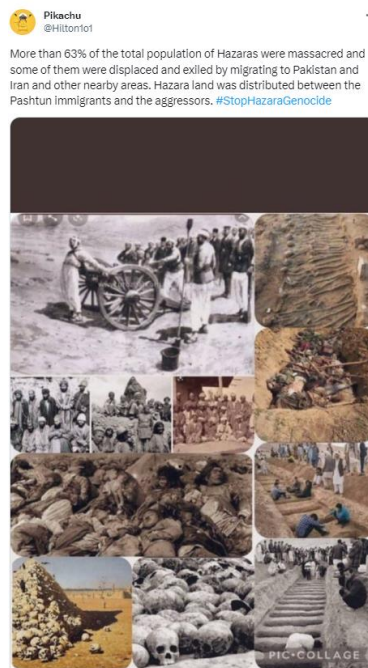
Internews' research pointed to certain foreign-funded media outlets based outside Afghanistan as key sources of disinformation targeting the Taliban. These outlets, which have financial and operational links to larger international networks, often appear influenced by the complex geopolitical relationships of their benefactors which raises questions about their impartiality.

Many of these outlets have been known to receive funding from individuals or entities in nations with vested interests in the region, yet they frequently deny any direct government affiliations. An example of the kind of disinformation spread by such media entities was brought to light by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). In July 2023, the OHCHR expressed concerns over the way such outlets [misrepresented facts about a Human Rights Council event](#) focusing on the rights of Afghan women and girls. They criticized these media sources for unfairly targeting Afghan speakers and UN staff, emphasizing the need for such events to support diverse viewpoints and remain free from intimidation or coercion.

Our research brought to light recurring narratives from individuals linked to the former Afghan government. These figures, whose posts form a notable part of the content we analysed, significantly influence the discourse on Afghanistan. Their narratives legitimately often focus on the Taliban's human rights record, raising allegations of severe abuses like forced marriages and targeted killings. However, some claims about the Taliban have been exaggerated or fabricated. For example, reports of "Islamic prostitution" were found, yet these remain unverified. Such news, if proven false, could undermine legitimate criticisms of the Taliban de facto authorities on women's rights issues.

We observed similar trends in narratives regarding ethnic minorities. Some reports, while rooted in genuine concern, have been bolstered with misattributed images and claims. The #StopHazaraGenocide hashtag, for instance, has been associated with out-of-context

images, as revealed by a reverse image search (see Figs. 4 and 5). While the Hazara community has faced atrocities, some circulated images do not accurately represent their plight.



Figures 4 and 5: Google reverse image search reveal that the collage is mostly of images of the Armenian Genocide of 1915; while the second image is of a Palestinian girl in Gaza circulated online in 2018.

Narratives often suggest external influences backing the Taliban de facto authorities, casting them as mercenaries or puppets of foreign powers (see Fig. 6). For example, claims about the Taliban's allegiance to Pakistan or assertions of most Taliban leaders being Pakistani have been made which can stir ethnic tensions. Furthermore, disinformation, especially regarding sensitive issues like border disputes, can profoundly impact public perception and political rhetoric. Misleading statements can escalate tensions and destabilize diplomatic relations. For instance, there have been disputed claims about Pakistan's activities in the Wakhan Corridor, highlighting how false news on such topics may be leveraged to stir potential border conflicts (see Fig. 8).

Narratives involving the United States also play a role, with some suggesting that figures like Zalmay Khalilzad, the former US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, supported the Taliban (see Fig. 7). These narratives contribute to the complex web of information and disinformation surrounding Afghanistan's geopolitical situation.



Figure 6: Hadia News claims that Afghanistan is occupied by Pakistan and Pashtuns who call Ali Jinnah their father and Pakistan their mother and home.



Figure 7: Haida News reports former National Security Directorate director's allegation that Zalmay Khalilzad openly supports the Taliban.



Figure 8: Post reads "If the Taliban were truly patriotic and honest, why have they not reacted to Pakistan's 13-kilometer advance into Badakhshan...?"

Pro-Taliban Narratives

Since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, there has been a [significant increase in the use of social media platforms](#), particularly [Twitter](#), by pro-Taliban accounts, media outlets, and officials for disseminating disinformation. These efforts have resulted in a substantial online presence, surpassing mainstream Afghan news organizations in terms of engagement and content.

A [report by Stanford University](#) noted the deliberate and effective nature of these campaigns, which rapidly spread across platforms and garnered widespread attention. The [Centre for Artificial Intelligence, Data, and Conflict](#) also reported on the de facto authorities' effective use of Twitter, observing that their engagement exceeded that of 18 mainstream Afghan news outlets combined. The de facto authorities published significantly more content on Twitter compared to Facebook, despite facing restrictions from tech companies labelling the Taliban a terrorist organization.

This situation presents a challenge for social media platforms as they navigate the balance between freedom of speech and preventing the spread of harmful propaganda. The Taliban have continued to use these platforms to undermine opposition, enhance their public image, and assert their claim to governance (see Figs. 9 and 10). Their social media strategy includes projecting a moderated tone to international audiences, contrasting with their actions on the ground. Afghanistan's national broadcaster, Radio Television of Afghanistan

(RTA), now under control of the Taliban de facto authorities, has also been involved in disseminating narratives supporting the Taliban regime that contradict on the ground realities, as evidenced by recent protests and insurgencies.



Figure 9: In a meeting with Mawlawi Amir Khan Motaqii, Acting Foreign Minister, Japan's ambassador in Kabul, Takashi Okada, praised Afghanistan's unprecedented security in the last 40 years and expressed Japan's desire to enhance cooperation with the Islamic Emirate.



Figure 10: Japan's Embassy issued a statement in response to the Taliban's claim, offering a correction by retweeting the Taliban's original post. They clarified that the meeting primarily centred on women's rights, promoting good governance, and fostering.

The Taliban have historically been known for their violent and discriminatory actions, especially towards minorities and women. Ongoing reports of human rights abuses under their rule casts significant doubt on their assurances of human rights protection.

In their governance approach, the Taliban authorities have focused on highlighting their effectiveness and stability (see Figs 11 and 12). For instance, they claimed significant economic progress and stabilization. However, this narrative is complex: while the economy experienced a sharp decline post-2021, it subsequently stabilized, albeit at a weak level. Reports by international organizations like the United Nations and the World Bank, attribute economic stability more to "heavy reliance on external support" rather than effective governance.



Figure 11: Taliban supporters claim good treatment of minorities.



Figure 12: Taliban's Kabul Governor asserted on 27 June that the de facto authorities have made 20 years of progress, stabilizing the economy

Ultimately, the Taliban's use of disinformation is not only a means of communication; it is a strategic tool designed to control the narrative, consolidate power, and seek legitimacy. This situation presents a complex challenge for Afghans, journalists, and the international community. They are tasked with the difficult job of distinguishing between truth and falsehood, responding appropriately to minimize the negative impact of this disinformation on the Afghan people.

Afghan Women and Social Media

There has always been a significant gender disparity of users on Facebook in Afghanistan; in early 2022, the user demographic comprised of [83.7% men and only 16.3% women](#). This imbalance is reflective of a larger trend in social media where gender issues are underrepresented in discussions.

This male-dominated online environment has led to skewed gender discourse. Debates about gender, especially those critical of the Taliban authorities, often portray women as passive victims rather than active voices. We noted that women's perspectives are seldom the driving force in narratives about issues that affect them directly. An instance of this is the narrative about Afghan women being forced into marriages with Pakistani men. On the surface, this points to women's rights violations, however, it also subtly addresses foreign intervention and national sovereignty (see Figs. 13 and 14).



Figure 13: Hadia News asserts that Afghan women are forced to marry "Punjabis" without credible evidence.



Figure 14: The post reads "these teenagers are Taliban sex slaves [...] Taliban is hypocritical, they impose laws on others but not on themselves".



Figure 15: RTA reports that "Afghan women welcome the Islamic Emirate's directive that prohibits women from working in institutions."

Figure 16: This post states that "Afghan women have no problems! Things are worse in India, Bangladesh, and Africa. African women die of poverty [...] but the United Nations never protests that".

There are also unverified reports of teenage girls and women being arrested and raped for defying the Taliban authorities. Authored primarily by men, these accounts tend to focus

more on the alleged sexual misconduct and religious hypocrisy of the Taliban than on the experiences and traumas of the women affected.

Our research indicates that opponents of the Taliban actively seek information to undermine the authorities' credibility, particularly focusing on accusations of sexual abuse and exploitation of teenagers. These allegations require thorough verification from reliable sources. The use of such serious allegations for political gain must be balanced against the potential harm to the victims' safety and emotional well-being. Prioritizing victim support and ensuring their stories are heard is crucial, as opposed to using their suffering for political objectives.

In contrast, the Taliban de facto authorities' communication strategy includes incorporating women's voices to legitimize their actions. For instance, RTA Dari claimed Afghan women support the Taliban de facto authorities' employment bans, yet this claim lacks substantial evidence or external corroboration (Fig. 15). These statements often represent a minority of female Taliban supporters, misrepresenting them as the majority viewpoint of all Afghan women. Such misinformation risks mischaracterizing the struggle of Afghan women's rights activists, potentially framing their efforts as against the 'majority's will'. This could lead to increased hostility against them.

Disinformation can also psychologically impact Afghan women opposing these restrictions. If they believe their peers largely accept the Taliban's oppressive policies, it might induce feelings of helplessness and discourage advocacy for change. Some comments on social media trivialize or deny the struggles of Afghan women, comparing them with the extreme hardships faced by African women, as if to suggest that the issues in Afghanistan are inconsequential (Fig. 16).

Overall, the digital narrative on gender issues in Afghanistan is complex and plagued with misconceptions. The dominance of male voices on platforms like Facebook and Twitter/X contributes to this imbalance. Afghan women are often portrayed as passive, and their stories are overshadowed by political agendas in reports of abuses by the Taliban de facto authorities. It is vital to recentre these discussions on women's voices and experiences to comprehensively understand and address their challenges.

Key Findings:

Part 2- Common Pitfalls

For the second phase of the research we focused on the dissemination of misleading news by Afghan news outlets. Building upon the foundational work of identifying key themes and narrative techniques, this stage concentrated on isolating journalistic practices that facilitate the spread of mis- and disinformation. Our goal was to increase Afghan media practitioners understanding about how to recognize and avoid journalistic errors in their reporting.

For this phase we identified and analysed 160 instances of misleading news, which shed light on the intricate disinformation landscape both within and beyond Afghanistan's borders. This part of the study underlined significant challenges and emerging trends in the media sector. We found that media amplified disinformation often stems from journalistic

lapses such as the use of inaccurate headlines, unbalanced sourcing, and the circulation of unverified or fabricated content. This issue permeates various media platforms, from state to independent and social media, and is exploited by groups across the political spectrum to further their own agendas.



Figure 17: Khorasan International shares recycled, out-of-context footage from TOLO TV to substantiate claims that the Taliban encourages prostitution



Figure 18: HADIA News describes former RTA presenter Diva Patang as a “Taliban lobbyist”, claiming she is related to the group’s spokesperson in Doha

As highlighted earlier the key themes in mis- and disinformation include longstanding disputes over governance and power, views on Afghan identity, and human rights issues since the Taliban takeover in 2021.

Gender disparity is evident in social media narratives, reflecting the Taliban's conservative norms that portray women as passive victims and exclude their voices from crucial discussions. This misrepresentation, combined with the exploitation of gender issues for political narratives, risks increased hostility towards women's rights advocates and impacts both local and international perceptions of Afghan geopolitics.

Challenges for Internal Media Outlets

Our findings from both Phase 1 and 2 of the research reveal that Afghan media outlets face significant pressure under Taliban rule, leading to the dissemination of state-sponsored narratives. While some outlets have been coerced into aligning with official messaging, the degree of compliance varies, and there are still efforts to maintain journalistic integrity despite these challenges. This complex environment results in a mixture of biased information and genuine reporting, highlighting the need for continued support to foster independent journalism and mitigate disinformation.

The nature of this disinformation often originates from press releases issued by the de facto authorities and ranges from overstatements about government successes and misleading portrayals of social and economic conditions, to the suppression of information regarding human rights abuses and the silencing of dissent. The impact of this state-controlled narrative is profound, as it not only misinforms the public but may also shape national and international understanding of the situation in Afghanistan.

Challenges for External Media Outlets

Media outlets operating outside of Afghanistan face a different set of challenges. The lack of transparent information and severe restrictions on media freedom within the country often lead to inadvertent mis- and disinformation. These outlets, attempting to report on Afghan affairs from a distance, frequently rely on limited or biased sources, resulting in unintentional inaccuracies.

In addition to these challenges, there are deliberate efforts by certain entities to produce and disseminate content that misleads and manipulates. These actors, often motivated by political or ideological agendas, aim to undermine opposition groups, or influence public opinion. Their tactics include creating and spreading false narratives about key events, policies, and figures, thereby shaping public discourse in a manner that serves their interests.

Journalistic Devices Driving Mis-/Disinformation

Our research highlighted a significant trend in the strategic use of audience behaviour on social media in news reporting. We found that 35% of misleading news instances we identified involved headlines that were either misleading or functioned as clickbait. These headlines, designed to draw in readers, often did not align with the more nuanced content of the articles. This practice of using sensationalist headlines and emotionally charged content aims to elicit immediate reactions and encourage sharing for viral dissemination, rather than promoting in-depth engagement with the news. Such tactics effectively increase audience engagement but also contribute to the rapid spread of mis- and disinformation, as readers frequently form opinions and share articles based only on the headlines, without engaging with the full content.

This issue of misleading headlines (see Figs 19 and 20) and their impact on audience perception aligns with findings from the [Columbia Journalism Review](#) on what makes news go viral. Their analysis, using data from the [Emergent database](#), indicates that news organizations reporting rumours and unverified claims often do so in ways that bias readers toward thinking the claim is true. They highlight that many news outlets pair articles about rumours with headlines that declare these rumours as facts, leading to misinformed audiences. The inconsistency in how unverified information is presented, along with a lack of clear disclosures, results in a cycle where once a claim is reported and gains media credibility, it gets widely circulated, often obscuring the original source, and leaving little additional reporting or context.



Figure 19: Khorasan International's headline alleges Taliban leaders ordered suppression of non-Pashtun units within the Taliban, but the report lacks evidence.



Figure 20: Hadia News' prominent headline inaccurately suggests US support for the Taliban against ISIS

In a global media environment that values viral content, news organizations worldwide, including Afghan media, face the challenge of balancing accurate reporting with the need for high audience engagement. This issue is especially critical for Afghan media outlets that rely on international donor support, which is often dependent on high engagement metrics. This puts these outlets in a precarious position, balancing the need to follow the principles of responsible journalism, which requires time for verification and balanced reporting, while also contending with the fast-paced, engagement-focused nature of social media. This reliance on engagement for visibility and funding can push outlets toward creating sensational, emotionally charged content. This dynamic creates a cycle where sensational content influences audience behaviours, further complicating efforts to combat mis- and disinformation.

Presentation of Unverified Information as Fact

A significant trend in our findings is the presentation of unverified information as factual. In our research, we found that most false news stemmed from reports either lacking credible sources or citing sources that were irrelevant, biased, or non-existent (see Figs 21 and 22).



Figure 21: Hadia News' report of a drone attack is unverified and unsupported by local news, potentially feeding into baseless rumours about drone activities in Afghan media.



انس حقاني خپلو استشهديانو سره فلسطين ته روان؟ انس حقاني په مسلمانانو غيرت وگر، انس اېحقاني تازه وينا

Figure 22: Star Press claimed senior Taliban leader Anas Haqqani travelled to Gaza to fight Israel. Haqqani has since made several appearances in Kabul.

This practice of sharing information without proper verification can not only mislead the audience but also greatly damage the credibility and integrity of the media outlet in question. Such practices can contribute to a growing mistrust among the public towards media sources, as they become increasingly sceptical of the information presented to them.

Moreover, the reliance on unverified information poses broader implications for the information ecosystem. It creates an environment where rumours and falsehoods can spread rapidly, fuelling mis- and disinformation, and potentially leading to real-world consequences. For instance, unverified reports about sensitive topics such as security incidents or political developments can exacerbate tensions or incite panic. This situation is further exacerbated by the fast-paced nature of digital media, where the pressure to publish quickly often overrides the due diligence of fact-checking. As a result, the responsibility falls not only on media outlets to uphold journalistic standards but also on the audience to approach news consumption with a critical eye, recognizing the importance of corroborating information with multiple, reliable sources.

Imbalanced and Missing Sources

Our research revealed a striking trend of false news within the Afghan media landscape. Approximately 40% of the 160 false news items identified did not cite any sources at all, highlighting a concerning practice of presenting uncorroborated claims as news. Furthermore, a larger proportion, 56%, relied on just a single source. This significantly compromised the depth and reliability of the reporting, as it failed to provide a comprehensive and multifaceted view of the subject matter (see Figs. 23-26).

The study also found that 12.5% of the sources in the false news reports identified were second-hand, while 17.5% remained unspecified. The use of second-hand sources is often employed to protect the identity and safety of sources in a country where reporting could have severe repercussions. However, relying on second-hand information could distort the original message and introduce inaccuracies, making the verification of the information more challenging. The issue of unspecified sources was even more problematic, as it directly impacts audiences' ability to assess the credibility of the information.



Figure 23: Bakhtar News Agency report provides no sources to substantiate the warm reception of Afghan returnees.



Figure 24: Khuzaa News reports an analyst's claim that the Taliban listen to the Afghan people, but without evidence or alternate sources.



Figure 25: Exile TV reports a ban on travel to northern provinces, but without evidence or alternate sources.



Figure 26: Khorasan International alleges members of the Taliban raped female prisoners in Herat; unconfirmed by any credible sources.

While protecting sources is a legitimate concern, especially in an oppressive environment like Afghanistan, unspecified sources left a gap in transparency, potentially leading to doubts about the veracity of the information presented. This scepticism can be detrimental not only to the credibility of the individual report but also to the trustworthiness of the media outlet.

Additionally, the findings indicated that in cases where more than one source was used, the reports often exhibited a clear imbalance. The sources used in these instances tended to be selected disproportionately from those that may have vested interests or specific viewpoints, leading to a skewed representation of events or issues. For example, in reports about political or social conflicts, using sources aligned with only one side of the conflict resulted in narratives that omitted critical context and alternative viewpoints. This type of imbalanced reporting can not only mislead the public but also contributes to the polarization of opinions and exacerbates existing tensions. The prevalence of such practices in Afghan media underscores the need for more rigorous journalistic standards and a commitment to providing balanced and well-sourced news content.

These findings underscored the critical need for outlets to practice discernment and implement robust verification processes. It also highlighted the importance of clear signposting and disclaimers, particularly for information that could not be fully verified, to maintain the integrity of the news while offering a platform for varied voices.

Recommendations

In concluding our research, we recognize the challenges Afghan media is facing in the current environment, marked by intense censorship, safety concerns, and resource constraints, that is highly susceptible to mis- and disinformation. This is exacerbated by the rapid evolution of digital media and the complexities of Afghanistan's political situation. Factors such as widespread misleading headlines, circulation of unverified information, and imbalanced reporting practices have greatly fuelled the spread of false information, undermining public trust and the credibility of the media.

Addressing mis- and disinformation in this context demands a broad approach. Our recommendations are directed at Afghan media, both in country and in exile, as well as their donors and supporters, with the aim of countering mis- and disinformation, fostering trust and credibility, and reinforcing the media landscape's resilience and effectiveness.

For Afghan Media

Strategies to Tackle Mis-/Disinformation

- **Adaptation to Disinformation Tactics:** Stay informed about the evolving media landscape and the tactics used in misinformation campaigns. Regular training and education in digital literacy, fact-checking, and secure reporting practices are vital.
- **Focus on Human Stories and Impacts:** Highlight the human impact of policies and events. This approach can provide a more relatable and accurate picture of the situation on the ground, countering propaganda that often dehumanizes or oversimplifies complex issues.
- **Transparency with Audiences:** Be transparent with audiences about the challenges and limitations faced in reporting. This includes disclosing when information cannot be fully verified or when sources need to remain anonymous for their safety.

Safety and Security

- **Elevating Standards in Non-Political Reporting:** Given the limitations on political journalism, media should strive for exceptional accuracy in less sensitive stories. This commitment to high-quality reporting in safer domains will bolster credibility, with audiences aware of the constraints faced in politically sensitive areas.
- **Discreet and Secure Communication:** Use secure and discreet methods of communication to protect sources, especially those who may be at risk. Digital security measures, like encrypted communication apps and VPNs are essential.
- **Psychological Support:** Seek psychological support when needed. The stressful and often dangerous nature of reporting under such conditions can take a toll on mental health.

Strategies to Tackle Mis-/Disinformation

- **Fact-Checking Initiatives:** Establish or partner with fact-checking organizations to verify news content. Implement strict fact-checking procedures to verify information before publication, especially for sensitive topics. This can prevent the spread of unverified news and mis-/disinformation.
- **Train Journalists on Ethical Reporting:** Conduct training sessions for journalists on ethical journalism practices, emphasizing the importance of balanced reporting and the dangers of sensationalism. Training programs and guidelines on ethical journalism can reinforce these practices among journalists and editors.
- **Digital Literacy Initiatives:** Develop and share digital literacy resources across news platforms to help audiences discern credible information from false news.

Building Trust and Credibility

- **Transparency in Reporting:** Be as transparent about sources and the editorial process as possible. Acknowledging errors and correcting them publicly can enhance credibility.
- **Diversify Sources:** Ensure that multiple and diverse sources are used in reporting to provide a well-rounded perspective on news stories. This will help avoid the pitfalls of biased or imbalanced reporting.
- **Strong Editorial Processes:** Introduce a system where journalists have their reports reviewed for accuracy, balance, and adherence to ethical standards by peers before publication. This collaborative process would enhance accuracy and ethical standards, fostering credibility and professional solidarity among journalists.

For Donors and Supporters

Funding Priorities

- **Long-Term Sustainable Funding:** Establishing stable, long-term funding sources for Afghan media is critical, as it provides the financial support needed to maintain journalistic integrity, invest in fact-checking resources, and address mis-/disinformation effectively.
- **Investment in Technology for News Verification:** Provide financial support for the development and implementation of advanced technological tools and platforms. These can assist journalists in verifying sources, cross-checking facts, and identifying fake news, thus improving the overall quality and reliability of news reporting.
- **Redefine Engagement Metrics:** Work with media outlets to develop new metrics for measuring engagement that value quality and accuracy over quantity. This will help shift the focus from sensationalist content to more substantial journalism.

Capacity Building

- **Digital Literacy and Social Media Workshops:** Prioritize financial support for workshops that enhance digital literacy among Afghan journalists, focusing on the responsible use of social media for news reporting. This includes training in identifying misinformation and effectively leveraging social media platforms for accurate news dissemination.
- **Collaborative Reporting Initiatives:** Allocate funds to facilitate collaborative reporting projects. These initiatives should encourage partnerships among Afghan journalists and their international counterparts, fostering resource sharing, diverse perspectives, and adherence to global journalistic standards.
- **Mentorship and Exchange Programs:** Provide resources for the development of mentorship and international exchange programs. Such initiatives would connect Afghan journalists with experienced professionals globally, offering opportunities for skill development, exposure to different media environments, and a deeper understanding of ethical journalism practices.