



Covering the Greater Middle East Crisis: The Problematic Representation of Cultural and Political Issues in International Media

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Abstract

Through the analysis of international media content, this study focuses on two phases of the recent Afghan history and its media representation—the end of the American military campaign and the beginning of the new Taliban government. Specifically, the analysis involves two questions: first, how the Western mainstream media publicly narrated the crisis following the establishment of the Taliban government; second, how the voices of Afghan women and journalists were reported within the news environment. Focusing on two dimensions, political and cultural, the article argues that the country has embarked on a process of "de-modernization," which needs to be checked.

Key words: Afghanistan, Taliban, international media, women rights, gender, religion.

Introduction

On August 15, 2021, the Taliban entered Kabul and quickly completed the recapture of the country. Control of the "new" Afghanistan was laid bare to the rest of the world with images of

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Islamic fighters inside the government building broadcast by *Al Jazeera*, while the president, Ashraf Ghani, had already left the country for a few hours to go to Uzbekistan.

At the first press conference, the leaders of the future Taliban government first *made it* clear that they would respect women's rights and forgive those who had resisted them in the past.¹ On various public occasions, then, through the words of spokesperson Zabihullah Mujahid, it was stressed how the "question of women in Afghanistan" would be an important point of the future political project and that the Islamic Emirate would be committed to their rights under Sharia.² Another interesting aspect were also the words addressed to the local media, presented as "independent and impartial", in line with Islamic values, free to "criticize" the country's political institutions.³

However, the apparent openness to the press soon turned out to be a short-lived facade. In the first place, with the start of the new Taliban government, the figure of women has once again been limited to the stereotype of wife and mother, while freedom of the press has begun to clash with radical Islamic thought.

The work presented here focuses on the political-social analysis on the one hand, and media-cultural analysis on the other, of Afghanistan, an example of a country in the process of "demodernization" where human rights have been won with effort in the last twenty years. They have been erased in a few weeks amid violence, information disorder, and geopolitical changes still in progress (Minakov, 2021).

Moving at a theoretical and empirical level, from the study of integrated open sources to the use of the social *content analysis methodology*, the research highlighted the main journalistic narratives that emerged between August 15 and September 30, 2021 at the international level.

The objective was to investigate the role of Afghan women and journalists within the current crisis situation and especially the representation of the latter in the information ecosystem, taking into account the situation of serious social and economic instability in the country, where each time Furthermore, it is evident how the processes of modernization and demodernization interact,

generating unexpected political, social, and technological transformations that, however, never seem to fully merge.

1. “Journalism trials” in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is considered one of the most dangerous places in the world for journalists.

On the occasion of the recent publication entitled *Special Report: Murders of Human Rights Defenders, Journalists and Media Workers in Afghanistan (2018-2021)*, Deborah Lyons, Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Afghanistan, has underlined in repeatedly how the Afghan people deserved to live in a civic space where people could think, write and express their opinions openly, without fear.

Even recent data, published by *Reporters Without Borders*, shows that at least 85 local reporters have been killed or taken hostage in the last 20 years.⁴ Despite the low level of security, since the first months of 2000 an interesting network of independent journalism has developed, well established in Afghan territory, but little known abroad.⁵

However, it is as of September 12, 2020, start date of negotiations of peace in Afghanistan,⁶ that attacks against media operators, as well as representatives of local legal, health and religious institutions have increased again. This event, with its important critical issues, had a strong psychosocial impact on the society civil.

Many of the defenders rights defenders and media workers even then they began to quietly leave Afghanistan, leading to a decline in public confidence and hope in the efforts made to achieve their peace. Information professionals have always been exposed to a series of daily risks such as threats, intimidation, harassment, surveillance, detention arbitrary. On years we have repeatedly attended a series of attacks against journalists, with the clear objective of silencing them through the use of artillery explosives improvise (EDI).

Specifically, only in 2020 we witnessed the discovery of the body of Safar Muhammad Atal (radio host Samoon) detonation of a FDI responsible for the death of Khurshid TV reporter Mir Wahid Shah Zamir Amiri, before the murders in city of Jalalabad of the reporter-activist by the Rights of women, Malalai Maiwand and finally, in city

of Ghazni, by Ghazni Journalists Association President Rahmatullah Nekzad.

Therefore, the long-awaited opening of peace negotiations has not produced the (desired) diminish of violence. On the contrary, there seems to be marked a significant increase in social insecurity among the civilian population and what were extraordinary narratives of acts of violence have become ordinary stories in which "you die, there is a tweet, and people move on" (NYT, January 2, 2021).⁷

After the recent takeover of Kabul by the Taliban, very few journalists are continuing their work, many others, in fact, have tried to leave the country fearing for their safety.

As for the figure of women, the issue is even more complex; even more so if your profession is linked to the narration of reality through the media.

Since the 1950s, despite having been the center of interest of the United Nations and the UN at a supranational level, Afghan citizens have always been strongly influenced by traditions, prejudices, the different ways in which legislative and culturally individual countries have conceived them (Lanzelotto, 2019). After September 11, 2001, freedom of expression has been one of the most important and cherished achievements for women (and) journalists in Afghanistan. The "Muslim public sphere" seemed to have allowed the arena to level, relocating and deconstructing masculine centers of power (Eickelman, Salvatore 2002; Pepicelli 2018). Despite discrimination and some hesitation, many women had somehow begun to fight for the "right to choose." Choose, for example, to study, uncover your eyes and give voice to your thoughts. Many young women, after studying at the University, had tried to approach a career in journalism, defending freedom of expression and women's rights also through the sounding board of local-digital media (De Poli, 2007; Pendezza, 2021; Grimaldi, 2021).

The tremendous growth of independent media in Afghanistan over the past decade has provided employment opportunities for large numbers of women journalists and other information workers in the country. However, this growth has faced many difficulties, including the challenging integration into the work environment that journalists have had to deal with.

In Afghanistan's traditional, patriarchal society from 1992 to 2001, being born female meant the absence of social opportunities and rigid barriers to beginning any professional career. In addition to being a difficult country from a political and cultural point of view, Afghanistan is, as mentioned, also among the places where it is quite risky to be a journalist. Since 2009, the AJS Afghan Journalists Safety Committee has recorded dozens of incidents of violence each year against mostly local women journalists, who all too often carry out their work in conditions and contexts of gender discrimination and hostility.

Despite this, in recent years, women have not been inhibited by the context, on the contrary, they have been able to take advantage of the opportunity of "twenty years in the process of modernization" to train and try to overcome the obstacles that separated them of a journalistic career.

The definitive return of the Taliban has thus erased twenty years of important achievements in the emancipation of committed women in the world and in the local journalistic sector.

A recent survey by *Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and the Afghan Association of Independent Journalists (AIJA)* reveals that since the capture of Kabul, more than 40% of the media have been shut down, weakening the market and censoring it (Euronews, 2021). With the Taliban takeover, TV shows and entertainment shows are being reorganized in line with radical Islamic thought, putting 84% of media workers out of work.

After the abolition of the Ministry for Women, the Ministry for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice was reestablished, assisted by a "moral" police which, in reality, not only sanctions all inappropriate conduct and immoral acts, but returns to spreading a representation of women relegated to "wife and mother" making her progressively disappear from the local media public sphere (Buoncompagni 2021; 2022; Cesare 2021; Giordana, 2021).

3. Methodological note

The study takes place between August 15 and September 30, 2021.

This period, although apparently short, represents the fundamental moment to understand the political and sociocultural changes of the new Afghan crisis. Specifically, the survey aimed to study the spaces and contents related to the narration of Afghan women and

journalists within the main international newspapers, considering in the first place two very specific phases: 1) the end of the "US military campaign"; 2) the beginning of the new Taliban government, which includes the restoration of a dark past for human and civil rights narrated by the media.

Although the present investigation is predominantly exploratory in nature, the research questions from which it starts are probably not intended to lead to a discovery, but rather to validate a hypothesis, which rests on a ground of empirical observations.

Specifically, the analysis revolves around two issues: first, understanding how the main Western media publicly narrated the crisis after the establishment of the Taliban government in Afghanistan; second, how the voices of Afghan women and women journalists were reported within the news space.

For this, the research was carried out through two integrated phases: a preliminary study of the sociological and political science literature alternating with journalistic material (specific reports and podcasts on the subject) and a subsequent content analysis in which analyzed the content of journalistic texts analyzed, following the structure of the discourse (*discursive structures*) and the "position" of the newspaper with respect to the research topic (*positioning*).⁸

The newspapers were manually selected⁹ through a search-analysis of 2,181 relevant press articles (out of 7,000 initially identified) present in the digital archives of the *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *Le Monde* and *Il Corriere della Sera*, newspapers from the countries that he actively participated in the mission in Afghanistan after September 11, 2001 and organized the withdrawal of military and civilians during the reference period, thus having had a "privileged perspective" to publicly recount the crisis.¹⁰

We then proceeded to a first chronic review of the events that occurred in Afghanistan and a subsequent mapping of the journalistic story within the identified period, through the use of three *main keywords*: " *Afghanistan*"; "*Afghan women*"; "*Afghan journalists* " ¹¹then identifying two thematic macro-areas, according to the classification criteria of traditional journalistic news (*hard and soft news*).

4. Afghan: The Point of view of the Western media

In the weeks that are taken as a reference, there are many local and international facts and news, of a political and social nature, communicated by the media around the world, through multiple channels and languages. Global media attention appears to have grown exponentially, in parallel with the growing complexity of the Afghan crisis.

Therefore, it is evident the difficulty, from a methodological point of view, of collecting, categorizing and analyzing a significant amount of information communicated directly by the different newspapers.

a fairly common *agenda setting* (McCombs, Shaw 1972) from the early stages of research, whose main postulate is *prominence transfer* that is, making the news stand out from the rest, by transferring one or more topics from a private agenda to a public one of the highest general interest.

It was possible to summarize this agenda by identifying among the collected data two macro-themes with reference to two specific time periods, which we will go on to illustrate in the following subparagraphs: - international- *military politics* (*Hard Political News*) - August 15-31, 2021; - *Human Rights Voices and Public Celebrities* (*Hard Social News*) – September 1-30, 2021.

This categorization has also been suggested taking as a model some specific criteria of "newsworthiness" (Brooks 1992; Lepri 2005; Sorrentino 2007). In particular:

- *time and actuality of the event*: this criterion considers the immediacy in time of an event or its novelty.
- *(public) relevance of the protagonists* refers to the attention and visibility of the subjects involved in a specific event, their belonging to "social elites" and institutional hierarchies.
- *the public interest*: that is, the degree of interest in that fact and the consequent level of *commitment*. This can happen both from a practical and quantitative point of view, as well as from a human and emotional point of view (compassion, solidarity, personalization);
- *physical proximity*. The involvement of a geographically (and politically) close place ¹², in the face of a great and unexpected crisis that is narrated, according to the "cynical" rules of journalism, augurs that it will make more news.

4.1 International politics - military

The first identified macro-category places the political and military issues discussed in the media at the center of journalistic communication, leaving the issue of women (and) journalists in Afghanistan very clearly to one side. More precisely, the tendency of each newspaper is to describe, according to a very nationalist perspective, the mistakes of its local government and the related geopolitical and economic effects, in relation to the rise of the Taliban government and the strategies introduced in twenty years of conflict by of the international community.

In this logic, the true criticalities of the introduced military policies and strategies were highlighted, without for this reason silencing the "strengths" and levels of risk, thus contributing to subtract ground from the two most luxurious rhetorical attitudes in the tradition of the allies: the defeatist on the one hand, and the generically and faithfully exalting, on the other.

As also reported in *table 1*, the *keyword* research allowed us to identify five dominant subcategories within this narrative line in the virtual pages of newspapers. The first refers to the main *media event* that initiates the entire information flow, still ongoing, regarding the Afghan crisis: the seizure of Kabul by the Taliban on August 15, 2021. An event that occupies an important space in all the newspapers analyzed. But it is within the *Corriere della Sera* (48%) and the British newspaper *The Guardian* (39%) where we registered the greatest attention to the issue.

Another dominant theme concerns the failure of US military policy and the related conflicts that have arisen between the US government and the international community. At this point, it is important to note that journalists often tend to create a narrative that always and, in all cases, starts from the figure of US President Joe Biden and then describes individual conflicting relationships/reactions within their own country of reference.¹³

On this occasion, it is the Anglo-Saxon and French information spaces that register significant figures, with 30% in the pages of *Le Monde*, 27% in *The Guardian* and 24% in the *New York Times*. While the United States evacuated the first 3,200 civilians, the European Union was preparing to receive the first refugees, registering strong

discontent in countries such as the Netherlands, Germany and France (Arnaldo, 2021).¹⁴

It is not by chance, therefore, that Le Monde reports special attention to the issue of migratory flows (21%), a story of intolerant migration even for those countries that should occupy more "hospitable" positions.

However, during the first phase of the emergency in Afghanistan, Corriere della Sera (11%) and The Guardian (13%) gave more space to women's issues, to the figure of so many women, mothers and information professionals who desperately attend and listen. by the international community. It is interesting to underline how this space is rarely occupied/accompanied by interviews/testimonials, direct or indirect, to the subjects concerned.

The issue of women and their violated rights is dealt with almost exclusively from the point of view of the journalist himself who, rather than investigating in depth and critically, seems to ask himself very general open questions, whose question mark often becomes the title of his outgoing piece, rather than a narrative of fact.¹⁵

In this first macrocategory, what can be observed, from a strictly content point of view, is the prevalence of themes that describe two scenarios. On the one hand, the surrender of the US in the face of an irrecoverable situation that leads to a slow erosion of the confidence of the armed forces and allies in what was announced as a peace mission to "save" the Afghan territory and its population. On the other hand, the interest and concern of the individual countries that took part in this mission that try to justify their positions and their mistakes, reorganizing the military and evacuation strategy, alarmingly announcing the ("dangerous") migration already at the gates. A strong limitation of journalistic communication is the little space and relative narrative value given to the "human factor" and gender.

Once the civil-military evacuation is finished, national interests and (future) political strategies seem to be a need to be told to *Western audiences*, at the risk of making cold, superficial and partial analyzes (AGI, 2021).

It is only in the second reference period, from September 1 to 30, 2021, that newspapers tend, although in different ways, to host narratives about the worrying humanitarian emergency and the

evident erosion of respect for human rights, through voices, figures, symbols, protagonists, and representatives of a society already in decline for weeks.

Tab.1 – International politics - military - (hard political news) -

Source: own elaboration

Subcategory	Daily	medium coverage
Taking of Kabul	<i>The Corriere della Sera</i>	48%
	<i>Le Monde</i>	39%
	<i>The Guardian</i>	39%
	<i>New York Times</i>	30%
Airport Attack/Chaos	<i>The Corriere della Sera</i>	10%
	<i>Le Monde</i>	6%
	<i>The Guardian</i>	8%
	<i>New York Times</i>	14%
Politics failure and coalition _ American	<i>The Corriere della Sera</i>	17%
	<i>Le Monde</i>	30%
	<i>The Guardian</i>	27%
	<i>New York Times</i>	24%
Migratory flows	<i>The Corriere della Sera</i>	14%
	<i>Le Monde</i>	21%
	<i>The Guardian</i>	13%
	<i>New York Times</i>	19%
	<i>The Corriere</i>	11%

Women	<i>della Sera</i>	
	<i>Le Monde</i>	4%
	<i>The Guardian</i>	13%
	<i>New York Times</i>	9%

4.2 Human rights and public celebrity voices

After an initial narrative centered on the installation of the Taliban government and the evacuation of citizens from Afghanistan, the attention of the press shifts to the world of women and human rights, an issue that has so far emerged in a rather confused and fragmented way. Also, in this second phase of the *content analysis*, five subcategories were identified, representative of the predominant narratives in the digital archives, in the period from September 1 to 30, 2021 (*Tab.2*).

A first piece of information that it was immediately possible to record refers to the constant presence of the "*international political-military*" issue in the month of September, which highlights the concerns of governments committed to managing migratory flows and safe repatriation. of their compatriots still present in Afghanistan. territory.

Le Monde (50%) and The New York Times (54%) have the highest percentages of *media coverage*, especially in the first two weeks of September. This figure is not accidental since it is linked to two fundamental facts for France and the United States. The first refers to the strong concern of Emmanuel Macron for the construction of a common refugee reception policy that will be proposed on the occasion of the G20. The second, the twentieth anniversary of the attacks of September 11, 2001, which this time does not evoke the start of a war that has been chosen to be waged in the Middle East, but rather the failure of the American and NATO troops with respect to that decision.

At the same time, there is particular attention from the Italian press (Il Corriere della Sera, 20%) and the British press (The Guardian, 26%) towards political elections, acts of violence and public communications by the Taliban government towards women and

professionals. Afghans after the withdrawal of US troops on August 31, 2021.

With the inauguration of the new Taliban government, many bans and changes have been imposed that have mainly affected the education and information sector, to prevent them from exposing their bodies and influencing political decisions.¹⁶

In the background of these events, among other contents, the story of civil society prevails, with a privileged view, by the media, on women (and) local journalists. The story of the "*women who flee*" and the "*women who demonstrate in the square*" are the first two subcategories identified in the newspapers. The term "*exhaust*" in this case It contains a double meaning: the numerous attempts to leave the borders of the country itself in conflict and the "defense" of freedoms and rights in a territory that is once again unstable.¹⁷ This *framing* is picked up by most of the press, both Italian (21%) and French and British (16%), where the woman is represented as a fragile, traumatized individual, almost resigned to a return to the past, who finds in a crossroads: stay or flee the country.

What is interesting and controversial is that in parallel The New York Times (20%) and Corriere della Sera (29%) build an alternative narrative to the one described so far, namely that of a brave Afghan woman who challenges the repressive policies of her the government organizes protest demonstrations in the streets of Kabul, thus gaining the eye of the cameras of all the international media, hoping to interrupt the (political) attempt to restore a dark past.¹⁸

Protests organized by Afghan women have been widely covered by the media and, to date, represent the main phenomenon of "grassroots" opposition to the Taliban regime.

The public and media success of these events, which obviously did not limit the situations of violence (rather they aroused the anger of the members of the new government), is attributable not only to the strong attention of the world of information and the international community, but also to the active participation of female subjects from all social categories with a notable relevance in the local public space.

The voices and testimonies of students, teachers, writers, athletes, judges, third sector operators and especially journalists were

received in all the newspapers analyzed, what changes in the description of the facts is the emotional reaction and the role of women: future migrants in shock on the one hand, "fighters" to recover their rights, on the other.

Many of them have given interviews or shared useful material to explain the current Afghan crisis, proposing their point of view by exploiting the power and transparency of digital technologies.¹⁹

This last aspect arises from the last subcategory identified, namely, the numerous *forms of altruism and solidarity* in support of the human and feminine cause that have affected political, institutional and cultural realities, considerably covering the international journalistic scene. *Corriere della Sera* (14%) and *The Guardian* (11%) describe another "side" of the Afghan crisis, dedicating a few pages to the *good news*, recounting the strength and hope of many Afghan refugees and the constant support provided by the host communities

The "Afghan Women Exist" event, the *EoF Global March* and *Together we resist!* launched by *Economy of Francesco*, an international movement of young economists and entrepreneurs, but also the international solidarity campaign launched by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), already at the end of August 2021, together with Afghan journalists, to denounce the increasing threats and violence against media operators, forced to close their newsrooms after the Taliban took control of most of the country, are just a few examples.

Tab.2 - Human rights and *public voices* (hard social news) - Source of elaboration of the authors

Subcategory	Daily	% average coverage
Forms of altruism and initiatives solidarity	<i>Corriere della Sera</i>	14%
	<i>Le Monde</i>	9%
	<i>The Guardian</i>	11%
	<i>New York Times</i>	5%
	<i>Corriere della Sera</i>	20%

Repressive policy of the Taliban	<i>Le Monde</i>	14%
	<i>The Guardian</i>	26%
	<i>New York Times</i>	10
Women on the run	<i>Corriere della Sera</i>	21%
	<i>Le Monde</i>	16%
	<i>The Guardian</i>	16%
	<i>New York Times</i>	11%
Women in the square and testimonials	<i>Corriere della Sera</i>	29%
	<i>Le Monde</i>	11%
	<i>The Guardian</i>	19%
	<i>New York Times</i>	20%
International politics	<i>Corriere della Sera</i>	16%
	<i>Le Monde</i>	15%

5. Conclusions

As the months go by, *solidarity and assistance* seem to be less and less present in the media public sphere.²⁰

The impression is that the condition of women, in relation to the continuous political interventions proposed by the Taliban government, interests the Western media agenda in intermittent phases, throughout a dossier, a special or sometimes an interview.

As shown and analyzed in the previous paragraphs, the "voices" of the different global media have built a "polyphony" that has alternated attention to the international political and military scene with the support of civil society in Afghanistan.

Despite the repressive measures imposed by the new Taliban government against the press, some women (and) journalists are still looking for new strategies to be protagonists in public and professional life, also trying to do journalism "at a distance" promoting the reconquest of freedom. and of democracy inside and outside the country, trying to overcome the limits that are imposed on them. At the same time, however, they "show" their emotional state, showing in the public media space their fragility and concern for a once again dark future, for the loss -total or partial- of their

professionalism, aware of the difficulties they will have to manage, 'from now on, the Taliban presence in Kabul.

Therefore, Western journalism must preserve and continue with its role of responsibility and defense of the ethical value of images, their cultural dimension, and why not, pedagogy, continuing to tell the story of women avoiding any form of stigma in the work environment, family, social relations in search of a narrative balance between the local and the global,

These aspects, far from being obvious, must always be considered in the life cycle of a company, before, during and after the emergence of crises, since public interest in certain events, especially if they are local and geographically distant, later of a time vanishes, adapting to the rhythms, spaces and times that the logic of information today imposes on journalists and their audiences (Altheide , Snow 1979; Bentivegna , Boccia Artieri 2021; Sorrentino, Splendore 2022).

By favoring newsworthiness, there is the risk of making prevail not what is expected of the public, but what is expected of it by the other media or the entire system. The "say to be believed", an identifying element of journalism, is replaced by "say so as not to be wrong" in the sense of the homologation of the production options and the conformation of the dominant ideas. The global traffic of news, ideas, beliefs, images thus transforms information into "shared events" devoid of content and value, as if any type of information equaled direct knowledge, as if even rumors were true communication (Wolton, 2009).

The Afghanistan case study, as can be seen, is not solely tied to a quantitative or qualitative dimension of the narrative. It is also a structural question of international journalism, it is about being in the place to tell the facts, taking advantage of the possibility of verifying sources, collecting testimonies and limiting as much as possible episodes of disinformation, or more generally, "contamination of the journalistic field" (Sorrentino, 2015).

The concept of "field", taken from Pierre Bourdieu, who founded this scientific tool to deal with the objects of his studies in sociology,²¹ applied to journalism, helps to understand, in the specific case, the complexity of "doing journalism", and of *being a (female) journalist*, within a demodernized and at the same time (inevitably) interconnected society (Russ -Mohl, 2011). The field of journalism is

part of the social system and includes the relationships between the different actors and their interests, as well as technologies, languages and norms; it also determines ties of dependency and establishes ties (of power) with other fields, particularly the economic-political field, which is increasingly asymmetrical.

The lack of balance between fields, in fact, seriously challenges the process of "shaping" the information" (Schudson , 1988), that is, respecting the phases of selection, hierarchy and presentation of the news, which depends on the network of relationships that occur in society and that define that abstract place from which journalism extracts its data, that is, the mediated public sphere. A "creative", "dense" space, no longer "dialogical and localized", that is, based on a direct dialogue within a physical place, but populated by a plurality of "spectators", in which media production is constantly reused and reinterpreted by its users, often contradicting the intentions of its issuers (Thompson, 1998).

The paradox of this condition is that while the media infrastructure is strengthened, allowing us to share information and build social capital online, in the new electronic-digital communication environments, new levels of risk and forms of tribalism emerge that "locate" and also take form in offline spaces by building or restoring situations of political and social instability (Giaccardi, Magatti 2022; Buoncompagni 2022).

A clear example, perhaps, of what philosophers like Weber, Horkheimer and Habermas called "reactions to modernity".

The "new" Afghan society very clearly embodies this hybrid condition and contemporary disharmony, which can be traced in two passages. The first refers to the decline of an international political plan aimed at building a democracy and the rapid restoration of a previous social and economic condition with the rise of the Taliban government, the cancellation of any civil rights and total control of information in the country. ; the second is linked, on the one hand, to the awareness on the part of the population of the end of a "reconstruction of the country" project shared with the West (although sometimes controversial), on the other, to the extreme difficulty of women journalists Afghan and Western media to build a clear, balanced and pluralistic narrative about what happened as it is

continually censored, exploited, emphasized or manipulated within a now saturated and disordered information ecosystem.

The predominance of the political-military narrative "field" over the social field of human rights makes it even more difficult to build a "cultural bridge" (information included) between two blocs, the West and the "Greater Middle East", very different from a historical-temporal point of view regarding the modernization process (Minakov, 2021).

Dialogue and collaboration are fundamental tools to begin to enrich mutual contact between cultures and constructive communication. In this regard, Bauman (2015) believed that there were three ingredients to build an effective dialogue in the hypercommunication era: informality, that is, establishing rules during communication without initially imposing them; *openness*, accepting the possibility that our reasons may be refuted or wrong; *collaboration*, a balanced exchange of information between institutions and citizens that does not contemplate prevarications, losers or winners.

A social and political balance that has the flavor of utopia if we take into account the alarming data reported by the local Afghan radio station ToloNews, namely that in 2019 there were still more than six hundred active media outlets in Afghanistan, while after the takeover of Kabul there were only 135 operational.

Paraphrasing a well-known quote by Marshall McLuhan in a sense contrary to its original meaning, at this historical moment it is above all essential (not) to "turn off the media" about the new crisis in Afghanistan. Guaranteeing equality, the plurality of information, not suffocating the "transition" towards that modernity that still appears "touched" is a concrete duty and not a speculative objective.

Talking about the facts and letting them discuss them thoroughly also means guaranteeing an exchange of/between gender.

The issue of discrimination against women, in fact, represents a specific motivation, which deeply permeates all social spheres and although Islamic radicalism does not reject either traditional or digital publishing, it still does not seem to agree to give women the exclusive possibility of narrating, and disseminate facts and news.

It is precisely at this moment that women (and) journalists need support and support to continue writing their own story as human beings, professionals and narrators of reality on the paper of a still

blank newspaper that hopes to record and disseminate the gaze on them. the uncertain Afghan reality. At stake is not only respect for the Other and the quality of the already saturated information, but also the credibility (and responsibility) of all the actors who interact and who create, distribute and consume media products within a “Mediapolis” (Silverstone 2009) perhaps also in the demodernization process, where pluralism and freedom of information are continually questioned.

NOTES:

¹ “Talebani: «Rispetteremo le donne, ma secondo la sharia». Ma cosa significa?”, 2021, accessed December 31, 2022, www.vanityfair.it/news/cronache/2021/08/18/talebani-prima-conferenza-stampa-rispetteremo-donne-islam-sharia

² In this sense, it should be remembered that the Sharia it is not a written, codified and uniform code for the entire Muslim world. It is a set of customs, uses, religious and moral norms that can inspire both the faithful in their personal lives and a community or a state. Sharia is based on two main sources, the Qur'an and the Sunna . But, in the Qur'an, only 80 verses out of more than 6,000 contain legal obligations. The rest of the Sharia rules are the result of analyzes and evaluations that can they vary from one region to another. An example above all, there is no single rule on the use of the veil and on the clothing of women.

³Ibidem

⁴ “Afghanistan Reporters”, 2022, accessed December 31, 2022, <https://rsf.org/en/afghanistan>

⁵ It is important to highlight how, in general, the internal affairs of the country, linked to economic or political-military issues, have never been in the first place of the interests of the different Western institutions before this new rise to power of the Taliban, except in cases of kamikaze attacks or violent riots.

⁶ On September 12, 2020, the intra-Afghan talks , the first peace talks between representatives of the Kabul government and the Taliban, to end 19 years of war, opened in Doha . A necessary process, although bumpy and with no guarantee of success that has in fact led to 11 murders, among defenders of Rights humans Y journalists . The occasion was in any case historic: the two main actors in the conflict -the government and the Taliban- sat at the same negotiating table, for the first time directly and formally and without mediators, as happened instead in 1988. peace conferences in Geneva and in 2001 in Bonn. But

the obstacles to a balanced division of power and a political solution to the conflict have always seemed difficult results to achieve.

⁸Content analysis, in this specific case, becomes a particularly promising heuristic tool to reconstruct the main interpretative frameworks (frames) of a specific topic, communication strategies and recurring forms of public narrative in the mediated public sphere.

⁹The decision to carry out an onerous manual selection work, and not through software, is due to the different infographics and technical structure of the digital archives/sites of the newspapers. These differences did not allow the collection and selection of material pertinent to the study, making it difficult, at the same time, to read the contents.

¹⁰The selection of the newspapers has been made by consulting a series of recent rankings that indicate the aforementioned newspapers among those of reference (by history and copies sold) and that refer to the countries of the United States, Great Britain, France, Italy).

¹¹The search by keywords was carried out in English, French and Italian, according to the country of origin of the only newspaper considered.

¹²The concepts of closeness and distance are relative, but still have a strong psychological relevance.

¹³In 2018, it was former President Donald Trump who began the new negotiations with the Taliban that ended on February 29, 2020 with the signing of an agreement that provided for, among other things, the total withdrawal of the 12,000 US troops still present in Afghanistan territory by May 1, 2021. In return, the Taliban would have had to cut all ties with terrorist groups, including al Qaeda. Plans changed again with the arrival of the new administration headed by Democrat Joe Biden, who on April 14, 2021 postponed the deadline by which the US should have withdrawn from Afghanistan: September 11, the symbolic anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center. Center. Later, at the beginning of July of the same year, Biden announced that US operations in Afghanistan would end on August 31. Therefore, the new president followed the path traced by his predecessor, although changing the calendar, especially in the first days of August 2021, to face the return of the Taliban. This is how we understand the presence of Biden's name in all the articles and newspapers on international and military policy in Afghanistan.

¹⁵Here are some examples of questions-headlines found several times in the selected newspapers after the filtering operation by using keywords: *"What does the return of the Taliban mean for women?"; "Will women's*

rights be respected this time?"; "Do women fear a return to the past?"; "Will we ever forget the previous crackdown on women?"

¹⁶Some of the following interventions are recalled here: the obligation to wear the burqa, the prohibition of sports, the prohibition of going to school before the age of 10, the division of classes by gender in universities, the absence of women in the newsrooms and soap operas (and state television in general), the creation of the ministry for the promotion of virtue and the prevention of vice.

¹⁷It is in the latter case, above all, that it becomes central for Afghan women to act within the media spaces of their own country (with the support of local newsrooms and online activist networks) to defend the impartiality of genre of journalism, avoiding bowing to a feminine "spiral". of silence" tacitly induced by the new regime (CPI, 2021; García, 2021).

¹⁸Here are some examples of recurring titles that clearly highlight what has just been described. In contrast to the previous macro-category, in this case the titles directly report the voice and point of view of the women protesters: " Herat , women on the street for the right to education"; "Women never more submissive"; "Women reject the new Taliban government"; "Women who protested attacked with rifle butts and tear gas".

¹⁹It is important to note that the majority of women who have lent their image or voice to the protests are mainly those who managed to leave Afghanistan thanks to air support organized by the United States and allies, and who are currently in a position of "privilege", useful to denounce violations of women's rights Despite the crisis, a minority of activists (eg Rawa women) have deliberately decided not to leave the country and "go behind the scenes" to educate the rest of the population in freedom and democracy.

²⁰ In very general terms, it should be noted that after an initial search, repeated within the digital archives, in the following period of October-December 2021, the articles on Afghanistan seem to appear very fragmented in the different newspapers, in terms of consistency with the topics covered and their position within the (digital) magazine itself.

²¹The "field" is a concept taken from physics. In the electromagnetic field, a field can exist in the absence of charges; the latter can alter it and the same field can alter the charges. With "field" Bourdieu refers to a social space within which precise dynamics are developed and certain social activities are practiced. The social system, as a whole, is divided into fields as a result of the differentiation processes that are at the base of modernity: each field is a specialized area and relatively autonomous with respect to the other fields that make up the global social apparatus. , and it is a domain within which specific hierarchies, rules, practices and power relations govern.

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