

Young Talent Shoulders Burden of Afghan TV Labor

By Matt Sienkiewicz

13-17 minutes

Media in Afghanistan is young. Although radio was popular during the decades of Soviet domination, the years of mujahedeen and Taliban control (1990 to 2001) were marked by a near-total media blackout. During the Taliban years, the only broadcaster was Radio Sharia, a state channel utilized for religious and political propaganda. Today, however, literally dozens of new TV and radio outlets emerge every year, ranging from upstart commercial ventures to small vanity projects bankrolled by local warlords.

Not all of these young outlets will make it, as the media-market appears to be heading towards total saturation and the Afghan economy seems destined for what might be a significant period of contraction. NATO's 2014 military withdrawal will take with it thousands of jobs and likely encourage cutbacks by numerous NGOs and businesses that employ Afghans. With nearly [97% of the Afghan economy](#) derived from military sources and international aid, according the World Bank, the commercial media industry faces a future in which potential advertisers may

have far less incentive to purchase airtime. After a decade of rapid, perhaps historically unparalleled, growth, Afghan media today finds itself in a state of uncertainty.

There is, however, a resilient sense of optimism among major media companies such as [Tolo TV](#) and [Ariana TV](#). In fact, Afghan media entrepreneurs see one great positive: youth. For the first time ever, young Afghans are coming to appreciate and even demand an array of media options. As the demographics of Afghanistan skew increasingly towards the young, media entrepreneurs see growing pools of both viewers and creative laborers. Little is certain about Afghanistan's future in terms of politics, security or economics. What seems clear, however, is that the nation's young people will insist that, somehow, media continues to play a central role in Afghan culture.

Here are three reasons why the Afghan TV industry is a place to watch:

1. The Afghan TV audience is young and growing.
2. Afghan television is FYBY (For Youth, By Youth).
3. Employee training, retention, and career progression remain stumbling blocks to long-term media sustainability.

1. The Afghan TV audience is young and growing.



On a hot, dusty Tuesday morning, cars crawl down a dirt path

on the outskirts of Kabul. At the end of the line sits a rusty structure that appears to have spent its better days as a merely serviceable airplane hangar. Outside its gate, leaning against a fence is a stoic, slightly bored guardsman. He fidgets with an enormous eight-gauge shotgun that offers all of the intimidation but none of the precision that a security emergency might call for. Not even a sign denotes that this is the production site of the Tolo TV programs that millions of Afghans watch every night.

Inside it is an entirely different world. Neon lights line the set of Tolo TV's newest gameshow, [*Minute by Minute*](#), an adaption of NBC's Guy Fieri-hosted game show *Minute to Win It*. The studio audience is large, loud and almost exclusively comprised of young men. More than a few seem to be skipping school to catch the taping. The production is slow and repetitive, with the low budget props never quite working as smoothly as the NBC format manual suggests they might. Yet the crowd remains boisterous for over four hours, obviously enthralled with the opportunity to take part in this new, unlikely pillar of Afghan culture.

The median age in Afghanistan is under eighteen and over sixty percent of the population is younger than twenty-four. These young Afghans represent the first generation in the nation's history to experience television as a more or less normalized part of daily life, as opposed to a politically contentious disruption of tradition. Accordingly, major Afghan broadcasters consider the young, particularly those in the rapidly growing urban center of Kabul, to be their target audience.

This emphasis is apparent in the budgeting and programming

strategies that Tolo TV, the nation's most successful broadcaster, employs when it is investing its own capital. Tolo programs that are funded by outside sources, such as the US Embassy, tend to be dramas and soap operas that take traditional storytelling formats and infuse them with donor-chosen messaging. However, when Tolo invests its own money, they look for reality-based programs that emphasize audience participation and focus on young participants. [Afghan Star](#) and [The Voice: Afghanistan](#) represent the station's biggest investments and most promising products.

These singing competitions do more than simply put young people on the screen. They also encourage direct involvement from young viewers, whether in the form of cheering live audiences or through the cell-phone polls that determine the winners of each season. Importantly, these programs also encourage the melding of Afghan TV with online media elements that are increasingly part of the lives of Afghanistan's urban youth. Despite low Internet penetration rates throughout the country, *Afghan Star's* Facebook page features over 75,000 "likes" from across the world, as well as robust discussions on the virtues of different contestants and the best way to skirt long-distance charges when voting. In a country in which traditional political structures tend to marginalize any voice under the age of sixty, the economics of the media industry have motivated the creation of a new, commercially-oriented space in which youth is prized above all.

2. Afghan television is FYBY (For Youth, By Youth)

This summer, Habibullah Amiri is visiting Los Angeles, taking a

break from his job at Tolo TV to enroll in a production course at the University of Southern California. Some of his classmates already have notable career credentials. Some have worked on independent films, others have produced high quality web videos. A few have TV credits to their names. But Habibullah, age twenty-four, has them all beat. Since being hired by Tolo at age nineteen, he has risen through the company's ranks, moving from a production assistant to lead content producer. Currently, he serves as the executive producer for four different reality competition programs, including *Afghan Star* and *The Voice: Afghanistan*. He has a show on nearly every day of the week, with millions watching each episode.

Habibullah is certainly talented and exceptionally competent at his craft. However, in context, he is no wunderkind. Twenty-four is neither particularly old nor young for a major player in Afghan television production. Mujeeb Arez, also twenty-four, holds the title of "senior producer" at Tolo. Last year he was sent to the United States with a videographer and a sound recordist, charged with producing dozens of episodes of the US Embassy-funded program [On the Road](#), during which he travelled from New York to California documenting sites of Afghan interest. Ghafar Azad, at the ripe age of twenty-six, is now the director of Tolo's flagship drama [The Secrets of this House](#). At twenty-four he was co-director of the [Eagle 4](#), an Afghan adaptation of *24* produced with the considerable financial support of the US embassy.

At Tolo, the motto seems to be "don't trust anyone over thirty and don't hire anyone over twenty-five." This strategy derives in

large part from Afghan media's lost years of the 1990s and early 2000s, during which not even the capital of Kabul benefitted from consistent supplies of electricity. By the time television became technologically and economically viable in 2004, there were simply no Afghans in their thirties or forties with any professional media experience. The older generation had grown up in the Soviet era and worked in a system radically removed from the new production context. Commercial media outlets therefore had to break with Afghan cultural norms of emphasizing age and experience, hiring almost exclusively pre-marriage age men who could be paid as little as \$500 a month.

Even by the standards of the global media industry, in which production staff is routinely expected to put in long hours for small rewards, Afghan producers are drastically over-worked and underpaid. For example, in producing *On The Road*, Arez was not merely asked to oversee and coordinate the big picture elements of the show, as the title of lead producer might imply. He also served as the scriptwriter, locations scout, traveling secretary, budget coordinator and video editor. As a final challenge, he was asked to overcome what must have been a dreadful lack of sleep to serve as the show's star and on-screen host.

This sort of overstuffed portfolio is the norm for an Afghan producer. In America, a lead producer for a major show like *The Voice* might spend an entire year preparing for a few dozen episodes, all the while leaning on an army of assistants. Habibullah Amiri, in contrast, is asked to produce the Afghan version alongside three other series. And this is to say nothing

of the mental strain that inevitably results from working on sets that must be constantly monitored by armed guards.

Producers at outlets such as Tolo are expected to reach bigger audiences with smaller resources than almost anywhere on the globe. Armed with budgets that might be insufficient to produce even modest, niche-targeted programs, they are asked to create shows that appeal throughout the diverse expanse of Afghanistan. This demands a youthful energy that few people could muster beyond their late twenties. For people such as Amiria, Arez and Azad, every day is the frantic, final push that American filmmakers experience during the last stages of a production. Deadlines are constant, pay is small and opportunities for respite, such as Amiri's trip to USC, are few and far between. The high desirability of media work and the poor general economic conditions in Afghanistan have allowed outlets such as Tolo to survive using this labor-squeezing system. Long-term sustainability, however, remains a question.

3. Employee training, retention, and career progression remain stumbling blocks to long-term media sustainability.



There are no film or television production schools in Afghanistan. The journalism faculties at places such as [Kabul University](#) are well respected in certain areas of society, but the world of commercial television is not one of them. Instead of formal training, aspiring Afghan media producers are tossed into

productions head first. For example, on Tolo TV's version of *Minute to Win It*, the games producer is currently a nineteen-year-old whose only qualification is having "grown up" loving Afghan game shows. It is a key job on a program that revolves entirely around contestants playing simple minute-long games as a host roots them on. And, as always, working in Afghanistan offers extra challenges. A game in which contestants must throw ping-pong balls at a target becomes much harder to produce in a place without sporting goods stores. The balls must be imported from Pakistan.

As might be expected, the washout rate among these young men (and as I'll explain in a forthcoming contribution to *MIP Research*, Afghan media is overwhelmingly a man's world) is very high. Those who survive develop vast, impressive, and highly flexible skill sets. These abilities quickly present a new challenge for commercial ventures such as Tolo: poaching. Nearly every day, skilled young Afghan producers are approached by upstart stations with offers of large pay raises. Often, however, these stations are vanity projects of local business people or warlords whose commitment to long-term sustainability is questionable.

Thus, media workers are constantly on the horns of an economic dilemma. Stations such as Tolo offer salaries that are sufficient for a young man living at home who has yet to consider the challenges of marriage and supporting a family. However, there is no guarantee of future pay increases or any relaxation of work hour expectations. New stations, on the other hand, offer comparatively rich short-term rewards and less strict

management styles. But to leave a place such as Tolo is to trade a lifetime of employment for what is, at best, a low-odds lottery ticket.

This issue is particularly pressing at the moment, given the high level of economic uncertainty deriving from NATO's 2014 withdrawal plans. In addition to directly impacting broadcasters that receive NATO funding, this transition threatens to pull large sums out of the Afghan economy, reducing advertiser media budgets. If, for example, one of Afghanistan's three major telecommunication companies were to go out of business, demand for advertising could be reduced by a devastating magnitude. Making matters worse, the unrestrained growth in the number of competing TV stations is fracturing a shrinking market, endangering the long-term health of the entire sector.

The real question for Tolo, Ariana and other relatively successful Afghan broadcasters, is whether or not they will be able to develop their economic resources broadly enough to accommodate and encourage career development among their impressive rosters of young talent. If they are not able to offer better salaries and more reasonable working conditions, producers will likely leave media altogether, moving on to managerial positions in other industries that offer a better quality of life. Youth, in this case, is a temporary asset that could easily turn into a longterm liability that stations could ill afford. Already reliant on youthful talent, managers are scrambling to meet the rising expectations of viewers with growing access to satellite and Internet programming alternatives. Audiences are opting for quality and relevance in the programming they watch. There

currently exists a skillful young workforce that is capable of meeting these demands. Afghan TV stations will, however, need to provide positions that pay well for knowledge and experience, as well as frenetic energy.