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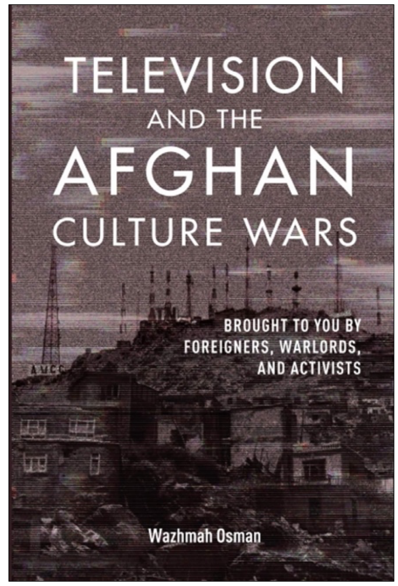
Wazhmah Osman, **Television and the Afghan Culture Wars: Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists**, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020, 272 pp., $110.00 (hardcover), $28.00 (paperback).



Reviewed by
Joseph Oliver Boyd-Barrett
Bowling Green State University, USA

Wazhmah Osman, the author of ***Television and the Afghan Culture Wars: Brought to You by Foreigners, Warlords, and Activists***, is an assistant professor in the Klein College of Media and Communication at Temple University. She is also a filmmaker and documentarist. She is from Afghanistan and undertook substantial field work there in 2008–2014, examining television production, programming, and consumption of 26 stations of the 50 then current. An intimate cultural familiarity makes her an excellent source to affirm the country's multiethnic, multiracial, and multireligious nature—a society in in which each ethnicity/tribe is affiliated with a specific region, their values permeating every aspect of the lifeworld. This consideration was critical to her gaining or being denied access to the sites of study, requiring her to emphasize one side or another of her family's ethnicity by mentioning well-known male relatives from specific ethnic groups. Afghanistan, therefore, is a strongly collectivist society in which the Western idea of being able to act only as an individual is not acceptable.

The author is a passionate critic of both Western and Russian imperialism in Afghanistan and of what she calls the "imperial gaze," a perspective that talks the language of development but primarily serves imperial interests (see chapter 4 throughout). In this modality, development is a public relations campaign to distract from the brutality of imperial power. Osman concludes that the imperial gaze is alive and well, and that it governs much of Western involvement in Afghanistan, generally, and Afghan television, specifically. She notes that for the imperial powers of the United States (and before it, Russia), aid and patronage are contingent on promoting and protecting vested geopolitical interests in the region, including continuing military dominance, and growth of their own economies. In this context, scientific mechanisms of program assessment are often a means of justifying the developers' funding and spending practices, rather than eliciting helpful feedback. Some projects exist only on paper. Cases of poor performance or embezzlement are sometimes overlooked. Development practices of "tied aid" or "conditional aid" ensure that donated money is returned to the donor economies (p. 85). There are numerous instances in which patronage, corruption, impunity, overemphasis on short-term goals, and fraud have diminished development-related efforts. Some media organizations are under instructions to ignore civilian casualties or other topics that portray the U.S. war in Afghanistan in a negative light.

The author also finds ample evidence of a "development gaze" that struggles to do what is best for Afghanistan and its people (see chapter 4 throughout). A political economy of media funding that relies heavily on international and multilateral aid, in addition to advertising, provides a competitive and diverse media system that is closer to a public-service, rather than a strictly commercial-media model. Most television is terrestrial, consumed in groups, free of charge, although electricity problems make viewing difficult. Each of the larger ethnic populations have multiple television stations affiliated with them, while government-owned Radio Television Afghanistan has local substations. There are niche television stations that are affiliated with specific ethnic groups, but most try to simultaneously preserve their cultural diversity. Stations that are rooted in ethnicity also strive to be national: There is a direct correlation between commercial success and packaging oneself as a national entity. This is a media model that trains local Afghans to produce their own media. Local producers often assert their own creative and political agendas. The model opens domestic and international markets; establishes advocacy, monitoring, and watchdog organizations; and promotes human rights. Even USAID and BBC Media Action have been involved in meritorious development projects.

Central to Osman's concern is whether television creates a public sphere or refeudalizes the country by inciting sensationalism and polarizing public opinion. She finds many problems, but also concludes that television enables local Afghans to talk back to the international community and provides a platform for producers to act as local reformers. Afghanistan has not yet been taken over by commercialization or authoritarianism, although the dangers were greater in 2020 than in 2014. Being under the gaze of international backers somewhat more than many of their counterparts in other countries, Afghan media institutions are more accountable for the maintenance of journalistic standards and freedom of speech.

Afghan television is largely owned and controlled by the very affluent. Yet television is also a sort of equalizer, giving the masses access to programing that reflects their lifeworlds. Some owners are relatively progressive and reformist, tolerating a measure of agency within narrow constraints. Osman discusses many specific stations and identifies peculiarities that elsewhere might dampen expectations for developmental potential. The national broadcasting station, Radio Television Afghanistan, is the government station and has rated relatively high on overall trustworthiness. Its mandate is to represent all Afghan ethic groups. Tolo Television, subsidiary to Moby Media Group, was started by an Afghan Australian family, and has become one of the country's most popular and controversial stations. In addition to attracting large national and transnational advertisers, it is sponsored by USAID. It is a main producer of reality formats, and is often thought to be favored by American funding sources. The Ariana Television Network is an offshoot of a telecommunications sister company, which, in turn, was a joint venture between a U.S. telecommunications company and the Afghan Ministry of Communications and Information Technology.

Imported programming accounts for a significant percentage of all three of the top Afghan television stations. Most popular dramatic serials or soap operas come from India (whose Bollywood dominance in the region is long established), and Turkey (whose Sunni values have helped forge a relation of exchange and trust with Afghans), with Iran trailing. In a competitive media landscape, one way of ensuring a share of audiences and advertising is through airing Indian dramatic serials, even when local sensibilities advise that these be censored. For reasons of affordability, many of these are B-rated or older. They offer a cost-cutting opportunity for Afghan stations but impede the development of Afghanistan's own media industry. While they provoke the criticism of Islamists and tribal leaders—among other things for "Hinduizing" Afghan culture—they also afford women a vicarious experience of agency (more in the case of

Iranian than Indian productions; p. 202). In a lifeworld as dire as that experienced by Afghan women, such serials offer welcome relief from warlords, violence, and victimhood. In Turkish and Iranian Muslim productions, Osman's interviewees encountered the peace of mind, tranquility, and spiritual order so soothing to a traumatized people.

Many Afghan media outlets challenge the hegemony, propaganda, and manipulation of the ruling classes. Many Afghan producers and foreign collaborative producers share an inclusive, pluralist mindset. They are well intentioned and genuinely desire a more just future for the Afghan people. They are motivated to contribute to nation building and unity, to teach and to entertain, even while recognizing that their economic survival requires that they give audiences what audiences want. Most channels have political satire and political comedy-sketch, discussion, or talk programs. While Afghan producers frequently complain that people have unreasonable expectations of them, Osman concludes that they are delivering on and meeting those high demands.

More problematically, television is at the center of violence, generating violence and targeted by violence. The tele-presence of women frequently stirs emotional and violent responses from Islamists. Sectarian stations affiliated with specific ethnicities are also accused of "retribalizing" Afghanistan (p. 124). But while there are stations that do provoke tribal or ethnic violence, these tend to be marginalized. Some stations are targeted because they are regarded as foreign puppets carrying out the interests of other countries. Funding pressures and threats affect what types of violence are afforded most airtime, as in the case of a popular antiwar serial that did not feature the civilian casualties that result from U.S. coalition military operations. Most stations tend to promote one side or another. But when stations succumb to such pressures, others will step in to report what has been suppressed, "equalizing" television violence.

Patriarchy imposes on female Afghan performers the ultimate burden of upholding national and cultural identity, embodying all that is virtuous, moral, and proper, in a context in which broadcast music videos of foreign female singers must be pixelated even when foreign music videos and pornographic imagery are easily available on the black market, home videos, and DVDs. Redefining what is possible for women is frequently a dangerous enterprise that, in some cases, leads to violence and the murder of female television personalities.

The author rightly insists on the continuing relevance of narratives of imperialism as against the neutrality-posturing narratives of globalization, not least because communication flows of all kinds are permeated by power. She castigates media studies' blindness to imperialism in favor of exaggerated claims for the merits of digital media that turned out to be largely controlled, centralized, and consolidated by Western corporations. Conditions in Afghanistan today, says Osman, bear a striking similarity to when the country was ruled by the British Empire. Her work is essential reading for all scholars of Afghanistan, media, development, and imperialism.