Yuval Katz:

Hi everybody. Thank you for being here with us this afternoon for this wonderful symposium about media practitioners dealing with changing world orders when everything around seems to be crumbling. My name is Yuval Katz, a post-doctoral fellow at the Center for Advanced Studies in Global Communication and the Center on Digital Culture and Society here at Annenberg Penn. I think the last panel was really remarkable to see how certain themes are woven together, connecting what we discussed this morning, but also what we discussed last night, the idea of documentation. What it means to fight misinformation and disinformation under very precarious situations. I'm thinking about Barbie's (Zelizer) question of the current moment, reflecting about the future. So I think that this panel will be interesting because we're pivoting into the process of undoing, right?

At this moment of undoing, what happens to media practitioners in the absence of world order? How do they know that the world order is crumbling? What do they do? What strengths and weaknesses about media practice emerge in situations of undoing? And what are the tactics of resistance that they develop? We have a group of wonderful speakers today, and I think that the order of sitting here will be very appropriate because it will connect us to the previous panel, but also kind of pivot us to some new terrains, new geographies. So we'll start with Tikhon Dzyadko, editor-in-chief of TV Rain, which is the only Russian independent TV station operating today.

And then we'll move to Wazhmah Osman, who is an Afghan-American academic and filmmaker. She's an associate professor in the Klein College of Media and Communication at Temple University. Finally, we'll have the privilege to listen to Matt Sienkiewicz who is an associate professor of communication in international studies and the chair of the communication department at Boston College.

Starting with Tikhon, I think it will give us some reflection on Russia, which very much related to what we discussed in the previous panel. Then we can pivot a little bit to thinking about Afghanistan, which is also a really interesting geographical context for thinking about the undoing of world order. Then Matt can give us some reflection because you also do some work on Afghanistan, but also on Palestine. So without further ado, Tikhon, the floor is yours.

Tikhon Dzyadko:

Thank you so much for having me here. It's a great honor. I must apologize. I'm a little jet-lagged, so maybe my English will not be very perfect. Now, speaking of Russia is very simple, and speaking about media in Russia is very simple because there are no media in Russia anymore. After the beginning of the full scale invasion of Russia into Ukraine, Russian authorities forced almost all independent journalists to leave and closed all independent media outlets within the country. The same happened with our TV station, TV Rain.

First, we started to receive personal threats from anonymous sources. Then we received information that the police were going to search our offices. Then they blocked our website and they cut off all the cable networks inside Russia. And then Russian government started to approve a new law. This law was approved on the sixth or fifth day of the war, two pieces of legislation. The first one is about so-called fake news about Russian military activities in Ukraine. The second one is about so-called discreditation of the Russian army.

What does it mean? It means that, for example, when you say that there is a war in Ukraine you are spreading fake news because Russian officials are saying that there is no war in Ukraine. There is a “special military operation.” Or for example, when you say on air that Russian soldiers killed civilians in Bucha, in the Kiev region, you are spreading fake news because the Russian Ministry of Defense denied

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this information. If you are spreading fake information about the Russian military in Ukraine, you could face up to 15 years in jail. Now there are more than 15 examples of people who were sentenced from seven to 10 or 12 years in jail for spreading fake news information about the military and for discrediting the Russian army.

After this new law was adopted, we decided to stop operating and to leave the country. Around 80 journalists from TV Rain fled Russia in March. We spent several months in different countries and in mid-July we settled down in Riga, Latvia. We also have two studios in Tbilisi, Georgia, and in Amsterdam, Netherlands. Other independent news outlets were blocked as well. I think overall more than 5,000 websites were blocked by the Russian government since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Most of these journalists are now working from abroad, from Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Germany and Georgia.

What Russian independent media are doing is very crucial because Russian society, unfortunately, is ill now. A lot of people are absolutely brainwashed by Russian propaganda, and I think that Russian propaganda is one of the main reasons why this war started. At the same time, I think that official information, which is usually being used by some outlets in the West, for example, is that 86% of people in Russia support the war. This information is false because imagine sociology and surveys and polls in a fascist country, and Russia unfortunately is a fascist country now, it's impossible. It's the same thing like a poll in Berlin in 1942. Of course, the majority would say what the people conducting this poll want to hear from them.

The famous Russian sociologist Grigory Yudin said there are three groups in Russian society now. Yudin calls the first group the aggressive minority. These people are pro-war and pro Kremlin. They support the war and they think that Ukraine should not exist, et cetera, et cetera. These people are infiltrated propaganda by propaganda. These people are hoping for the reconstruction of the Soviet Union, et cetera, et cetera.

On the other side there is another group. We can call it an anti-war part of the Russian population. Unfortunately, we cannot hear anything from them because they are scared to say anything. It's impossible to protest in Russia. It's impossible to post anything on social media because you could be easily accused of spreading fake news information about the Russian military.

In the middle there is the biggest part of the Russian society that Grigory Yudin calls the passive majority. These are the people who don't have a strong opinion for different reasons. Some of them don't trust anyone because it was the main idea of Russian propaganda over the years. Don't trust anyone. Everyone is lying. There is no truth. That's what they've been saying since the beginning of the presidency of Vladimir Putin. Some of these people are in denial because for years, Russians were told that our fathers and our grandfathers were killing Nazis, were fighting the Nazis, who were killing innocent people during World War II. Now when the situation has changed and Russian soldiers are killing innocents-- admitting it means you have to do something.

First of all, your world has crashed now because you have to admit that soldiers of your country are the same as Nazis. Second, you have to do something. Go and protest, save your position, but you cannot do it because you will be arrested. That's why they are in denial.

Now it's the main goal for Russian independent journalism, for TV Rain, to speak with these people, to explain to them that this is a terrible war, and that this war is about them as well, even if they did not vote for Putin, or even if they do not support the war and live their own beautiful or not beautiful life.

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We see that Russian independent journalists are slowly succeeding in this because, for example, the audience of TV Rain now is growing. Since the beginning of the military draft announced by Vladimir Putin in mid-September, our audience in Russia has doubled. Now we have more than 14 million viewers monthly, which is a lot for a country with a population of 140 million people. And we think that our goal now is to convince more and more people that this war should be stopped. For this, we have to find the right tone of voice, right intonation, while speaking with them. But of course, working from exile is a huge challenge for average journalists and for TV Rain as well, because in Russia, almost all the sources in internet are blocked, more than 5,000 websites, almost all social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. A lot of people use VPN services to get access to media resources. Of course, it's different when you have full access and when you have to use a VPN. YouTube is not blocked yet, and it's the way for us to speak to the people.

So the two biggest challenges are how to get information from Russia and how to deliver information into Russia for the Russian audience. For now, we fortunately are succeeding at getting information from there from our anonymous sources, but it could change at any moment. As I mentioned, we are succeeding in broadcasting our shows through YouTube, and as I said, we think that we are succeeding in convincing people that this war has to be stopped.

Wazhmah Osman:

Hi everyone. I wanted to start by thanking Barbie and Aswin and John and everyone for organizing this timely conversation. In my book, *Television and The Afghan Culture Wars*, I examined the rapid emergence and expansion of the Afghan media sector and its role in the development of an increasingly robust albeit fragile public sphere in post-9/11 Afghanistan. I also studied the cultural contestations that this rapid media proliferation was producing and the political economies that were sustaining it. This talk builds on that research from that time period spanning the two decades of the post-9/11 US, NATO and EU mission and interventions in Afghanistan.

Additionally, I will provide analysis of the current situation of the media in Afghanistan since the Taliban takeover in August of 2021 and make some suggestions of where it may be headed amid rapidly unfolding geopolitical events. With the ouster and defeat of the Taliban in their first incarnation in December of 2001, US and NATO troops as well as the international community ushered in an era of nation building and development with over 50 countries providing aid, funding, building capacity and training.

While the legacy and the efficacy of the many development projects that were launched and implemented during these two decades remain complex and highly debated, the development of the media sector is deemed to have been successful even by some of the staunchest critics of foreign interventions. In my book, I analyze the impact of the international funding and cross-border media flows on the national politics. Via production and reception studies, as well as content analysis of the most popular genres on Afghan television, I assessed the influence of the media boom and the cultural contestations and movements that it inspired. I argued that each popular genre served a distinct important function. Through public information campaigns, the news and political satire, media makers investigated and exposed everything from cases of corruption, abuse of power, to violence stemming from local and international warlords and government officials.

With foreign dramatic serials and reality TV formats, Afghan media programmers provided the large and avid viewers of these programs with glimpses into diverse lifestyles, cultures, and televisual representations of the gender

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and sexuality practices of people from around the world. This opened up a space crucial for private and public discussion around sensitive cultural issues. Yet in the context of international militarism, which is the other side of international development in humanitarianism and local warlordism and Islamism, from their inception, the new Afghan-made programs occupied a limbo state between vulnerability and vibrancy. Even before the Taliban 2.0, the ongoing state of war in Afghanistan undermined and threatened not only the progressive human rights messages that new programs projected to a nation besieged by gender and sectarian violence, but also the media makers themselves. Media makers, especially those who worked on screen and television, were routinely targeted by local conservatives and Islamist groups and subjected to violence.

Of course, this worsened with the fall of the Afghan national government and the departure of the international community, including transnational media watchdog organizations who provided a degree of oversight and protection to media makers. In a dystopian country where guns, local militias, foreign militaries, and physical force constituted the status quo, the one sector that offered the most hope to ordinary people as a means of countering the power abuses of the elites and bringing them to justice was also the most vulnerable to retaliation. As a result, self-censorship became ever more prevalent. During my post 9/11 research trips, and I started in 2004, and my last one was in 2014, I noticed that self-censorship was becoming more of an issue both through content analysis as well as with interviewing, again, some of my initial interlocutors. They were reaching the limits of their courage and of Afghanistan's tenuous media freedoms.

I ended my book with a warning and call to action for media owners, the Afghan government and the international community to protect media makers. This was not just a question of personal safety, the future of independent media, and therefore the future of Afghanistan, depended on it.

So having been at the forefront of the Afghan culture wars, media makers were recognized as an at-risk group by some international organizations and governments, and some of them were evacuated by the international community in August of 2021. I'll talk a little bit about the people who got out and then the people who are still there. Some of the more fortunate research subjects and interlocutors with whom I worked for my book have managed to leave Afghanistan both before, shortly before and after the Taliban takeover. They're trying to continue their work in exile while navigating the hardships of becoming refugees and new immigrants. Najiba Ayubi, an internationally recognized journalist and the managing director of the Killid Group, an Afghan media outlet consisting of 10 radio stations in two weekly magazines, and Roya Sadat, a prominent television and film director and writer are in the US.

Sanar Sohail, the news director of Saba TV and editor and publisher of Hashte Subh, one of Afghanistan's largest daily newspapers, left for Canada before the Taliban takeover. He has managed to secure asylum for some of his staff in Canada and Germany. Currently, Roya Sadat and her husband and creative partner, Aziz Dildar, are working on a documentary in the US. They have had to put on hold a fiction film that they had started in Afghanistan because the crew and cast are scattered all over the world.

Najiba Ayubi is working on a novel and trying to also give public talks on the situation of journalists as an award-winning journalist herself. Sanjar Sohail is continuing to run Hashte Subh from exile.

Due to dispossession and displacement, as well as the destruction of cultural institutions and the targeted killing of many media personalities

and producers during the long years of war, the Afghan media industry has lost tremendous talent and a well honed tradition of production. The commonly applied terms of brain drain and human capital flight and their focus on national economies and the net gains and losses of migration do not capture the totality of the impact.

The loss of human talent, including media makers, and especially in the cases of forced migration, dispossession and displacement, brings about a far more profound cultural loss for a nation that cannot be quantified and instrumentalized only in economic terms. Speaking of her departure from Afghanistan and arrival in the US, Roya Sadat expressed the sadness and grief that is all too familiar to refugees. She said, "I'm having a hard time saying everything in past terms, as in the dramatic serials were having a positive impact on Afghan society. I still cannot believe that despite all the incredible developments in our media and our culture, all of our hard work and efforts, the Taliban came back to power. Unfortunately, our time was short and our work remained unfinished. But God willing, in the future, if the opportunity presents itself again, we will see what we can do for Afghanistan. In the meantime, we will continue our work from afar, and the media programs that we made will continue to circulate outside of Afghanistan.

So, now I'll shift briefly and then I'll conclude about the people who are still trying to work over there. Of course, the majority of Afghanistan's cultural workers, like the rest of the population, did not receive international support or have the means to leave and were not prioritized for evacuation. They remain in the country, unable to work in the same capacity under Taliban rule and barely able to survive.

Those most at risk were and are women and ethnic minorities. Yet at the same time, after 20 years of global interventions, the Afghanistan of today is a very different nation than it was in the 1990s when Afghans were traumatized by the violence and lawlessness of the civil war, and the Taliban were even welcomed in some areas for bringing a modicum of security with their harsh and draconian brand of Islam.

The current Afghan society that the Taliban are trying to rule has been transformed by a media and civil society infrastructure that offered people glimpses of a democratic and pluralistic future. A new generation of Afghans have tasted the promise of self-expression and political participation, work connected to the global economy, social mobility and more education opportunities for everyone.

Likewise, the public has split into many groups with differing viewpoints and ideologies, yet more people than ever before are refusing to tolerate theocratic or autocratic rule by force. Women who dare not exit their houses during the first Taliban regime are protesting on the streets of major cities.

Afghan media organizations and media makers in exile are continuing to produce work and to make sure that Afghanistan stays in the international news cycle. Television media pro professionals who stayed have to walk a slippery slope when engaging with the Taliban and their censors. The risks associated with media and journalism are at an all time high.

In one instance, a Kabul University professor, Faizullah Jalal, was arrested and imprisoned after criticizing a Taliban official on a talk show, shows him speaking with a Taliban official, and he called him an "uneducated donkey." Shortly thereafter, Jalal was released due to international pressure and offered asylum by the Netherlands.

There is a widening rift within the leadership of the Taliban as well. Moderates are aware of the seismic shifts in Afghan society and are trying to persuade hardliners to be less draconian in their interpretations of Islam.

As much as the hardliners want to keep the media down and cosmopolitan ideas out, this

Taliban generation, like the rest of Afghanistan, also grew up with mobile phones, hundreds of radios and television stations and an extensive media bazaar, markets, on the Pakistani border, like in Peshawar and Quetta that have become hubs for pirated content from around the world.

Afghans want a diverse public sphere and representative politics, no matter how difficult, to match the tapestry of their own multiculturalism. In this aspirational and inclusive society, which Afghans are discussing and planning in the diaspora on their media platforms in exile, the Taliban exists as one of many political parties with their own media venues.

The Taliban also know that if they do not yet yield to the wishes of the domestic and global Afghan public sphere, the swinging pendulum of cultural change will strike them out of power sooner than later, as many are predicting.

Of course, I'll leave with saying that this is the hopeful view, or this is what some of us in the diaspora are hoping is the case, but the not so hopeful view is that global attention has shifted, and we will continue to be moved elsewhere. The Taliban receive funding from a variety of countries, they will stay in power until the US or another powerful country decides otherwise.

Matt Sienkiewicz:

First, I want to thank everybody for putting together this wonderful and just incredibly sad, if very timely program. These are difficult topics and it’s so important that we're discussing them and it's a pleasure to be a part of it.

This event gives me an opportunity to return to some ideas that I frankly have been avoiding over the last few years. There’s been a lot of reasons to hide the last few years intellectually, and this has forced me out of that and I think in a good way. It's a lot of the same stuff that Wazmah's confronting right now.

In October of 2016, I released a book that I thought was about current events, more or less. It was based on years of field research in the Palestinian Territories as well as a short, very intense summer in Kabul in 2013. The thesis of the book was that the United States had developed a specific sort of marketized approach to media intervention, devoting political and financial capital to local media institutions that would model, insofar as possible, American-style commercial broadcasting approaches. Viewing this from the ground, I found a complex blend of local agency and American discursive constraint with a heavier dose of the former than most scholars were tending to identify at the time. So I released this current events book in October of 2016, and by November of 2016, I was a historian of a seemingly ancient past.

We all hate cliches, but nonetheless Trump changed everything, especially in this realm of American foreign intervention. American involvement in the spaces that I studied and everywhere else diminished or changed and went in directions you couldn't have predicted. The NGOs that funded projects in the Palestinian Territories, which were basically just extensions of USAID, lost much of their funding and all of their confidence.

In Kabul, as we just learned, the Taliban grew increasingly adamant in their targeting of media figures, with special attention to those who worked with American-supported television media outlets but certainly not exclusively. Looking back six years later, it pains me to consider what's happened to those media practitioners that I wrote about, and I've got a story that's not so different from the one you just heard, just a few different examples.

I have to acknowledge that I'm not quite ready for a thorough theorization of this yet. At the same time, I think it is useful and important to consider what's happened since and offer the observation that there's an apparent and perhaps even sadly poetic sort of cyclicality to

the lives of these media makers that I was studying and who are working under these most difficult circumstances. So I'm just going to describe a few examples of these and then we can see where the discussion goes.

The first of these groups is my favorite group of filmmakers, period, anywhere in the world. These are a group of young men in Kabul who became known as the Jump Cut Collective. Nearly all of them grew up outside out of Afghanistan in exile in Pakistan and mostly Iran. Watching lots of films, it's worth noting that nearly all screen media were outlawed in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime.

The NATO and Northern Alliance invasion and overthrow brought their families back to Kabul where these young men gravitated towards media work, finding employment mostly within Western supported media systems. Some worked in American-supported television outlets and all participated in workshops sponsored by the US Embassy and featuring American media trainers.

One of my favorite details about this group is that they were very into art cinema, particularly Iranian art cinema and French New Wave, but they were going to these American training systems, so they became star proteges of Jonathan Lawton, who was the screener editor of Pretty Woman, but also the writer and creator of Cannibal Women in the Avocado Jungle of Death starring Bill Maher and Shannon Tweed, highly recommend.

But the point being these were not the guys the Jump Cut Collective saw themselves as being a part of, but this is where the training was coming from and they engaged in this really interesting hybrid creative experience working with these outside American organizations and their own artistic ideas and their ideas about the world in which they live. These filmmakers worked together as a true collective and the results are really wonderful.

I can show you these films if you're interested. They're not really available broadly. During the day, many of them would make US Embassy funded soap operas drenched with approved ideas and ideologies, and at night they'd use Western funded NGO grants to make films critiquing NATO forces and the Afghan government. They're really good films, especially given the limited resources.

Then they came under attack, bullet holes in the door, friends attacked, colleagues killed, and then of course last year happened and now they are back in exile. The story starts in exile. We'll see where it ends, but it is back in exile. They're in Paris, they're in Copenhagen, they're in Frankfurt, they're in Virginia.

One member, Hassan Fazili, made a very well received documentary about his experiences, *Midnight Traveler*, I can find it. It was on POV. It's really quite good. He was part of this group. Most of the people in the group work menial jobs, sweeping bakeries and stocking shelves. Again, mostly throughout Europe, and when I talk to them about what I'm interested in now is how they're trying to remain a collective against all of these odds, and I can't say they've gotten there at this point.

Their practice was one based on overcoming hardship through community and media as a community activity. Their practice, in one sense, the sort of hardship side of it has been quieted. They don't face bullets, but their community has been ripped apart. Every time I talk to the members, they have a plan to get together to make a project somehow under these new circumstances. That hasn't happened yet. I hope it does, and I hope to give another talk talking about what that looks like on the backside of things. But as of now, that's not there.

I'll briefly discuss two other examples that are visiting ideas from this book that I came out with six years ago. In 2007, I started visiting and studying the Ma'an Network, a Bethlehem-

based Palestinian broadcaster funded mostly by America and European governments. It's a very complicated story. I'm happy to talk more about it. But in brief, at least one thing to say is that during the Obama years, especially the early ones, they grew. They went from being a bare bones newsroom with wires sticking out of the wall to a real functioning international satellite operation. Today, the satellite signal is still on, but just barely. The content is sparse, the staff is minimal, and when I visited this summer, the wires are all of a sudden back sticking out of the walls.

Simply put, the West no longer wants to pay attention, and the Arabic language commercial market is so competitive that they're really trying to find footing. It's a struggle. For the EU and the United States, the projects have been buried under more pressing headlines. First was the Arab Spring, then Trump and his Middle East policy, the Abraham Accords and now Russia, Russia's aggression in Ukraine, and all these things have knocked the Ma'an Network and other projects like it. Further and further down the priority list when it comes to the Western world.

Ma'an is basically back to step one, looking for donors and trying to make the case that the world should care about and support Palestinian voices working outside of factional control. It's difficult right now to see where that support might come from. It's another story, I hope I tell you a different version of it sometime not too far down the line, but certainly the undoing we're describing is in effect.

Lastly, in preparation for today, I called a friend of mine from my research in Afghanistan, Mujeeb Arez. Mujeeb grew up in Kabul during the Taliban regime. He was a media personality from a young age. When the Taliban fell, he emerged a major figure in Afghan television starring on Tolo TV, which is a major and very popular Western supported broadcaster.

Tolo, despite its constraints, represented freedom for Mujeeb and became a sort of perfect propaganda opportunity for America and its allies. There was a real mutual benefit in this relationship. On a show on the road, he drove a jeep across Afghanistan, drawing a rosy picture of Afghan diversity, tolerance, security and freedom.

As the years went on, of course, things got harder and more threatening. He actually traveled to the United States with a small crew to shoot a season of this show on the road in the US. The crew came, only Mujeeb went back. Everybody else claimed asylum here in the United States. You could sort of picture his world kind of peeling off one by one as people were finding safer places to be. He went back and worked at Tolo TV literally until the day that the Taliban breached the doors of the station. He thought about staying even then. He eventually left, but it's a harrowing story. It's inspirational in its way. It's tragic, it's very complex.

Last August, he did leave. He's in Fairfax, Virginia, now, and remarkably he's still working in Afghan media. He's part of the Virginia-based satellite and web outlet called Amu TV, their website's a little vague. It says it draws from this and that.

It's almost certainly the State Department or NGOs running through the State Department, and so it in some ways represents a incredible disjuncture and also a continuity. He's doing the same thing. The remarkable thing, from a subjective perspective. In talking to Mujeeb, I see the story of constant violent disruption, and his version of it is continuity.

He tells you he is doing today what he was doing in 2005. He's using the power of media, working within its constraints and limitations. I mean, he knows, he understands the constraints of whoever's paying him and the other elements that are holding certain things in place. But he's using that to help Afghans

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move towards what he thinks a better future, and it's remarkable how steadfast he is in the context of what we would see as undoing.

It's extremely hard to draw conclusions from these stories at this point. I'm not ready to do that myself and theorize the grand sense, but I just want to say that I think they certainly open up questions, both ethical and strategic, about media intervention and I hope that they point to the crucial need to study people and not just systems, even in the context of the media that's wrapped up in vast, complex geopolitical stories.

Yuval Katz:

Thank you very much for these wonderful presentations. I think I'll do what we did in the last panel. I'll start with my own questions so you can gather your thoughts and then we'll open the floor for what I'm sure will be a myriad of really interesting questions.

I think one of the connecting threads, and I have to be honest, these are all very depressing presentations. So I want to raise the question of hope and reflect on hope. So what keeps these people going? That would be my basic question, thinking about the practitioners that you've been working on. I think based on the conversation that we're having, the informal conversation that we talked about the passion of these media, media creators.

So can you reflect on what keeps these people hopeful? Because I feel like the easiest thing to do is to cop out and stop doing what they're doing. But they keep going, they keep doing that, they keep going. So can you tell us a little bit about what keeps these people hopeful? Why do they keep doing what they do even though there's so many dangers and they put themselves at risk?

Tikhon Dzyadko:

Well, I think the answer is pretty simple or the right answer for many Russian journalists, for me, for example, is that's the only thing that we know how to do. The second answer is more serious. We understand that we have a responsibility to our audience in Russia.

As I said, we see that our audience in Russia is growing, and we see that it's, on the one hand, important for the people to get information. On the other hand, important for the people to understand that they are not alone. Because those who are watching TV Rain, for example, it's obvious that they do not support the war because otherwise they would not watch TV Rain.

When they see that 14 million people are watching TV Rain as well, it means that they are not alone. The third thing important here is that we know the stories of how people change their minds about the war and about the situation, because of TV Rain.

As I've mentioned, after the mobilization started in Russia, I think 7 million new viewers came to watch Dozhd, and it's very easy on YouTube to track that these people started to watch Dozhd for the first time in their lives. After the mobilization ended, only 20% of them left. So now 80% of them are continuing watching TV Rain, and it's important.

The last answer to your question is that we really think that media could change the situation, and when the situation is changed, we will be able to go home and we really want to go home.

Wazhmah Osman:

I would add to that and say that in the case of the media makers that I interviewed during the 20 years of the interventions and occupation, they had incredible popular support. I mean, they really, really were the superheroes of everyday people.

They would be recognized places they would go, everybody was watching. There was a ton of TV and radio stations, and they all became personalities in their own right. I think that kept

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them going. There was a lot of violence back then too, but like I said, not to veer off of not being hopeful. At a certain point when the dangers and the violence kept increasing and there was no accountability, I think some people reached a limit and did shift over.

Then now what we see with the Taliban 2.0 back in power is that you also have the donor communities not there. So in addition to that, they're not being paid. So many more people have had to do any kind of jobs they can just to eek out a living, because across the board, Afghanistan was heavily dependent on foreign aid, and the economy is just an in terrible condition, partially because of the sanctions and so forth. So we lost more people.

So I think as you were saying, the support and not feeling alone and knowing you want to make a change is so vital. But I think at a certain point, if there's enough other factors and your life is constantly in danger, some people will shift.

Matt Sienkiewicz:

Both of those make perfect sense. I would add something that maybe is helpful. You asked the question, prompted me to think, well, how did they answer when? I mean, I asked that question, you have to ask that question. The theme, now that I think about it, they believe in democracy in a deep way, which talking to Mujeeb, for example, the last example I gave, I asked him a question along those lines.

He says, "I know what the people want and I'm confident that what the people want is in line with what I'm trying to support and show them. We got a lot of things covering that and clouding it and destroying it." But a core belief that deep down good media will show true ideas and people are going to be persuaded by true ideas, ultimately. It's hard to have faith in that other contexts.

I think it's, in the Palestinian case, with the Ma'an Network, I truly think that they see all the bullshitting worse than that, that that's on top of it. But they have this really profound faith that what's underneath is the right thing and that the tool is the right tool. It can't do all the job right. There's got to be other things that uncover it. So you can get to the people and give them an opportunity to hear and express it, but I really think they're democrats.

Kevin Platt:

I'm Kevin Platt from Russian and East European studies at Penn. Once again, thank you for these presentations that were really illuminating and a little bit also, what should I say, provocative and challenging in terms of the fates of these people who dedicated themselves to a certain kind of professional activity, and it's no longer possible. It is a sad story.

Anyway, my question is mostly for Mr. Dzyadko. You spoke primarily about addressing the Russian audience in the Russian Federation, which is obviously of huge importance but the information war that is being waged by the Russian media on the world is directed, I think, predominantly in terms of its force outside of the Russian Federation, towards Russian speakers in Ukraine and in other locations in what Russians call the near abroad in the states which surround the Russian Federation. I was wondering if TV Rain had developed a strategy with regard to addressing, for instance, Russian speakers and recruiting them to become viewers as well, Russian speakers in Latvia or Russian speakers in Ukraine. How have you conceptualized addressing that audience? What is it that TV Rain can contribute in terms of providing information security to those societies or influencing hearts and minds in societies where, from what I see, there are many Latvian citizens or Latvian non-citizens who are avid consumers of media from the Russian Federation and who see the world through the Kremlin's eyes.

Tikhon Dzyadko:

Well, yes, we have viewers in Ukraine. We have viewers in Latvia and in all Baltic States, because we are in cable networks in Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. As you, I'm sure, know, all the Russian TV stations were banned in Latvia after the beginning of the war, so TV Rain is the only Russian TV station which is being broadcast in Latvia, even though technically we're now a Latvian company, Latvian TV station, but of course we're a Russian TV station and we know that in Latvia there is a big part of the population, some of them are citizens, some of them are non-citizens, but there is a big part of the Russian-speaking population which supports the war, supports Putin, supports the Kremlin, and they were the audience of these Russian TV stations while they were broadcast before the war.

We know, I mean, it's not sociology, but from talks with people, from letters, we know that some of them shifted from Russian state TV stations to TV Rain now. That's why I think TV Rain is important for these communities as well as in Ukraine, as TV Rain is not broadcast in cable networks in Ukraine. TV Rain was banned from broadcasting in Ukraine in 2017 because of the mistake when the map of the Russian Federation was shown on air and Crimea was shown there as a part of the Russian Federation. That's why TV Rain was banned in Ukraine. But we know that around 800 thousand to a million people every month from Ukraine, watch TV Rain, and it's very important for us that they watch TV Rain because it's in Russian and they are used to watching content in Russian.

What is more important is that we are not trying to mentor someone. The Russian speaking media landscape now is very divided. If you look at it, you will see that on the one flank, you have Russian propaganda telling you that NATO is fighting against Russia and that all the Ukrainians are Nazis or neo-Nazis and that they should be killed and all these terrible things. On the other flank, you see that a lot of Russian-speaking media are drawing the opposite picture, that all the Russians should bend on their knees and that they all are guilty for the war and et cetera, et cetera. We are trying to be in the middle. We are trying to tell that there is a concrete war. There were concrete people who started the war. There are concrete people who are fueling this war on state TV stations, et cetera. This is a calm conversation. That's why it's being watched by people in Latvia and in Ukraine, even though in Ukraine there are plenty of Ukrainian TV stations.

Muira McCammon:

Hi, my name is Muira McCammon. I'm a PhD candidate at the Annenberg School here. I'm thinking about what types of through lines can be drawn between what you three have talked to us about today and also thinking about Wazhmah's and Matt's comments about the political economy of journalism both in the West Bank and throughout Afghanistan and Tikon's fascinating example of having been in Russia, having left Russia. I guess my question is really for Wazhmah and Matt, but I'd love to hear other thoughts about within the West Bank and within Afghanistan with the collapse of media institutions and the collapse of funding. I'm thinking about the collapse of trust in institutions. Is there an effort to look to the diaspora for guidance towards what type of future media institutions should be and or what types of media institutions can be trusted? I'm thinking in particular of the horrible job USAID has done over the years and even in the case of Afghanistan, the Biden administration's decision to hold onto money from the Afghan Central Bank. I'm just trying to sit with that. I'd be interested in your thoughts.

Wazhmah Osman:

I think I'm just in the part where, still, I'm part of a few diaspora groups including one called Afghan American Artists and Writers

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Association and we receive so many emails regularly from cultural workers who are just like, "Please get us out. Is there anything you can do?" All we've been able to do is we've had a few fundraisers and we're trying to do another fundraiser in February, actually. I think in terms of your bigger question of helping them build institutions and the diaspora. The diaspora who's recently come, unlike the older diaspora, me, have been trying to set up and some of them have tried to continue the same organizations now in exile. But I think the bigger question that I'm exploring and I know Matt's exploring, is what kind of impact does it have and what does it mean to produce media for the home country when you're far removed from it now. There's a natural shift in perspective as they're also trying to deal with becoming part of a new country. Those are the types of things. I don't have any concrete answers, but I'm trying to suss that with people who have media makers who've recently come in.

Matt Sienkiewicz:

Yeah, I mean, on the cultural side of things, certainly. Diasporic cultural sort of arts focused or expression focused media, 100%. My example of the jump cut collective trying to reestablish itself, I think that that's very plausible. Depends on people coming together and, certainly, in terms of the Palestinian diaspora cultural sphere is actually very strong. The example of that, sort of more directly to the question but cuts to the heart of the question, if what you want to do is up-to-date current analysis, it doesn't really make sense from the diaspora, right? It's very, very difficult. AMU TV, which is an example of this, trying to do this based in Fairfax, Virginia, and on the one hand it is a diasporic Afghan news and public affairs outlet. On the other hand, it looks a whole lot like Radio Free Europe or a Voice of America Arabic. It's based in Virginia. It's looking from afar. It's only going to be as good as its sourcing in the original space and so on and so forth, and, of course, it's paid for, I think, by us. They are a little coy about it and I'm sure we can find out. But that idea of if what you want to have is minute to minute public affairs, public sphere impact, diaspora seems like a bad tool. One, just for sheer distance and difference. But also, there's a lot of tendencies in diasporas to move in certain directions, often towards more extreme directions. I'm not saying these groups in particular, I'm just saying as a rule, there's a tendency in diasporic cultural groups to sort of say, "Yeah, let's fight harder," because you're not there for the fight kind of thing, so I'd be leery of that also. Maybe, but there's a lot of challenges there.

Jing Wang:

My name is Jing Wang, I'm the senior research manager at CARGC. My question is for all of you, but if there's any specific incidents, I would really love to hear. It's more from a feminist perspective and question of intersectionality. In times of conflicts in a war, women are particularly under threats say in places like Afghanistan, but also what's happening in Iran right now and the death of many people know her as Mahasa, but actually her Kurdish name is Gina. I wonder, in places like Afghanistan, how are women's situations and is there specific media attention to their situations there? As well as in the Gaza area or inside Russia, what are the feminist voices, especially now they're on the line of protesting around the world?

Wazhmah Osman:

I can start with that. What I am observing on the ground there is that there are a lot of feminist organizations and women activists who are emerging, who are trying to be leaders in the movement to regain their rights. They're organizing protests and they're trying to use the media in delicate ways, being careful about things. At the same time, you have the

hardliners from the Taliban cracking down in a variety of ways and they also have been having their counter protests. The Taliban have been organizing young boys and men in direct opposition to the women's protests with signs that say, "Afghan women who don't veil are not Afghan."

You have some of the moderates who are going on TV and saying, "Women should be allowed to. We can't be like this anymore." They're speaking on behalf of women's rights. Many of the leaders from before, who have also had connections to the US or NATO countries have left. That goes back to the question you had, and I think somebody raised it, which is the issue of being a new diaspora person. Who is an influential person if you can get co-opted very easily? That's a big problem that I'm seeing, in some of the leading feminist figures who were in Afghanistan, pre Taliban takeover, very active and speaking on behalf of women's rights are now, some of them are here in other places, but they're winning awards, let's say from the State Department, the International Women's Courage Award and things like that.

It's a lot to decipher. I don't think there's an easy answer because it's similar to what Matt was saying, who is behind AMU TV? Who is paying them? As you [Matt] said in your book, and I've said Tolo TV is US funded, but they produce incredible work too.

So that doesn't automatically negate such people. But there is an active behind the scenes thing that we're aware of there that makes it a little bit confusing why some people are not speaking out that used to and why some people now are. It's a lot to kind of unpack.

Matt Sienkiewicz:

I might just backtrack that question just a little bit cause, frankly, the current moment is hard to decipher. But I'd mentioned this notion of the US media intervention trying to marketize things and this has a tremendously difficult gender element to it and that part of the reason for doing it always starts with the sort of women's rights thing, and then it turns out that costs more money and it's less commercially effective to support women as journalists or as creators. Very often that peels off very quickly from these ideal plans that are drawn up. I think, let alone in its undoing, but even in its sort of doing, it had a tendency to use women symbolically and really try for a minute and then it would conflict with the neoliberal ideologies, the feminist side with the commercial side, and the one that loses, probably not shockingly, was often the feminist side.

Tikhon Dzyadko:

In Russia, I'd say that, for example, on TV Rain, we have a show on women's rights and there was a pretty strong movement for women's rights in Russia, but, of course, the war destroyed everything. There is no discussion in Russia on women's rights, and I think that they decriminalize domestic violence. Russia is very, I don't know how to say it, but a "patriarchal" country. But at the same time, there is an interesting movement now that the last protests in Russia were made by women and these were protests against the mobilization. Mothers, and wives, and sisters, they went protesting in different regions of Russia because men fled the country or they are afraid of being arrested during the protest and sent to the war.

Sarah Banet-Weiser:

I'm Sarah Banet- Weiser, faculty member here at Annenberg Penn. Thank you, all of you, for these very sobering but also very moving presentations. Following off of Jing's comment, I was going to ask about the way in which different actors in this kind of global political scene are using women in particular ways, especially Afghan women or Iranian women, as a way to propagate a particular state agenda that uses kind of female nationalism so that it

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becomes something where women need to be saved in that very traditional liberal feminist way. But she kind of asked the feminist question, so I was just going to ask another one, which is Wazhmah, in your book, the subtitle of your book, which is really, really interesting, is, "Brought to you by," right? "Brought to you by foreigners, warlords and activists." All of you have talked about political economy and the funding issues that are no longer there in some ways for media practitioners. What about social media? What about encrypted text? What about other forms of media practice that can circumvent a more donor based or state funded based economy of media? Do you see that as something that is emerging or challenging some of the issues that you've talked about in terms of visibility and invisibility?

Wazhmah Osman:

Yeah. I'll back up with your first comment about how Afghan and perhaps Iranian women are being co-opted or used by saying, I'm trying to figure it all out, but the more I dig in, the more I find these interesting pieces of information. For example, one of the leading figures in the Iranian protest movement who started the hashtag, my stealthy freedom. There was also a cover story in the *New Yorker* about her recently. Not to be confused with the woman who was killed. Her name, this woman's name is Mase. She was partially supported by the Trump administration and in his Secretary of State.

Things like that where she's a proponent of the women's rights movement and Iran, but at the same time you have these neocons who latch onto it as well for war hawk types of reasons. In terms of your social media question, if I understood it correctly, and I think other people can talk on it too, and we have Ali Karimi over there who I don't want to put on the spot, but he's a media expert as well. But what I noticed is that social media and the diaspora people have been very active both for women's rights, for anti-imperial types of things, all kinds of things that have really energized the diaspora.

There's of course issues of disinformation sometimes when you see these images of the Taliban beating up women again or being extremely violent. You don't know the extent of what's what, and then people say that's not really true or this is that. And so I think here it's been effective with the diaspora in terms of my analysis during the 20-year period. The illiteracy rates are just too low. Afghanistan, unlike Iran, which is highly literate, the infrastructure for digital technologies is incredible. It's different, and I think that's part of the reason why the women's movement hasn't had the same kind of global solidarity.

Matt Sienkiewicz:

From the top down, the donor perspective, is a really important question. And I was sort of describing the things that buried these local issues, particularly in the Palestinian case, but broadly. And part of that is the reality that of course broadcasting's not where it's at. And people know that. I think it's still true. It certainly was true for the most part over the past five, six years. Donor interest in that issue is big and it's a very attractive place to put money. So I'm thinking of things like the Atlantic Council has The Digital Forensics lab, which is in many ways supposed to be doing the same kind of work that on the ground will train journalists or will teach local filmmakers in these spaces. But instead of having to go and get somebody who speaks Arabic and can train somebody and work, you know, just pay some nerds in Washington and they sort of fix media from the outside by trying to prove that this information's bad. And that seems very foolish to me in many ways, but you can see how it's very attractive, particularly during Covid, right, where travel and all these things became hard and it's just simply easier. I don't know if it's a future-- and it's important, I'm not saying it's not an important disinformation work, but I

think it's seen by many donors as another option, as a way to fix global media if you see global media as a problem. And it's very attractive because you don't have to take risks in the same way.

Julia Sonnevend:

Hi, I'm Julia Sonnevend. I'm faculty at the New School and I have a brief question about TV Rain. So you mentioned that you're looking for the right intonation, framework to convince people that the war needs to be ended. I'm wondering whether you could mention a few frameworks that you think are working and maybe some that have failed.

Tikhon Dzyadko:

Well, I don't think that I can tell now concrete examples, but it's the way of speaking about it. I mean, it's a very important thing. I think that, as I've said, a lot of people in Russia are unfortunately ill. In Russia, there is a very famous activist whose name is Yevgeny Roizman. He is known for his fight with drug-addicted people and his very harsh methods. For example, he was accused of chaining people up to stop them from taking drugs. I don't think it's the right method to cure people. It's the same thing with the propaganda. If someone is infiltrated by propaganda and he's sure that the earth is a square or he's sure that white is black, and unfortunately a lot of people in Russia now, they are sure that white is black. And if you just tell them you are an idiot, white is white, he will think that you are wrong because he knows that white is black. And if instead you will tell him, okay, you think so? Let's look here. Is white here is black? Is it white? No. Is it black? Yes, it is black. This is this. So it's like when you speak to a child.

Also important is we need to understand that there are Russians and there are *Russians*. In Europe, especially in Eastern Europe, there is this very strong narrative about collective guilt and the fact that all Russians are guilty in this war. I think it's a false narrative. Is my two-year-old son, who has a Russian passport, guilty of this war? Or, if somebody had a Russian passport and another passport - does it mean that they're half guilty? And why am I saying this? I think that we should understand that there are Russians and there are Russians because otherwise the reaction of a lot of people would, I think, just be counterproductive.

A lot of people could say, all right, you think, for example, Europe, you think that I'm guilty for this war. I'm sure that I'm not. Then I don't want to know anything about you. I'm going to stick to my government because at least it's closer and I understand them. So our idea is to talk to the people so that they understand that there are concrete people who are to blame for the war. People on the TV, people who ordered the beginning of the war, people who went there and kill civilians and Ukrainian soldiers and destroyed towns. I think it will be very important after the war that we sit and we talk. How could it happen that in the 21st century, our country is doing these terrible things? But this conversation has to happen after everything is ended. That's what I think.

Silvio Waisbord:

Hi, I'm Silvio Waisbord from George Washington University. So I have a two-part comment and question. So listening to you guys, I'm thinking about the undoing in the title here and what comes to mind is a different profound asymmetry between doing and undoing. The doing seems to take a lot of time in terms of progressive or democratic media reforms. And then undoing apparently takes very little time so things can fall apart very quickly, unravel very quickly in ways that the building, and we have experiences at least since the late eighties nineties around the world in terms of media development takes much more time. So that's the first one. What are your thoughts on this? And the second part is if so, why is that the

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case? Traditionally, we thought that there was something in the approach to media development that was built-in in ways that it created a dependency, that it didn't create local ownership.

So as soon as you remove, sort of, international global support, things fall apart because you never actually build it to last to be sustainable. And that may apply in some cases, but I think we have learned enough, or at least being people doing media development learned enough to be able to be mindful of that problem in spite of all the pressure for them to do quickly from the outside because of programming money, et cetera. So the reason will be why is that the case? In recent years, we heard in the West that things, that democracy gradually erodes and collapses. That is a long, drawn-out process. But if you look around the world, and there's a recent study called Windows of Opportunity that looks at media development in Burma, Tunisia, Sudan, and one or two more countries. It was a very different conclusion. That people who spent 10, 15 years trying to build institutions following what we could argue is a very democratic blueprint suddenly it’s very difficult to find what has happened. So that's my question to you. Do you agree that sort of things unraveled much more quickly? And if so, what is the case and what can be done better?

Wazhmah Osman:

I can start the conversation by saying that it's absolutely the case that that happens. But I think it's also case by case. For example, let's talk about when the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan happened, in 1979. And that happened, Afghanistan was going towards democracy. It was a constitutional monarchy. And I think in that case, if you look at the details of what happened at that time, you had the rise of the Islamists, you had the rise of the Communists and Socialists and you had many different countries intervening. But it took a variety of acts of subterfuge and coups by the Soviet Union-- as well as the US was involved in terms of wanting a proxy war for the Cold War-- that precipitated many things. So it's almost like adding fuel on the fire. And then if you look at what happened in the last 20-year period, post 9/11 before Taliban 2.0, I think it was a different set of circumstances.

And that goes back to what you yourself said, which is I think the constitution that was drawn and the civil society institutions that the UN was all initiated in a series of conferences in Germany by the UN and the US-- had some incredible aspects to them, like 25% of members of parliament had to be women, freedom of speech and on and on. But it had some serious flaws, underlying flaws, that meant that it wasn't going to last. And I don't know if that was shortsightedness or if it was designed that way that they didn't want it to last. I can't speculate on that. But one of the things that was a big design failure is that they invited many of the former Mujahideen warlords to become a part of the government, afraid that if they were going to be outside it was going to be more destructive.

But them being inside of it, they took over the courts, they took over the justice system, they had their own TV stations, on and on and on. That became a very dangerous situation because they don't believe in democracy. They have militias. They don't think twice about killing people. So that was one of the many design failures that the UN and the US could have done something from the outset. They had the ability. All the warlords had left the country, they thought they were going to be prosecuted and they were like, no, please come join us in these things. So yeah, I'll leave it there.

Matt Sienkiewicz:

Yes, that's right. The first part makes me just think of a truism of conflict resolution. It takes one bomb to take down a whole peace process. And I think there's an analog literally and maybe

less literally as it relates to that. One thing I'd add-- although I think that sort of the direct violence stuff in the case of Afghanistan is the highlight-- from what I see, I think that the media infrastructure was built up in actually a really strong way and with a lot of talent developed that really was self-propagating, but it was done under the auspices of a commercial media system, and emphasis on competition, at least in some of these spaces. Which means that on the one hand you need people to know to make that media, but you also need Coke and Pepsi and people who can purchase Coke or Pepsi.

And if you don't have that, then you don't have anything. And that is so, it's relatively easy to teach people how to make media. It's much harder to stop seeding an economy that's going to be the structure on top of which the media are going to be built. And so in addition to the things that, while she was talking about in many of the cases that I read about, the sort of competitive aspects of it are sort of artificial, right? There is no actual organic media commercial economy, even though they're training to build commercial media systems on sort of practice commercial economies, that once the world loses interest, takes that away. It doesn't matter how strong a talk show you can do. It doesn't matter. There's no Coke and there's no Pepsi.

Chenshu Zhou:

Hi I'm Chenshu Zhou from Cinema/Media Studies at Penn. I want to bring the topic back to exile and diaspora or just the decision to leave. I know you've all touched on it several times already, so feel free to pick up on a thread that resonates with you, or I'm happy to just let it stand as a comment. My starting point is, is there a difference between exile and diaspora? Is there a difference between being forced to leave and wanting to leave or where is the desire to leave already an imposition that comes from oppression and exploitation? So I'm thinking about how a lot of Hongkongers have been leaving Hong Kong since the protests in 2019. I'm thinking about how the Chinese internet has been exploded with conversation about leaving to the extent that people coined a new word for it.

So it's called "run". It's basically run but pronounced in the Chinese way. So it's a new word that people have coined to talk about this desire to leave because of the political oppression that has emerged just in the last several years. And then there's always people who would give out a retort and saying, why don't you stay and build your country here? So is there some kind of shame in wanting to leave and in leaving? And then once you leave, how big is that space that you can maintain so that you can still speak about your home country, that you still have the political right to speak about your home country. And myself, for example, I live here, I work here. I don't have American citizenship. I don't like when people call me immigrant. I don't want to think about getting citizenship even though that means I don't get to vote here. I'm caught in between. But I always feel like if I give up my Chinese citizenship then I give up my right to speak about it. So I guess where is that space in diaspora that can be productive for a conversation about justice in the distant, faraway homeland? I'll end there.

Wazhmah Osman:

I came as a refugee here a long time ago, so I can briefly talk about that. And my father was here, he left now, but to your question of shame, I think he always thought it was shameful to leave. No matter what happens, you stay in your country, you work for your country, and every decade it's been close to 50 years now, half century of war, he was like, the situation's going to get better, the situation's going to get better. He stayed for a long time, finally had to come here because the situation did not get better. And so I think it's a

complicated question about what it means. I think for many people, given the opportunity, you have to leave.

Tikhon Dzyadko:

Well, I would agree that we were ready to leave until the last moment when we were told that the police are on the way to our studio to search it. The police never came. It maybe was a manipulation, but to me it was like the last thing. Even though my wife, our news director at TV Rain, and my mother, they were telling me to buy tickets five or six days before we decided to leave and I rejected it. Of course, partly there is shame and there is this discussion, which I hate, in a Russian segment of Facebook between those who left and those who stay in Russia, those who left for some reason are blaming people in Russia for not protesting even though they left because of the absence of the possibility to protest. And those who are staying are blaming those who left for the fact that they left. It's a very complicated, complicated thing. But for example, me, I'm not calling myself immigrant. I feel that I'm like on a long mission somewhere and that eventually, sooner or later, rather sooner than later, me and my colleagues, we will go back home.

Yuval Katz:

Okay. I think on that note, many of us in this room can relate to what you said. Thank you very much for this heartfelt and very honest and very open discussion and I hope that all of you will stay for our wonderful final panel. Thank you very much for sharing a talk with us.