

## Social Media in Afghanistan - Users and Engagement

The fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 brought with it a resurgence of a homegrown Afghan media sector, which has been hailed as one of the success stories of the past 15 years. Television channels, radio stations, and newspapers flourished with the support and resources of international organizations. This support hinged on the belief that a thriving media sector would become a pillar of the country's fledgling democracy. The more recent growth in access to and use of the Internet, and specifically social media, has brought focus to the platform as one that could reenergize public discourse and improve upon traditional media through its user interactivity, broad reach and appeal, and cost effectiveness. Media coverage describes an exploding Afghan social media scene that holds impressive power over political and social life. The lack of restriction and regulation on social media make it easy for free speech to take place, and use of social media has been readily adopted by journalists, activists, and politicians.

Social media is of course dependent on the availability of internet, leading to the pace of social media penetration differing from that of other media. Just as the Taliban restricted and controlled traditional media, they banned internet outright, as they had no control over its content. Afghans waited until 2002, when the Afghan Wireless Communications Company (AWCC) was awarded the first GSM and 2G license in the country, to have internet access. The year 2012 was a turning point, as Etisalat was awarded the first 3G license, making mobile internet faster, better-quality, and cheaper for users. Mobile internet became more common as less expensive smartphones became available. The relationship between mobile, internet and social media penetration strengthened as increasingly-common smartphones and faster data made data packages available to a wider population beyond those who had fixed lines and laptop computers. A 2014 study found that 76% of social media users accessed platforms via their smartphones (ATR, 2014).

However, despite recent milestones and enthusiastic press coverage of the possibilities that social media offers, the reach of social media remains far below that of traditional media. As of 2017, internet and social media users remain predominantly urban and a minority. Previous studies indicate users are usually young and educated, with a preference for Facebook usage above all other platforms. Little more is documented regarding social media users, and even less of who and what they interact with on social media. As such, there is a dissonance between the perceived potential of social media as a new platform for public discourse and what is known or rather unknown of users. This gap in knowledge necessitated a more in-depth assessment of the social media landscape.

### WHAT THE STUDY AIMED TO EXPLORE

In June 2017, Altai Consulting was engaged by Internews to conduct a study on social media in Afghanistan. The research was borne out of the gap between what was known of social media usage and spread in Afghanistan, and expectations of social media platforms to propagate change through open expression. Specifically, the research had three objectives:

- **Objective 1:** Gain in-depth understanding of the social media landscape both in terms of stakeholders and contents;
- **Objective 2:** Describe as accurately as possible users' consumption patterns, modes of engagement, perceptions and expectations;
- **Objective 3:** Understand how mainstream media, the government, and CSOs leverage social media platforms.

An overarching question throughout the study is **whether social media can be viewed as an agent for change in Afghanistan, specifically as a tool to address injustice and a platform for open expression.**

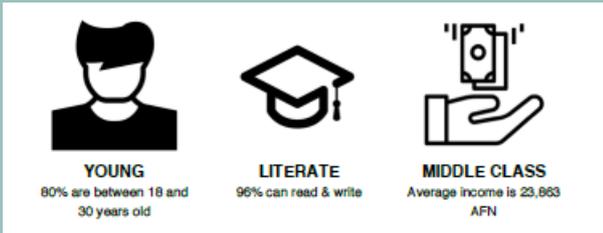
### The assessment relied on three modules to gain a complete picture of social media users and their habits, as well as opportunities to leverage this medium for change

<b>User Survey</b>	Held across <b>8 urban centers</b> (Kabul, Jalalabad, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kandahar, Lashkar Gah, Bamyan, and Pul-i-Khumri)
<b>Landscape Mapping</b>	Conducted in cooperation with <b>Altai's sister company Masae Analytics using data mining techniques</b> , this module first identified the accounts most liked or followed in Afghanistan, and secondly analyzed the content on a selection of those pages to assess what content elicited the most engagement
<b>KIIs</b>	30 KIIs with organizations (10 Media, 10 CSOs, and 10 Government) as well as 15 Social Media Influencer KIIs

## WHAT IS THE PROFILE OF SOCIAL MEDIA USERS?

Social media users are a homogenous group of mostly young and educated individuals.

**Close to 80% of respondents declare being between 18 and 30 years old.** For those users above the age of 30 however, men are more likely to be social media users than women, as the repartition of female users tends to be younger. The Afghan population itself tends to be young, with 40% of the population under the age of 14 and 22% of the population between the ages of 15 and 24 years old (UNStats, 2013), but even so Afghan youth are disproportionately represented on social media.



Social media users are overwhelmingly literate, with no difference across gender lines. This is an expected result as the nature of social media relies on users being able to navigate written content, but anecdotal evidence shows that illiterate users can also enjoy social media for its picture and video content, or through voice messages. Users in Jalalabad for example are less likely to be literate than in other centers as 82% of them can both read and write compared to over 94% in all other centers.

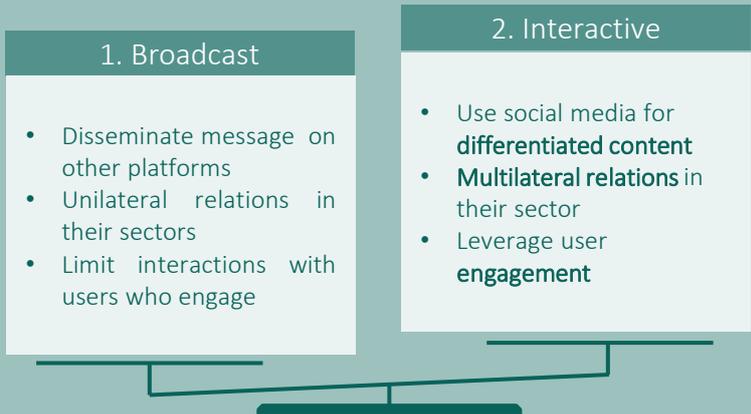
Considering the age and level of education of respondents, it is no surprise that **21% of social media users are students.** This is true for both male and female respondents, but gender differences reveal themselves - the remainder of female respondents are chiefly divided among teachers, and housewives. Male respondents on the other hand have a more varied set of occupations.

## SOCIAL MEDIA USE CONCENTRATED ON TWO TYPES OF PLATFORMS

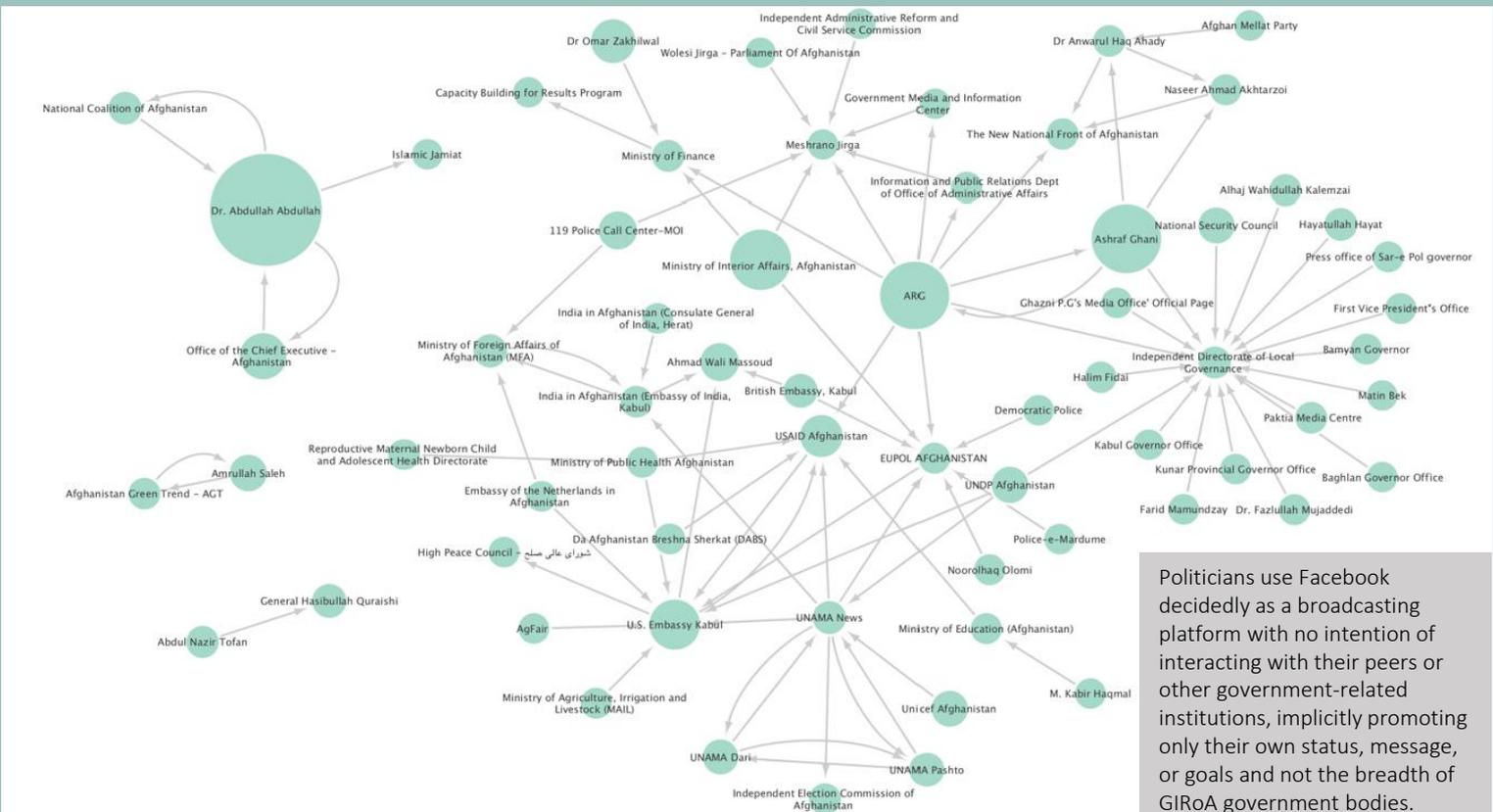
- 95% of social media users have a Facebook account – accordingly, 75% of users have a Facebook messenger account
- Whilst **Facebook is the dominating social media platform, instant messaging apps in general are very popular** as 84% of social media users have at least one
- Twitter is limited and only used for higher-level and international audience.

## SAMPLED PUBLIC PAGES ON FACEBOOK ARE MOSTLY RELATED TO POLITICS AND MEDIA, DEPLOYING VARYING STRATEGIES

Media organizations, government bodies and international organizations, and CSOs are the most represented categories of organizations on Facebook with respectively 18%, 29% and 10% of public pages. Yet there is huge heterogeneity among those organizations especially in terms of communication strategy. Some are solely broadcasting information while others use social media with an interactive approach.



## Network mapping - government and politics on Facebook

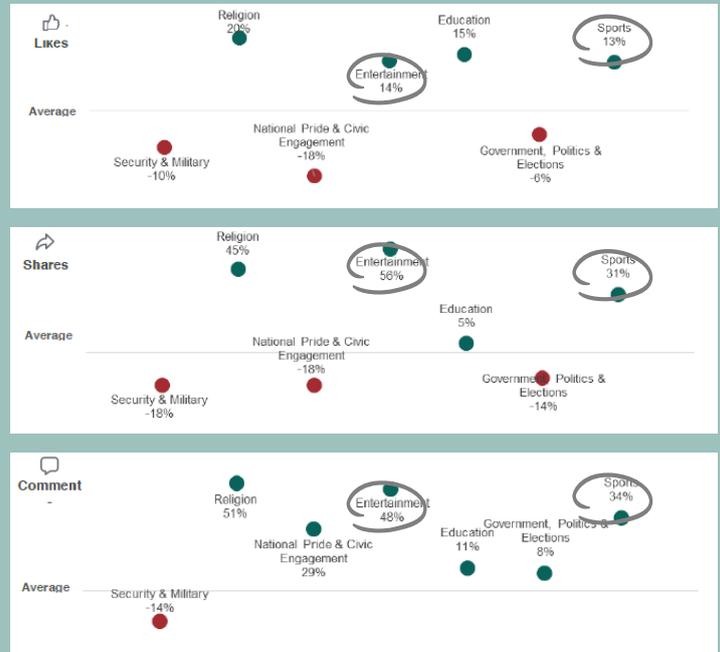


Politicians use Facebook decidedly as a broadcasting platform with no intention of interacting with their peers or other government-related institutions, implicitly promoting only their own status, message, or goals and not the breadth of GIROA government bodies.

**ALTHOUGH MEDIA ORGANIZATION ARE THE MOST FOLLOWED, PEOPLE ENGAGE WITH POSTS PERTAINING TO RELIGION, EDUCATION, ENTERTAINMENT, SPORTS OR NATIONAL PRIDE THE MOST.**

Likes, Shares and Comments have been studied as 3 progressive steps of engagement, with “Comments” being the most qualitative, generating debates and conversation. Although it is established that media organizations are the most followed types of pages, it doesn’t help identify the particular content people engage with the most. Categories of content that generate engagement are the ones pertaining to entertainment and sports. **Social media is primarily an extension of an individual’s prior network and a space for entertainment**

Social media users primarily interact with friends and family. 56% of Facebook users say the person they interact with the most on Facebook is a friend, followed by family (25%). Women limit their interactions to a circle of trust: either relatives only (35%) or women only (19%). 13% of women declare interacting with people they have never met face-to-face compared to 25% of male users.



Activity Sequencing

Afghanistan My Passion elicits the most engagement on Facebook

- With 3.8 million likes, the page posts photos of women in traditional dress, Afghan armed forces, and archive pictures of Afghanistan
- A post gets an average of 12,251 likes, 263 ‘hearts’, 242 ‘sad faces’, 451 comments, and 320 shares



Screenshot of Afghanistan My Passion (taken 26/09/2017)

The landscape mapping may provide aggregate engagement metrics, but the quality of the engagement is not always evident. The comments on the analyzed content were aggregated to understand the nature of reactions to content, revealing the uniform tone of comments and the focus on prevalent concerns.

Masae Analytics compiled the comments to the content analyzed and ran a lexical analysis on them to identify the most commonly occurring words in relation to specific content on Facebook. **The word clouds below for education-related content and civic engagement-related content are striking in their similarity.** The methodology to identify education or civic engagement related posts relied on specific lexicons which, especially for education, allowed little overlap.



**SOCIAL MEDIA PERCEPTION IS PARTICULARLY POSITIVE AMONG WOMEN, AND CONTRIBUTES TO A VERY HIGH AWARENESS BUT LIMITED ENGAGEMENT**

Facebook is sometimes used as a “naming and shaming” platform effectively:

- **92% of users agree that they can say things they wouldn’t otherwise say in person or on radio, TV or in print**
- Government agencies describe receiving **allegations of corruption and election fraud**, and activists can bring attention to **injustices** effectively and **hold authorities accountable**
- **59%** of users find that social media has had a **positive effect on gender**, and **62%** find it had a **positive effect on corruption**.

Social media remains a double-edged sword for activists:

- Social media campaigns and activists experience both the benefits of having an online platform, as well as its flaws, daily. The language online can go in any direction – the veil of potential anonymity emboldens users to have a **divisive, discriminatory and at times violent language online** (as seen during the 2014 elections)
- Influencers and organisations alike feel the need for stronger social media **regulation** or monitoring
- Furthermore, the impact of social media campaigns is hard to assess at best.

## MAIN FINDINGS

### 1. Social media users are homogenous and concentrated on Facebook

Facebook is the dominant platform as 95% of social media users have a Facebook account, compared to other platforms such as Twitter, Instagram or Snapchat who have much fewer users. Instant Messaging platforms however also prove very popular. There is a wide gap between Facebook and Twitter in terms of users and content, as Twitter is perceived as targeting a higher-level audience.

### 2. Social media is filled with current affairs, but users would rather engage with entertainment and sports topics

Content on social media relates mostly to government, politics and elections, and security and military matters, largely because this is the bulk of what media organizations publish. Yet the content that garners the most audience engagement relates to sports, entertainment or national pride. Engagement is overwhelmingly driven by likes, whilst comments and shares are marginal. This shows that the majority of engagement is superficial, with likes being the type of engagement which require the lowest level of effort from the audience, while comments and shares show a much greater investment by users.

### 3. Social media is first an extension of one's private network, and a source of information second

Social media is primarily an extension of an individual's prior network, limiting direct engagement with individuals and ideas outside of established social networks. The exception to this would be popular public pages such as those maintained by traditional media outlets or public figures, however the more limited active use (likes versus shares and comments) still reduces direct engagement.

### 4. Awareness of content related to current affairs is high, mobilization through social media much lower

Private communication is the primary usage of social media, and while almost all users are subjected to content relating to current affairs, a limited number share and propagate information with even fewer engaging through comments.

There is a very high awareness of current affairs among social media users, but very limited engagement. Thus, mobilizing users through social media for a specific cause faces many hurdles, but the practice of reporting wrong-doing through social media is common and the most direct impact social media has on Afghan society.

### 5. Social media is disruptive

Negative language and content festers on social media, so much so it can be disruptive to the electoral process such as during the run-up to the 2014 elections. The wider political implications of a social media that enables uninhibited and fractious language are less of a concern for day to day users at present, who are more concerned with fake profiles and direct negative engagement to their content. There is a clamoring for regulation in order to tackle this issue. Most organizations and users tend to simply ignore individuals making negative comments, or try to engage privately with them to understand their point of view. No respondent was aware of or keen to use the built-in reporting tools on Facebook that allow anonymous flags on discriminatory or violent language. The impunity on social media is taken advantage of, and there is wishful thinking that the Afghan government should be able to police accounts and content on social media with little attention given to the readily available tools, as incomplete as they may be.

## ASSESSING SOCIAL MEDIA POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE

Social media's reach is limited to specific areas and to a specific population, which engages primarily with entertainment, sports or national pride content. Taking this into account helps define the influence social media can have on public discourse.

Debates, campaigns and reports of incidents on social media will not in themselves have direct influence on the national discourse, but they can trigger wider conversations. Discourse on social media seems to have less influence in shaping opinions on an issue than in generally bringing attention to the issue. Social media momentum builds up very quickly and if social media is incensed about an issue, it will be brought to light to a wider audience through television, radio, or word-of-mouth.

This leads to a second key takeaway, namely that social media coexists with traditional media. These interactions go further than media outlets having a Facebook page, as social and traditional media share content and share audiences. Interactions on social media feed the content shown on traditional media, as they have influencers from social media featured on their shows, while the content from television or radio is relayed on social media. The Afghan media has not reached a stage of symbiosis between social and traditional media yet, as the population of users and infrastructure does not allow for frequent live interactions between the two, but it is headed in this direction.

Finally, while the population of users is indeed limited to a homogenous group, this group is representative of a generation of young Afghans hungry for change. They are now as much influenced by what they see on social media as they are by print, radio or TV and their involvement in some issues online will reverberate in other media through the interlinkages between social media platforms and the wider media.