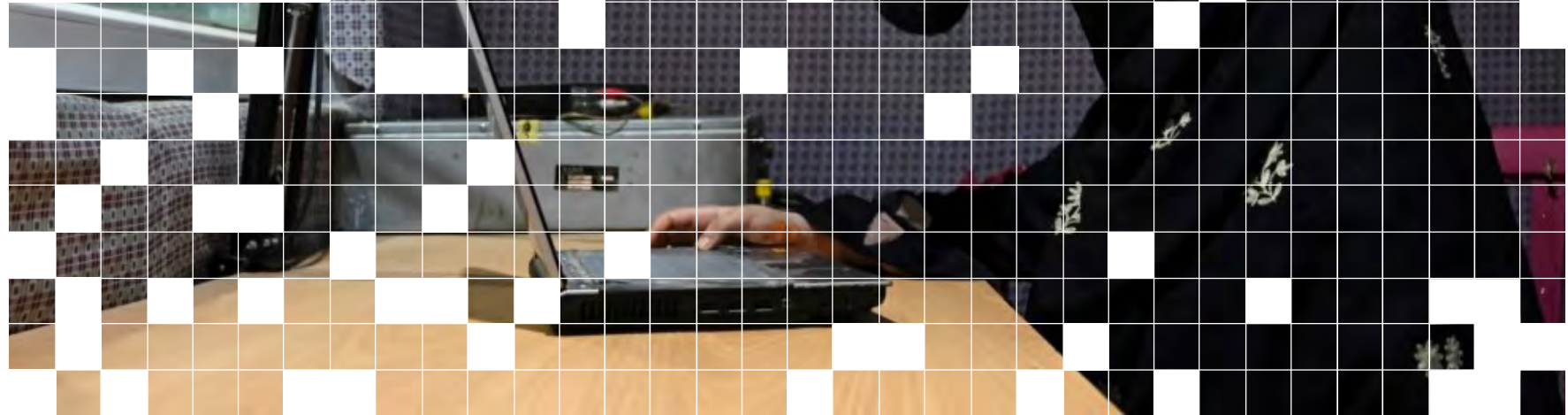# THE INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM IN AFGHANISTAN AND IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN ACTION

ROOTED IN TRUST

INTERNEWS, DECEMBER 2023

CONTENTS

ACRONYMS

CCEA
Communication, community engagement, and accountability

CFM
Complaint and feedback mechanisms

DFA
De facto authorities

FGD
Focus group discussion

IEA
Information ecosystem assessment

IDP
Internally displaced persons/people

KII
Key informant interview

NGO
Non-governmental organization

SSI
Semi structured interview

TV
Television

EXECUTIVE **SUMMARY**

Information ecosystems are dynamic and responsive, changing with time and circumstances. As a result, on-going review and study of information ecosystems is necessary to understand these dynamics and changes and to inform communication practices. This is especially true in humanitarian settings, where people experience major shocks. Humanitarian responders need a strong understanding of information and communication dynamics and shifts to ensure they maintain accountability to affected populations, use feedback from communities to inform programming, and include affected communities across programme cycles.

The Taliban (referred to as the de facto authorities or DFA) takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 led to major restrictions on personal freedoms, and subsequently media and information access. Within a few months, almost half of media outlets had stopped operations, with extreme employment cuts for those working in journalism, especially women. The Taliban's return to power resulted in restrictions on all segments of Afghan society, most notably women. Immediately after the DFA returned to power, Afghans began to self-censor on social media and in daily interactions because of uncertainty and fear of what they could say. This has continued. Since, the DFA have become more established, restrictions on women and girls have become stricter. This limits their access to information through informal sources such as bakeries, beauty salons, and schools. Women are thus less likely to be informed than men. While conventional media sources like TV and radio still exist, their content is subject to censorship and self-censorship[1]. As a result, public trust in information sources as well as access to reliable and dependable information has diminished.

To understand the impacts of these changes to information and access and behaviours, Internews commissioned a study between May and July of 2023 to analyse the information ecosystem in Afghanistan. This research built on previous assessments conducted in Afghanistan by Internews, with the aim to highlight any significant impacts since August 2021. The study adopted a mixed-methods approach composed of a literature review, 997 phone surveys covering all 34 provinces of Afghanistan, and 42 in-depth and in-person interviews in three provinces, all of which included both male and female respondents. The qualitative data collection sought to understand how lives had been affected by changes in information access. To illustrate this, four stories are shared to humanise the research findings through the voices of respondents in Afghanistan. The narratives and findings also present opportunities for humanitarians to collaborate with communities based on their needs to enhance both the quality and accessibility of essential information.

This report details the findings of the study and provides insights into how to conduct and replicate similar information ecosystem analyses to improve and support humanitarian action.

KEY FINDINGS

- **The main media platforms/channels people use to receive information depends on their location.** For example, in urban areas 82% of respondents owned a TV compared to less than half of rural respondents. Urban respondents more frequently relied on TV and social media to access information, while rural respondents relied more on word-of-mouth. Radio is a common source of news for many Afghans, both urban and rural. As many radio and TV channels disbanded or changed since the Taliban retook Kabul, peoples' sources of information have also changed.

- While respondents spend significant amounts of time **on social media** (primarily Facebook, followed by WhatsApp), **the public sharing of information on these platforms is relatively low.** Social media platforms are predominantly used to receive information from public channels or for private communication.

- People trust information that is accessible, understandable, and relevant. Both formal (public institutions, health organisations, humanitarian organisations) and informal (mosques, shuras, alley representatives, schools, madrasas) were highly trusted depending on context.

- There was decreased trust in media (including state media, private media, online news, and news content shared online and via social media). **Trust in media among women decreased more significantly than men.**

- **Trust in online news decreased less than in traditional media** (TV, radio, newspapers), **but lack of regulation and the spread of "fake news" has made many suspicious of its reliability.** Information received via word of mouth remains a trusted source of information; people are likely to trust their own experiences and those of family, friends, and close community members. **This is especially true among women.** When trust in government is low, people rely on local leaders, teachers, heads of households, and doctors for information needed for decision making.

- **Trust is closely linked to proximity.** People trust eye-witness accounts, families and friends, religious and community leaders, teachers, students, colleagues, and clients. **Trust can be rebuilt via results.** The main concern is whether the information being shared reflects peoples' experiences. Trust increases when people can verify information and see their feedback turned into action.

- **Trust in humanitarian organisations has decreased.** Humanitarian organisations are trusted as entities themselves, but their information and processes are not. Miscommunication about aid services, eligibility, and the process of receiving assistance has led to confusion and mistrust. While aid institutions themselves are not seen as untrustworthy, the

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1. Afghanistan Media Landscape Guide", *CDAC Network,* April 2022.

inability to get reliable information on processes around humanitarian aid has caused scepticism as many feel distributions are unjust. **People are unsatisfied with the current complaint and feedback mechanisms (CFM) and lack information on how to use CFMs and contact humanitarians.** Communities thus tend to rely on elevating Issues to community leaders (rather than the government or humanitarian organizations). This can be very limiting for women and girls, or for people trying to raise sensitive issues.

■ Afghan callers to complaint and feedback lines do not only use these hotlines to provide feedback or complaints on humanitarian assistance, but as a way to share their frustrations and express despair, highlighting the need for open two-way communication systems that do not focus solely on humanitarian assistance.

■ **Two-way information flow Is key to building trust and tackling rumours.** The preference and need for two-way information is evidenced both In the current dissatisfaction with humanitarian communication channels as well as the use of CFMs as a way to voice additional needs and concerns, not simply to provide feedback on humanitarian assistance.

■ **Restrictions on women's participation also affects women's access to information and the production on female-focused content, including on health. Women are more likely than men to face challenges and restrictions to accessing information.** Illiteracy is a barrier to accessing the internet and social media (the literacy rate for women Is 33%, compared to 50% for men). Women are more likely to rely on informal spaces (bakeries, home visits, beauty salons) than men for information sharing and verification. The closure of beauty salons in July 2023 thus had a negative impact on women's access to information. **Information gaps on jobs and livelihoods, education,**

and women's rights are reported by all age groups. Women most frequently mentioned that they lack information on women's rights and gender-related issues (68%), jobs and livelihoods (67%), and education-related news and updates (67%). Men reported needing more information on jobs and livelihoods (64%), followed by information on development and humanitarian initiatives (59%).

■ **Age Is an important factor in determining where people turn for information.** Older people are more likely to rely on TV, although 50% of respondents 25 years or younger also rely on TV. Older people are less informed and more likely to report lacking information on national/government-related issues. They are also slightly more likely to report lacking information in other areas. However, **local elders and community leaders are still the people who community members (58%) turn to when they need to fill Information gaps.** Younger people are more likely to rely on social media and less likely to rely on community spaces to access information. However, **word of mouth Is similarly important for all age groups.**

■ **Geographic location impacts access to information.** Most urban respondents own a TV (82%), compared to less than half of rural respondents. Respondents in urban settings also rely more frequently on TV and social media than their rural counterparts, who relied more heavily on information via word of mouth. Women in particular trusted information from their peers more than other sources. There was less variation regarding owning a radio, which is a common source of news for many Afghans. Coverage and infrastructure are correlated with the urban-rural divide; those in urban settings have more access (73%) compared to peri-urban (54%) and rural (43%) respondents.

■ **Community councils were once a key source of information for communities but have since been restric-**

ted or disbanded due to lack of funding. While indigenous patterns of communication still exist, trust in leadership has decreased, mostly due to confusion around aid eligibility and feelings of unfairness as to who is receiving assistance from humanitarian organisations. However, people continue to **mullahs, Imams, shuras, alley representatives, teachers, colleagues, classmates, service providers, families, and friends to receive and validate information.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

■ Humanitarian organisations should leverage existing information systems. There is a need to recognize indigenous information sharing systems (such as informal chats in coffee houses and beauty salons or sharing of information between parents and teachers), as much as modern alternatives (such as the use of social media).

■ There is a disconnect between trust in humanitarian organisations themselves and trust in information about humanitarian operations. To address this, humanitarians need to reassess information campaigns to put a greater emphasis on transparent communication around the delivery of services (including potential limitations) and allowing the community play a role in the design of messaging to ensure it meets local expectations and works to fill information gaps and rebuild trust.

■ Humanitarians should use local structures to gather and share reliable information. Schools are a place of information exchange and considered trusted spaces. Humanitarians should also explore creative and different informal ways of sharing information with women. Although beauty salons have been closed, greater research is needed to identify other culturally appropriate informal gathering places so that information can be shared through those networks and platforms that are culturally appropriate and safe for women.

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■ Most respondents did not know how to use CFMs and noted they either did not know how to reach humanitarian organisations or feel that when they did try to share feedback, they did not receive a response. However, those who did know how to use call centres used them for two-way conversations, where they shared information about their needs. Beyond the collection of community data, Actors must ensure they are transparent about the feedback they are receiving and the actions they have taken in response. This will build trust in these processes and encourage greater engagement from community members. Additionally, a collaborative community engagement and accountability (CEA) information campaign among actors could effectively communicate the significant role of feedback in shaping and improving aid services, thereby raising awareness within the community.

■ All respondents expressed a preference for face-to-face engagement, especially women. Face-to-face engagement continues to be critical and humanitarian responders must not give up on current efforts to continue engaging women.

■ People use social media primarily to collect information - primarily Facebook, followed by WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, Telegram, and X. This means social media remains a relevant platform on which to share information with communities, even if humanitarians do not see high levels of obvious engagement. Culturally appropriate and sensitive social media engagement is key.

■ Face-to-face communication and in-person contact should be prioritised, including for collecting feedback on humanitarian assistance. NGOs should ensure that they use trusted interlocutors for such engagement but should not rely solely on community leaders who may also have their own biases or agendas.

■ Call centres are both effective and affordable ways to disseminate and receive information, as seen by one INGO who found their hotline was used for Afghan callers to air their frustrations and despair. Using call centres as two-way information systems as opposed to one-way information dissemination channels encourages people to call in and discuss their needs transparently. This can also address issues such as fear that an NGO will stop providing assistance if it receives too many complaints.

■ Humanitarian organizations should engage with the media more as collaborators, not just as amplifiers. this can help mitigate miscommunication that contributes to mistrust. community feedback and social listening findings should be shared with media actors so they can adapt their content to their audiences' needs.

■ Humanitarians should provider information literacy training to community members and NGO partners to better understand verification mechanisms, safe online practices, and to be able to Identify misinformation and disinformation. ♦

INTRODUCTION

In August of 2021, the Taliban (now known as the de facto authorities or DfA) returned to power. This had an immense impact on Afghan society in many ways, including heavily restricting access to information and opportunities to share and create information. The media sector bore the brunt of the restriction - in just three months, nearly half (43%) of Afghan media outlets disappeared; the number of people working in Afghan newsrooms reducing drastically from 10,780, in August 2021, to 4,360 in December 2021, according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and the Afghan Independent Journalists Association. Media actors either lost their jobs or fled the country to escape persecution. Those journalists who remained in Afghanistan did so *"at the risk of censorship, termination, physical and psychological abuse, and arbitrary arrests.*[2]*"* Women journalists were impacted more than their male counterparts, with four out of five (84%) losing their jobs, (410 women were working in newsrooms in December 2021, compared to 2,490 in August 2021). In comparison, only half of all male journalists lost their jobs, from 8,290 in August 2021 to 3,950 in December 2021[3].

While conventional media like public and private TV channels and radio stations (eg. TOLO News, Radio Television Afghanistan) still provide information, sources are limited and reliability has weakened. Access to information and the ability to understand and trust this information greatly depends on demographics like age, gender, geographic location, financial circumstance, and displacement status.

ABOUT INTERNEWS
At Internews, we believe everyone deserves trustworthy information to make informed decisions about their lives and to enable actors to hold power to account. In nearly two decades on the front lines of humanitarian crises, Internews has seen how poor access to information can increase exposure to risk and derail a response effort, costing time, resources and the dignity of crisis-affected communities.

Internews is a thought leader in the field of information access in humanitarian contexts and has completed more than 50 Information Ecosystem Assessments in 30 countries to date. As a founding member of the Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network, we have contributed to the growing acceptance of information and communication as aid, and advocated for communities affected by crisis to access quality information and be allowed to actively participate in humanitarian programming cycles, and the importance of gathering reliable data and information for the development of evidence-based approaches to Accountability to Affected People (AAP) activities.

Internews is an international nonprofit with 30 offices around the world, including headquarters in California, Washington DC, London and Paris, and regional hubs in Bangkok, Kyiv and Nairobi. Internews is registered as a 501(c)3 nonprofit in California (EIN 94-3027961), in England and Wales as a charity and company (Charity no. 1148404 and Company no. 7891107) and in France as a non-profit association (SIRET no. 425 132 347 000 13).

ABOUT THIS REPORT
This research uses Internews' Information Ecosystem Assessment (IEA) approach to understand the 'health' of an information ecosystem by investigating Information supply, Information demand and Information dynamics such as trust or misinformation that might pollute and confuse the information supply and create risks for communities (For further details, see the methodology section below).

Between 2020-2023, Internews ran a 15-country humanitarian project responding to the unprecedented scale and spread of health-related misinformation related to vaccines and the pandemic. The Rooted in Trust project in Afghanistan, Internews has been supporting improved Risk Communication and Community Engagement (RCCE) practices through the collection and analysis of misinformation, production of health content in local media channels and research to help actors understand the information environment. Information ecosystems are constantly shifting and changing, especially in times of crisis, so understanding the ecosystem in a given context is a first step to developing programming that can properly support the information needs of community members.

To gain insights into changes in Afghanistan's information ecosystem, Internews commissioned an assessment which was conducted between May and July 2023. The study seeks to provide humanitarian responders with a deeper understanding of the information ecosystem in Afghanistan to improve humanitarian response capacity through enhanced mechanisms for communication, community engagement, and accountability (CCEA).

> **Information ecosystems** are complex adaptive systems that include information infrastructure, tools, media, producers, consumers, curators and sharers. They are complex organizations of dynamic social relationships through which information moves and transforms in flows.
> **INTERNEWS**

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2. Doran Jeremy, "Helping Afghan Media Continue Their Work", August 24, 2022.

3. "Afghanistan | RSF," *Reporters Without Borders*, March 14, 2023.

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One goal of this study is to probe the community perceptions of humanitarian processes and understand where miscommunication and mistrust originate. This study also explores whether the varied feedback and accountability channels for communities are effective. In a previous Afghan COVID-19 study conducted by Internews, it was found that humanitarian organisations had most success when using existing community partnerships and societal infrastructures.[4] As this research builds on these findings, it seeks to understand which infrastructures and feedback mechanisms work and do not.

This report answers the central research question:
Which information channels, platforms and sources do communities have access to and do individuals trust to make decisions for themselves and their families?

In addition, this report draws upon findings of a 2022 unreleased Internews study on the dynamics of social media use In Afghanistan (see Case Study on Social Media in Afghanistan in this report). This research was primarily carried out in March and April of 2022 by Faisal Karimi and Abdul Wahab Siddiqi of the Afghanistan Institute for Research and Media Studies[5]. The study includes additional research by the NGO Paloonkey.

METHODOLOGY

This report utilises a phased mixed-methods approach to understanding the information ecosystem and gaps in information and access. The methodological framework focused on three levels of analysis and used a culturally-, gender-, disability, age-, and displacement-sensitive approach to ensure inclusion of different voices.

▶ The **systemic or contextual level** looks at the information landscape and the structural factors impacting production of information and dynamics of access (e.g., law and policy, and conflict).
▶ The **community or situational level** looks at access, use, and dissemination of information, with a focus on vulnerable and marginalised communities, including displaced communities.
▶ The **individual or personal level** looks at the roles of specific groups as both influencers and users of information, as well as middlemen involved in information systems. This integrated a focus on age, gender, and diversity (e.g., ethnicity, language).

The phased mixed methods approach allowed researchers to first assess the gaps in information systems through pilot interviews before surveying a large sample population across 34 provinces. These initial findings allowed for more in-depth research to be conducted in a third qualitative data collection process. The three phases built off each other:

1 **Phase 1 - Desk Review/Pilot interviews** to understand the critical dimensions of the information ecosystem at the systemic, community, and individual levels. This looked at the shifting dynamics and importance of information in crisis contexts, the role of rumours and trust, and the current situation in Afghanistan with regards to media, socio-economic issues, and the humanitarian sector.

2 **Phase 2 - Quantitative surveys** consisting of 997 random dial phone surveys, conducted in June 2023, covering all 34 provinces in Afghanistan.

   a. Reflecting overall population sizes, a substantial fraction of the interviews was conducted in Kabul (194), followed by Herat (132) and Balkh (71). Most of the interviewees were either Pashtun (41%) or Tajik (40%), followed by Uzbek (8%), Hazara (8%) and respondents of other ethnicities (3%). •••

Profile of respondents
Respondents by province

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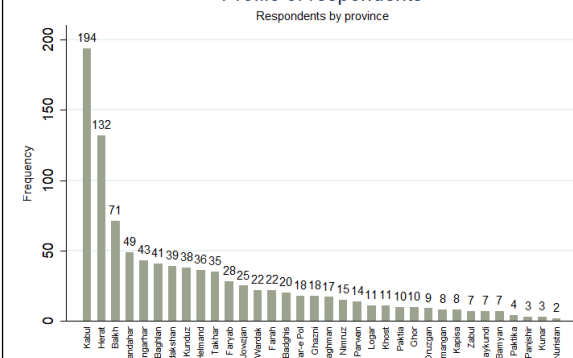
4. "Diversity, Distance, and Distrust: Information Dynamics in Afghanistan during the COVID-19 Pandemic", *Information Saves Lives* | Internews, March 2021.

5. The study was conducted via digital platforms and social media channels between March and April 2022 and surveyed 1,600 social media users, with 61 in depth interviews across all 34 provinces of Afghanistan.
The Afghanistan Institute for Research and Media Studies (AIRMS) was established in March 2015 and registered as non-governmental organization in Afghanistan carrying out media research and providing journalism education in Afghanistan. AIRMS, led by a group of journalism professionals and academics, seeks to support freedom of information and raise media standards through civic educations programs, capacity building and research. The AIRMS team concentrates on formulating questions in media and communication sciences, in particular about the topics of media innovation and development. In addition, AIRMS established the Afghanistan Women's News Agency and Kaashi Media to produce and distribute content, information and awareness on new media platforms.

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b. Around half of the interviewees lived in urban areas (53%), followed by respondents living in rural areas (37%). The remaining respondents lived in peri-urban areas (10%). One respondent lived in a camp.

c. Respondents were generally young; only 10% reported being older than 50 years old.

3 **Phase 3 - Qualitative consultations** with men and women of different socio-economic and displacement backgrounds across three provinces: Kabul, Nangarhar and Herat. The consultations consisted of:

a. *Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)* on how people access information post August 2021 and how this access, or lack thereof, has impacted services, aid, and their decision-making processes.

b. *Semi-structured interviews (SSIs)* with people who may considered sources and channels of information, including male taxi drivers and shopkeepers, female teachers, health workers, beauticians, home workers, and community and religious leaders. This helped develop a stronger understanding of who community members share information with, get information from, and who they trust.

c. *Key informant interviews (KIIs)* with media actors to understand the strategies people have developed to collect, verify, and share information, and with representatives from humanitarian organisations to understand their approaches to delivering information and the challenges they face.

Key informant interviews, semi structured interviews and focus group discussions were led by experienced field researchers in Kabul, Nangarhar, and Herat to conduct the qualitative data collection. Each location, including Nangarhar, provided a mix of urban, peri-urban, and rural locations. These locations also provided a diverse sample in terms of ethnic backgrounds: Herat being made up of Hazara/Sadat/Tajik/and some Pashton, Nangarhar being mostly all Pashtoon, and Kabul being composed of Hazara/Sadat/Tajik.

LIMITATIONS AND CONSTRAINTS

Given the current environment, restrictions on media, communication, and women's participation limited the research.

1 **Gender:** Most respondents to the random dialler survey were male (71%), which aligns with the general tendency that random dial surveys in Afghanistan often result in an overrepresentation of male respondents. Since the calls were random dial, there was no guarantee that the gender of the respondent would match the gender of the caller, which presented cultural challenges. To some, a woman speaking to an unknown man could be considered sin and a sign of an illicit relationship. There were also incidents where calls were disconnected when male heads of household learned the women in their family were being interviewed. Many who answered were also men

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Table 1. Data collection methods and sample

TOOL	SAMPLING	LOCATION
Quantitative Survey	997 random dialler phone surveys (71% male, 29% female)	All 34 provinces of Afghanistan
Pilot	1 Female FGD (6 Participants), 4 Male SSIs	Kabul
Desk Review	N/A	Remote
Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)	8 KIIs (6 Media Sector Experts - 4 Male, 2 Female; 2 Humanitarian Actors - 1 Male, 1 Female)	Kabul, Remote
Phone-based Semi-structured Interviews (SSI)	24 SSIs (12 Male, 12 Female)	Nangarhar, Kabul and Herat
Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)	9 FGDs (6 Male FGDs - 30 Participants) (3 Female FGDs - 15 Participants)	Nangarhar, Kabul and Herat
Altogether, 1,084 respondents were consulted and interviewed from the pilot to the data collection phases.		

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at work who were unwilling to share the contact information of women in their family or share information about their access to information. Most women in rural areas were found to not own their own phones and therefore relied on responding via those of their male counterparts. These restrictions resulted in lower participation rates from women. To address this discrepancy, the research team allocated additional days of quantitative research in the call centre specifically to reach more women. While the additional surveying provided a more thorough perspective, the limitation exemplifies current struggles in the information landscape: women are restricted from accessing information by a variety of barriers, including cultural, educational, financial, and familial.

2 **Political restrictions:** Current media censorship meant some respondents were afraid to speak on the topic. During the survey, some random dial calls were made to people who declared themselves to be members of the DfA. Some rejected the interview while others participated after asking questions.

3 **Infrastructural barriers:** It was not uncommon for phone surveys to be disconnected halfway and left incomplete due to signal issues. This reflects what many respondents highlighted in the qualitative discussions: a lack of service and coverage is a barrier to information access. Respondents living in rural areas also have less access to media, which also resulted in a lack of knowledge about many of the questions asked.

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6. Ibid.

7. Internews, INVOLVE US: information & participation dynamics, desires and challenges in Sudan's Tigray refugee response, 2021

8. "Diversity, Distance, and Distrust: Information Dynamics in Afghanistan during the COVID-19 Pandemic", *Information Saves Lives | Internews,* March 2021.

CONTEXT

INFORMATION IS ESSENTIAL DURING CRISES

Evaluating and understanding the information ecosystem of a society, especially one in crisis, is essential to helping humanitarians and other information providers engage with communities as they adapt to changes in their environment. Understanding a community's needs and preferences in relation to the elements in their information ecosystem can strengthen networks, reinforce communication, and support decision makers to develop more responsive and resilient systems[6].

Other studies by Internews have revealed the impact of accurate, timely and relevant information and media access on development and good governance in regions underpinned by crisis, instability, and poverty. This is evident in Internews' 2021 assessments of the information landscape among Ethiopian refugees in Sudanese host communities[7] and of COVID-19 information dynamics in Afghanistan[8]. The findings from these previous studies show trends in information access. For example, information behaviours are influenced by social and political shifts; communities compensate for lack of information by finding alternative ways to share information amongst themselves; and information needs and

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demands vary among different groups (youth, older people, people with disabilities, and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

THE INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM IN THE AFGHAN CONTEXT, PRIOR TO THIS STUDY

Afghanistan has a history of drastic political shifts and associated socio-economic, security, and cultural changes that impact access to information and influence trust. These impacts also extend to access to services and trust in the humanitarian sector.

During the previous Taliban regime (1995-2001), the state-owned radio station was the only accessible broadcaster. Over the course of 20 years since the US invasion and the installation of a republican government, and because of large-scale national and international investment in infrastructure, more national and private media outlets emerged, and access to international media increased. However, local media agencies continued to face challenges due to insecurity, conflict, financial stability, and restrictions on freedom of press. In 2020, the Freedom House's Civil Liberties Index ranked Afghanistan extremely low with regards to civil liberties and freedom of expression. Less than two years later, following the fall of Kabul, Afghanistan experienced a 7-point drop and was ranked even lower[9]. Since the DfA's return to power, media actors and journalists have come under even more threat and artistic and media activities have been highly restricted. Afghanistan's independent media sector faces challenges due to the lack of diversified financial resources for media outlets, who have for some time relied heavily on international donors or government agencies. This reliance can threaten their

editorial independence and financial stability and security. In addition to influencing content, the lack of financial resources results in an unstable and largely low-skilled workforce, and few resources to produce high quality content including in-depth reporting that holds powerful actors to account[10]. Access to information and media is heavily dependent on demographic factors such as gender, age, location, and economic situation. The urban-rural divide is particularly large. Urban communities tend to have higher literacy rates, are more able to afford devices like TVs, and have better access to the internet. They are also better able to access information via traditional media outlets such as TV, radio, social media, and print. Rural households, however, more frequently get information from the radio and via word of mouth.

Resulting from and exacerbated by these issues, the current humanitarian environment in Afghanistan has been facing challenges. This is expressed in previous Internews studies and by humanitarians who share frustrations over miscommunication with communities regarding humanitarian assistance. There is a discrepancy between the aid people expect and the aid people receive. The information provided about aid distributions - both by the media and by humanitarian organizations - does not always correspond to the assistance accessed. This discrepancy, shared among communities, on social media, and in the news, contributes to and exacerbates mistrust and low expectations regarding humanitarian aid. ♦

9. Afghanistan: Afghanistan: Freedom in the World 2023 Country Report," *Freedom House, 2023.*

10. Internews, INVOLVE US: information & participation dynamics, desires and challenges in Sudan's Tigray refugee response, 2021

1. DATA OVERVIEW: A SNAPSHOT OF THE INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM FROM AFGHANS INTERVIEWED ACROSS THE COUNTRY

RESPONDENT PROFILE – QUALITATIVE DATA

GUIDING NARRATIVES

Four stories or vignettes into the lives of men and women across Afghanistan are integrated throughout the report to share the narratives and voices that informed this research and highlight the impact of the changing information ecosystem on individual lives. Each story speaks to the changes in the information ecosystem since August 2021, and the distance, fear, and lost hopes of people. They also exemplify openings and opportunities to work with communities and individuals to improve the quality and access to information.

DISPLACED WOMEN IN KABUL

These displaced women, most of whom do not work, rely on information shared in women's bakeries and other informal, crowded, and at times unreliable, places for accessing their information. Their voices shared the fear of girls being harassed, women being kidnapped, and other information that led them to think "what will tomorrow be like?"

A CHANGING COMMUNITY ECOSYSTEM

Previous research has showed that community health is on the decline (*Samuel Hall IOM 2022*) because communities cannot protect themselves. One of the reasons for this is the closure of some community development councils that, due to lack of funding, are no longer operating or allowed to operate. Other committees have emerged, their profiles and intentions are however linked to the DfA and not trusted by people.

TUNING IN FOR GOOD NEWS

This group of men are trying different ways to access information. They want to be able to and receive information about job opportunities, humanitarian assistance, and their futures. They tune in to the TV and radio, but realise that less and less of what they hear or see speaks to their situation or their communities. They're no longer included in the information content shared.

INFORMATION AND MIGRATION

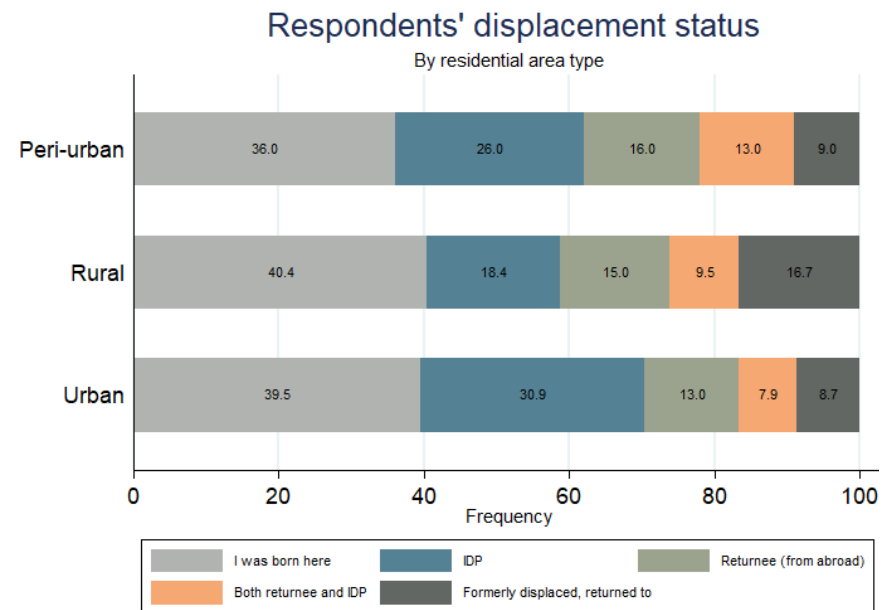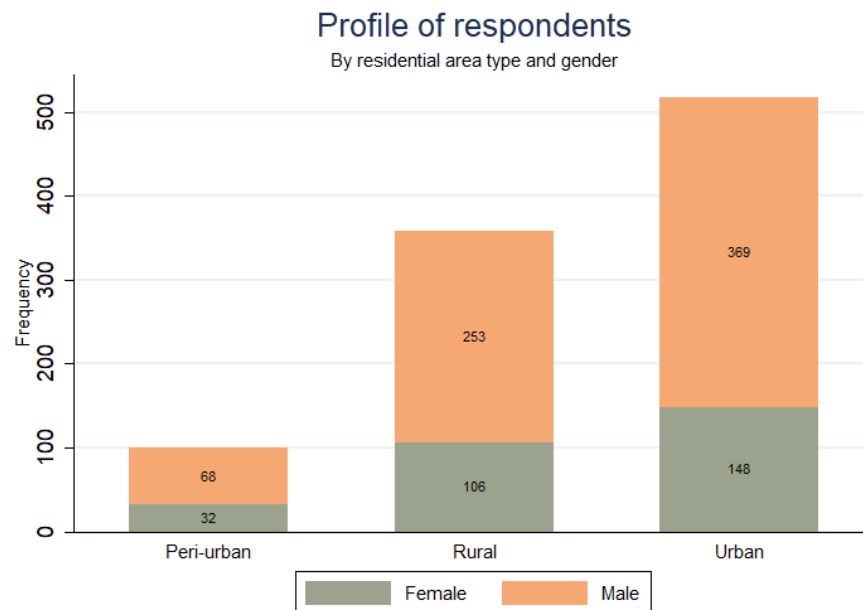One 34 year-old woman who still works as a cleaner in a hospital noted she accesses information in three ways: through doctors, through her husband and family at home, and through the local TV antenna. It is the local media that convinced her to move to Kabul, and now it is convincing her not go to Iran. She is making life decisions based on the information she hears while recognizing the information can be biased.

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RESPONDENT PROFILE – QUANTITATIVE DATA
DISPLACEMENT PROFILE

Profile of respondents
By residential area type and gender

Respondents' displacement status
By residential area type

Most respondents had been displaced at least once, if not more than once. Some were IDPs (26%), some were returnees from abroad (14%), some were previously displaced people who had returned to their area of origin (12%), and some reported being both returnees and IDPs (9%). The proportion of displaced respondents was relatively similar across urban, rural, and peri-urban samples, but there were more IDPs among urban respondents and more formerly displaced respondents who had returned to their place of origin in rural areas. Only 39% of respondents reported living in the same areas where they were born.

Their experiences of displacement have an impact on the type of information they seek, the decisions they need to make, and the networks they rely on to triangulate information.

WAYS OF ACCESSING INFORMATION
When asked about devices owned by the household, urban respondents most frequently reported owning a TV (82%). This compared to less than half of respondents based in rural (44%) and peri-urban (48%) areas. Meanwhile, around 4 in 10 households owned a radio, with little variation across rural and urban samples. People reported accessing radio both on static radios as well as via simple phones.

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING INFORMATION
Economic and infrastructural obstacles limit people's ability to access information. These include lack of electricity and network or coverage, low educational attainment, inability to afford devices (mobile or television), and inability to pay for Internet or TV subscriptions. Another barrier is sociocultural, including language and the ability of women and girls to move freely.

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65% of respondents reported earning money for their households, although this varied substantially based on their gender. Only 33% of women reported earning money, compared to 79% of men. Since the data was collected, beauty salons have been banned. These were one of the main sources of income (and information sharing) for women[11].

Education and literacy are barriers to using the internet or social media[12]. Approximately half of male respondents self declared as illiterate, compared to two thirds of women.

Another barrier is infrastructure. While 73% of urban respondents reported having access to the internet, only 54% of those based in peri-urban and 43% of rural respondents did. The level of access also varied substantially based on gender, with women reporting lower levels of access to the internet compared to their male counterparts. There were no significant differences based on the displacement status in terms of their access to the internet or social media. ♦

Do you have access to the internet?*
By residential area type and gender

Peri-urban: Female 31.3, Male 64.7
Rural: Female 29.2, Male 49.0
Urban: Female 62.8, Male 77.5

Legend: Female, Male

* positives responses
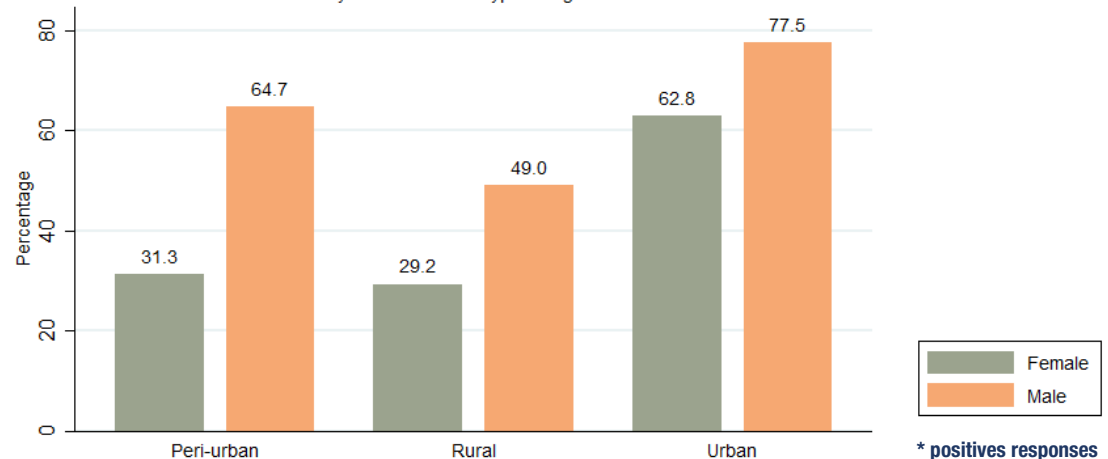
Does your household own...*
By residential area type

Peri-urban: radio 38.0, TV 48.0
Rural: radio 42.9, TV 44.3
Urban: radio 38.3, TV 81.8

Legend: radio, TV

* positives responses

11. Hadid, D.,Qazizai, F. "Inside Kabul's beauty salons: One of the last places women can gather now must close". NPR. July 14, 2023.

12. Ilt should be noted that illiterate users of social media may consume audio and video content.

2. INFORMATION LANDSCAPE

This section details the information landscape in its current state. It provides a story of women's realities, details of changes since the regime shift, an analysis of the data that demonstrates what sources are used and trusted and which are not, and a case study on the use of social media.
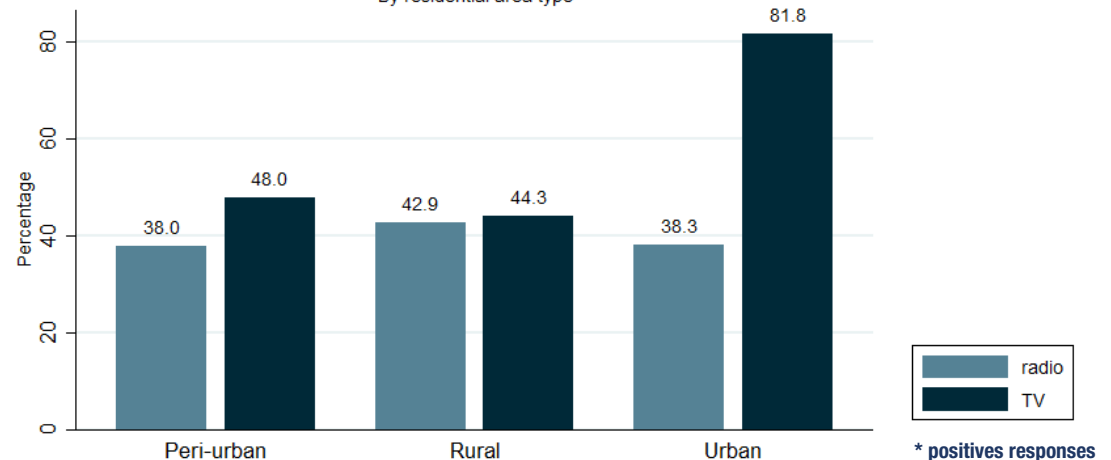
STORY 1. DISPLACED WOMEN IN KABUL CITY SPEAK OF EXISTING WITHIN INFORMATION GAPS*

Muska and her friends Najwa, Arezo, Azadeh, Karima, and Hamida are all Hazara women living in Dashte Barchi, a settlement in Western Kabul. They have all experienced displacement in some form, either because they were born in Maidan Wardak and fled war, or they lived, like Arezo, as refugees abroad, in Iran, and returned to Afghanistan in the early 2000s.

All six women are in their 20s and 30s, and have lived in Kabul city for almost two decades. Everything in their lives has changed, from their neighbourhoods to their children's access to services; from their daily TV shows to the radio channels they listen to. Karima has two children with health issues but cannot afford their treatment.

"We have no information; we mainly sit at home. If I watch TV, I get upset," explains Muska, who is bothered by the flow of bad news from Iran and Afghanistan, where people are left without work and a voice.

Before the fall of Kabul, they liked to watch TV for entertainment - series, satires, music shows, and comedy shows - much of which has since been banned by the DfA. Because of restrictions to media content, only Arezo, who is a teacher, still has a decent, reliable, and uncensored access to information; her students and their families have become her trusted network.

All six women said if they do not hear information first-hand, via word of mouth or through international news channels, they consider them lies. However, the second-hand Information they receive still impacts them. This information includes stories about a girl who committed suicide in their neighbourhood and a medical doctor being kidnapped from her office to help Taliban wives deliver their babies in secret locations. These rumours impact everyone.

"We just go to the bakery. We hear a lot from other women. Since the economy has gone down, we can hardly afford to use the internet or Facebook".

But gathering, including at the bakery, can be dangerous if there are too many women at once. The DfA can confiscate their phones, which they use to listen to the radio.

"What will tomorrow be made of? We don't have any information on what is happening around us." Most of the stories they hear scare them. They believe there is a lot of information they cannot verify. They are feeling trapped among information gaps, knowing that there are risks that can impact them but not hearing anything about them.

"It's been 6-7 months that the Taliban has only allowed for a one-sided conversation," they say as we conclude the interview.

When asked how best to reach them, they indicated that it was by phone. They rarely leave their homes except to buy food or bread.

They said what they want is to know the truth about things, and about how what happens today will impact their future. They note the growing tide of rumours and false information about schools reopening after Eid in 2022 as an example.

Muska, Najwa, Arezo, Azadeh, Karima, and Hamida want information about referral mechanisms for doctors for their children, as well as guidance on training, skills, and information for themselves. They would also like to know about the passport process, just in case. *"If we have it, then we can go. We are scared. If I have a passport, it opens the door to exit".*

*Names have been changed.

BOX 1. WHAT IS DIFFERENT SINCE THE GOVERNMENT CHANGED?

Economic, cultural, and educational restrictions all have an impact on where information can be exchanged. Restrictions on women's mobility and ability to work reduces their access and ability to validate information; restrictions on school limits access to one of the most trusted sources of information. Women who still work include health practitioners and teachers who believe they can access trusted information because of their networks of parents and children. Their worlds are still not entirely closed. Other women rely on information that is closer to rumours, and whose truth can be contested. Below are a few examples of how restrictions and censorship impact access to trusted information:

Cultural restrictions ➡ The DfA have imposed restrictions which have a direct impact on cultural practices, interactions, participation, and information sharing. Religious leaders have increased their presence to compensate for some of the community councils that have stopped running. They have held Quran recitals and kept the mosques as open spaces

for sharing and for holding community meetings.

Conditions for women ➡ Women have been the subject of many restrictions. Discussing women's rights in community workshops, for example, is now prohibited. Most contested is the ban on women and girls education, although the policy is not implemented equally across provinces. Some girls reported still not being fully informed about the restrictions, and some participate in alternative forms of learning online or in groups. The lack of internet access and coverage in many areas (especially rural), makes such alternative avenues for education difficult to access for women and girls. Women who have lost their jobs have also lost their access to some financial independence and the ability to pay for internet, let alone online classes. In July 2023, women's beauty salons were ordered to be closed, ending not only a form of income generation but also social engagement and information sharing.

Media censorship ➡ There are restrictions on women-related content on

TV (feminine hygiene, women's health, beauty etc.), and women are prohibited from appearing on TV without covering their face (Reuters 19/05/2022). News has also become very Afghan centric with little news and information from abroad being shared. Music has been banned in all forms, as have and social media apps like Tik Tok, impacting the spread of both cultural content and political information.

A decrease in trust and an increase in fear ➡ TV channels have seen a reduction in viewership, likely because content has been censored. Journalists are pressured not to speak on certain topics, TV channels cannot portray reality, and there is a general decreased ability to speak the truth amongst communities. This has led to a culture of self-censorship, with people limiting what they say in public and on social media for fear of repercussions. There is an overall culture of fear when it comes to information sharing, in part because of a fear of DFA informants. *"We are told that we do not have the right to criticise the Taliban, and they have spies everywhere. I think one of our close*

friends may be a spy and report us to the Taliban because the Taliban hires spies regardless of their ethnicity. For example, even a Hazara might be a spy, not to mention Pashtuns and Tajiks."

Limiting the spread of information ➡ All communication channels have been reduced. The most frequently used sources of information, such as TV and radio, have experienced a decline in trustworthiness, so people are increasingly turning to social media or community leaders and elders to verify information. However, these elders are often men. The community councils that once provided a stream of information and opportunity for feedback have also been limited or disbanded due to a lack of funding. Similarly, communicating with humanitarian organisations has become more difficult, according to respondents. Feedback mechanisms are confusing to many or seemingly non-existent. People are less inclined to ask for help, even for services such as help with drug addiction, because they fear repercussions on themselves and their families.

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INFORMATION PLATFORMS AND SOURCES

Respondents reported that the main news sources they had relied on to keep abreast of national, regional, and international news had been disbanded or had come under control of the DfA, thereby changing the content of the information. International news sources like Voice of America and BBC Persian had been banned by the DfA at the time this research was conducted in May and June of 2023[13]. Given the correlation between socio-economic status and access to the internet, and within the context of Afghanistan's current situation, many now rely on traditional forms of information sharing over social media.

INFORMATION PLATFORMS AFGHANS RELY ON

Levels of access to information vary by gender, education, and other factors, showing the connection between socio-economic status and media access. **Television and radio are the most commonly used sources of media** because of their convenience[14]. TV ls accessed by people of different ages, socio-economic status, and education levels. Although TV is accessed by people both in urban and rural environments, the content differs. Those who can afford a satellite can receive international news, while those who rely on local TV antenna lack strong coverage and access mostly local news because foreign content is banned.

Respondents most frequently relied on television (53%) for news, followed by information obtained through word of mouth (39%) and social media (38%). Men relied more on social media, community spaces, and radio than their female counterparts. However, women relied more heavily on word of mouth. This may be explained by lack of trust in official sources of information and in social media reported by female respondents.

Most respondents, both male (64%) and female (54%), relied on both national and international news from all platforms. Those who did not rely on both relied primarily on national news (34%), with very few (5%) relying only on international news. There were no significant differences between rural, urban, and peri-urban samples.

Many Afghans also use social media and messaging apps to stay up to date. Facebook was the most popular platform, mentioned by 80% of respondents who said they used social media. This suggests that nearly 1 in 3 (30%) of all respondents used Facebook[15]. The second most popular platform was WhatsApp, mentioned by 51% of social media users. Other less popular options were IMO (17%), Instagram (15%), Telegram (15%), X (formerly Twitter) 11%), followed by

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TV and radio sources:
Respondents were asked about specific television and radio stations they tune into. Among those who said they watch television, 66% listed Tolo news, followed by 34% of respondents who reported watching Afghanistan International. Further less frequent mentions were Ariana (18%), Shamshad (13%), Lemar (11%), RTA (9%) and BBC (9%). When asked about why they do not watch certain television channels, respondents explained that it is either because of circumstances (speak different language, bad signal, no time, no electricity, etc.), or that the news channels do not broadcast accurate news. Those who were dissatisfied with the content of the television channels most frequently mentioned Ayna, Ariana, Meli or national networks more broadly.

With regard radio choices, respondents who said they listen to radio most frequently mentioned BBC (40%), Azadi (21%), Arman (20%) and Shamshad (14%). Some respondents also mentioned local province-level radio stations. When it came to reasons for not listening to other radio stations, most respondents listed lack of time or other barriers (language, limited signal, only being able to listen to the radio at work or in the car, etc). While the evidence was anecdotal, open-answer responses suggest some division in opinions over BBC: 4 respondents reported listening to BBC exclusively or almost exclusively, while 4 interviewees said specifically that they do not like / trust BBC and / or foreign news.

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13. https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/taliban-decides-to-ban-international-media-from-airing-in-afghanistan-122032800255_1.html
14. "Afghanistan Media Landscape Guide", *CDAC Network,* April 2022
15. Facebook was more popular among male respondents than among women, although 1 in 4 urban female respondents reported using the platform. It was more popular in the city than in rural or peri-urban areas, and younger respondents were more likely to use Facebook when compared to older interviewees. There were no statistically significant differences in Facebook use based on displacement status.

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a few respondents who mentioned YouTube, Messenger, Tik Tok and Viber. Accessing TikTok may require a VPN since it was banned by the DfA (announced in 2022). However, large portions of the population cannot access social media due to socioeconomic barriers (including cost of both a phone and internet subscriptions) and literacy.
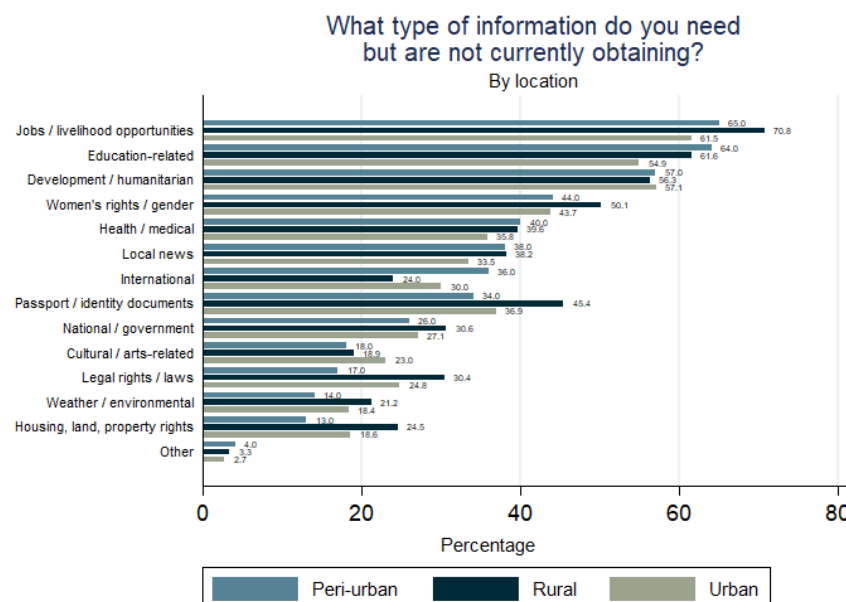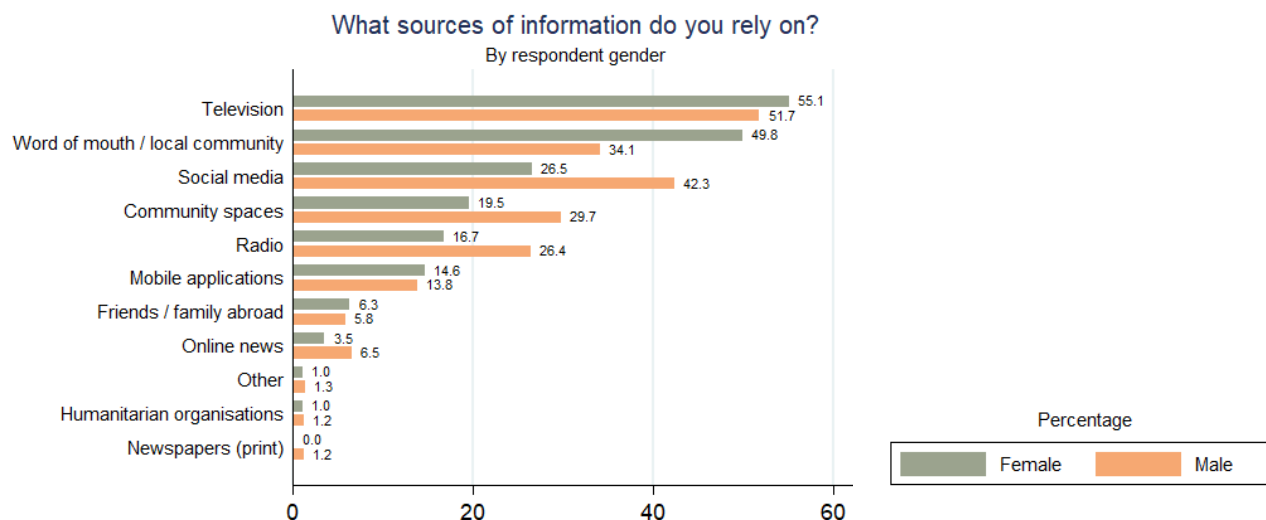
Age was an important factor in determining where people turn for information. TV was a more frequently used by older people; 50% of respondents who were 25 years old or younger relied on television, compared to 75% among respondents aged 65+. Younger respondents were more likely to rely on social media and less likely to rely on community spaces to obtain information, although word of mouth was similarly important for all age groups.

Urban respondents relied more frequently on TV and social media than rural and peri-urban respondents. **Respondents based in rural areas most frequently relied on word of mouth.** Despite the growth of technological mediums for media, people living in rural settings are limited by layers of inaccessibility.

Respondents were asked how much information they obtain through state TV, state radio, private news channels, online news and blogs, social media, and word of mouth. In terms of most frequently used channels, respondents reported obtaining a lot of information through private news channels (36%), followed by state TV (31%), and state radio (30%).

Urban and peri-urban respondents were slightly more likely to obtain more information from private TV and radio channels than their rural counterparts. Urban interviewees also less frequently relied on state radio, although the level of consumption for state TV was similar across different types of locations (see Annex I). There were no substantial variations based on gender.

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What sources of information do you rely on?
By respondent gender

Source	Female	Male
Television	55.1	51.7
Word of mouth / local community	49.8	34.1
Social media	26.5	42.3
Community spaces	19.5	29.7
Radio	16.7	26.4
Mobile applications	14.6	13.8
Friends / family abroad	6.3	5.8
Online news	3.5	6.5
Other	1.0	1.3
Humanitarian organisations	1.0	1.2
Newspapers (print)	0.0	1.2

Percentage

What type of information do you need but are not currently obtaining?
By location

Type	Peri-urban	Rural	Urban
Jobs / livelihood opportunities	65.0	70.8	61.5
Education-related	64.0	61.6	54.9
Development / humanitarian	57.0	56.3	57.1
Women's rights / gender	44.0	50.1	43.7
Health / medical	40.0	39.6	35.8
Local news	38.0	38.2	33.5
International	36.0	24.0	30.0
Passport / identity documents	34.0	45.4	36.9
National / government	26.0	30.6	27.1
Cultural / arts-related	18.0	18.9	23.0
Legal rights / laws	17.0	30.4	24.8
Weather / environmental	14.0	21.2	18.4
Housing, land, property rights	13.0	24.5	18.6
Other	4.0	3.3	2.7

Percentage

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FORMAL AND INFORMAL STRUCTURES AND SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Informal sources of information are used to understand security, politics, and gender issues, as well as to make life or death decisions and decisions around migration. Informal information sources include public and private, formal and informal spaces such as mosques, schools, bakeries, beauty salons, messaging app groups, families and friends. This story illustrates changes to a historically relied upon informal source of information:

STORY 2. A CHANGING ECOSYSTEM AND A FEAR OF FREE SPEECH*

Before the fall of Kabul, community leaders and community councils, often composed of smaller groups of elder, youth, and religious leaders, were a primary source of information between the government and their rural and peri-urban localities. While these entities are still the main bridge between the village and decision-makers, Hakim, a young schoolteacher in Muqam Khan Village, told us about the new role played by the Department of the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention Evil in his village. Following August 2021, DPVPE committees seem to have popped up across Afghanistan, not just to share the virtues, pillars, and rules and regulations of the Islamic Emirate, but also to keep an eye on the population.

"Two or three people are assigned for each community, and they guide people on Islamic values. For example, they guide people on what clothes to wear, especially instructing women to wear a Hijab and cover themselves when they come outside their houses. They tell women not to commute in the city without having a mahram (male family member). They also guide people to go to the mosque for prayers and not indulge in bribery. They tell us, the boys, to not have western-style haircuts."

Hakim's school has also received many letters regarding the benefits of these 'virtues'. The head of the school is directly in touch with this committee and the authorities through a WhatsApp group in which information about incoming changes is shared. The principal then sends a voice note to all schoolteachers asking them to share and enforce the new rules so that 'evil is prevented and virtue promoted'.

Such committees are symbolic of the increased control of information flows within Afghanistan.

"We don't have freedom of speech… [The government] specify the types of programs to be aired or not to be aired on radios and media channels. For example, they closed a radio station as it was airing songs. In the past, everyone had the freedom of speech. We could share our opinions and facts about government officials, but now we cannot even ask where our leader is. There are limited issues we can publicly discuss. For example, we can only talk about the education system in the village."

Hakim feels that no one can be trusted as the government has imposed many restrictions on people and the media. He fears that the government will arrest them as they have punished several journalists, *"therefore, sharing or getting information in public is like calling for your death."*

Previously, Hakim received most information from his friends and people in the bazaar. Now, however, when he asks someone about a specific issue, they tell him they do not know, even if they do, because they do not know if they can trust a stranger. Hakim also believes rumours and misinformation have significantly increased. While many rumours stem from social media, misinformation also exists on other platforms, such as local news channels.

For Hakim, people cannot control the information being shared, but they can choose not to follow those deemed untrustworthy. He recommends that people follow "reliable" sources of Information, such as the Facebook pages of humanitarian organisations. Finally, he urges discussions between community leaders, humanitarian organisations, and the government regarding the respect of individual and women's rights. *"Our leaders should raise their voices to ask for their/our rights."*

*Names have been changed.

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FORMAL AND INFORMAL SOURCES:

- **Public institutions:** This includes the newly (or reinstated) Department of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Evil which has established community committees to guide people on rules and regulations from the DfA (as illustrated in Story 2).
- **Health:** This includes doctors, vaccination centres, and general healthcare providers that share information about hospitals, vaccines, diseases, medical needs via official channels. The health sector is also one of the few where women can still work and obtain information (see Story 4).
- **Humanitarian sector:** This includes large and small NGOs and local civil society organisation (CSO). Humanitarian organisations provide information about humanitarian assistance and sometimes hold effective informational workshops.
- **Religious and traditional structures influence the flow of information.** The data confirms the importance of schools and training centres as a location where information on various topics is shared – from civil status, to security, to coping strategies. The closure of educational facilities thus diminishes one of the most trusted sources of information.
- **The mosque** is a gathering space and a place for sharing information. It is where district officials go to convey information to the community and to interface with the religious leaders that inform and guide their members.
- **Local councils, shuras, and alley representatives** (who represent a particular neighbourhood) are influential as they act as a bridge between the government and communities, and also interact with the private and public sectors. They are often the frontline for information and act as intermediaries between communities and humanitarian organisations. They also engage actively with religious leaders.
- **Schools, teachers, and madrasas (religious schools) offer mutually beneficial exchanges of information.** One teacher in a focus group discussion said that her main sources of information were her students and their families. Some teachers and madrasas go beyond sharing the required information to offering workshops for girls on health, for example, or offering a safe space for girls and IDPs. Women often said they triangulated information accessed via formal sources (TV or radio) and informal sources (their homes, their communities) within the school system.

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CASE STUDY: SOCIAL MEDIA IN AFGHANISTAN AND THE IMPACTS FROM POLITICAL SHIFTS

This case study is an adaptive summary of findings from a research study carried out by Internews report on the dynamics of social media use in Afghanistan post August 2021[16]. The primary study was conducted via digital platforms and social media channels between March and April 2022 and surveyed 1,600 social media users, with 61 in depth interviews across all 34 provinces of Afghanistan.

SOCIAL MEDIA USE IN AFGHANISTAN

Social media continues to be popular post-DfA takeover and is frequently used by people in Afghanistan to access critical information. The most popular social media channels are Facebook and WhatsApp, cited as frequently used platforms by more than 90% of respondents. Afghan social media users put most trust in the information provided on the social media pages of international media organisations, artists, academic and sports figures, and local media agencies. While this data was collected in 2021, there is evidence to suggest social media use has further decreased as people struggle to afford connections – especially women.

Sixty-eight percent of the Afghans surveyed said they always used social media to talk with friends and relatives; to follow local developments (58%); for education and training (57%); learning new skills (54%); and reading news from Afghan (54%) and international (51%) news outlets. Social media is also used by businesses and government agencies to launch campaigns, advocacy initiatives, and public service announcements[17]. Gender and age determine access; women and girls have less access than men and boys, and older people with more disposable income have more access to both technologies and digital spaces. **While respondents spend significant amounts of time on social media, the public sharing of information on these platforms is relatively low.** Almost one third of all participants (30%) reported publicly posting on social media only two to three times per month, and less than a quarter (19%) said they post publicly 2-3 times a day. Social media platforms are predominantly used to receive information from public channels or for private communication.

Less than a year prior to the government takeover, the research found that through social media, Afghan people behaved quite differently regarding the consumption and sharing of information, but also reacting to and sharing information further in their networks. There was more space for public discussion. The growth of social media had gradually helped women to raise their voices and be heard in public space, empowering them to express their views, wishes, and goals freely while remaining anonymous.

Even prior to the DfA's takeover, the legitimacy of information received via social media was questionable due to low media literacy and poor governance of social media, leading to ethnic tensions, misinformation, and propaganda.

CHANGES IN USE SINCE POLITICAL POWER SHIFT

Since the DfA assumed power, it has become more difficult for people to access certain types of information on social media. Social media users, including those working for media agencies locally, refrain from publishing certain types of information online. This includes political statements, information about conflict and violence, information about sexual abuse, and negative comments about the DfA. The prevalence of self-censorship negatively influenced the type of information available. Accessible information tends to focus instead on social, cultural, and religious topics and events which the DfA views as uncontroversial. While the DfA banned the use of TikTok in April 2022, the regime has not restricted the public use of other social media channels[18]. Some media houses have closed their TV and radio operations and moved to online channels to be able to continue interacting with their audiences, for example the Afghanistan Women's News Agency and Mandegar Daily.

Social media users and local media have adapted their online behaviour due to fear of retaliation from the DfA. Since the DfA took power, many people stopped using social media[19]. Nearly one third of survey participants (32%) reported having stopped using at

16. Internews, 2022 "Dynamics of social media use in Afghanistan post August 2021". This research remains an unpublished, internal study.

17. FGIZ & ATR Consulting, 2014; Orfani, 2020; Mahdi, 2021.

18. Internews, 2022 "Dynamics of social media use in Afghanistan post August 2021". This research remains an unpublished, internal study.

19. This finding was also supported by research from the BBC, 2021; Reporters Without Borders, 2021; and Human Rights Watch, 2021.

CASE STUDY: SOCIAL MEDIA IN AFGHANISTAN AND THE IMPACTS FROM POLITICAL SHIFTS

••• least one messenger application, and almost half (42%) said they have stopped using social media altogether. Social media users reported changing their online behaviour in several ways: reducing the number of posts published; reducing interaction; changing the tone of text and speech; deleting earlier posts that could be seen as sensitive; changing usernames, profile photos, and identities; and refraining from tagging close friends in certain kinds of posts. Participants also changed the topics they discussed on social media. All mentioned self-censorship in the production and publishing of social media content. Some media partners also stopped using social media altogether.

In addition to fear of retaliation, study participants noted family restrictions or the feeling that it is 'useless' to share information as reasons for changing their online behaviour[20]. Nearly one third (30%) of participants in the online survey also reported having been directly identified and threatened anonymously on social media, whilst around a fifth (19%) were threatened or harmed in person due to their comments on social media platforms.

There is an increased demand for

locally relevant news, but DfA restrictions make the gathering of independent and critical news very difficult. Media actors across Afghanistan reported an increased appetite for news and information concerning developments in the country, particularly on social media. However, online censorship means that critical information is not available to audiences. Media agencies also risk grave consequences if they cover issues related to sexual health, feature female journalists without a face-covering, publish in a manner deemed too liberal, or cover controversial topics like women's protests. Whilst social media channels often offer more information than traditional media outlets, freedom of speech on these platforms is limited as DfA officials monitor them. Many people in the country, including journalists, citizens, and ex-government officials, risk their lives daily to provide critical information to citizens. In a bid to operate safely, some media agencies have substantially revised the administration of their social media channels.

Afghan journalists also practise self-censorship online, using terminology and concepts 'imposed' by the regime. As one publisher reported: *"We once used the word 'suicide' in the news. We were called directly by the Ministry of Interior, and the Taliban told us that we can no longer use the word 'suicide'. We should use 'martyr' instead. The Taliban interfere in the way words are used and try to change the media according to their ideology."* The regime's editorial control distorts the content and credibility of available information.

CHANGES IN TRUST

In general, very few information providers are shown as being 'always' trusted to share accurate information on social media. International media outlets (42%) were most often cited as 'always' trusted, followed by social media accounts of famous artists, athletes, and scientific figures (34%), official government accounts (33%), journalists' personal accounts (32%); and Afghan media organisations (31%). All but international media outlets were cited as 'always' providing reliable information by only about one third of study participants. **International media outlets still inspire the most trust:** 95% of study participants cited them as 'always' or 'sometimes' (53%) trustworthy. Information published on social media by foreign and domestic NGOs is found to be 'always' or 'sometimes'

trustworthy by 80% of those surveyed. Due to changing levels of trust in the media and the lack of coverage about certain topics, citizens seek information in different ways. Participants reported an increased reliance on eyewitnesses, friends, and relatives.

IMPACTS ON VULNERABLE GROUPS

Women and girls are disproportionately affected by developments in the country and face additional challenges to accessing information due to gendered restrictions on social media use. The online behaviour of women and girls is more restricted under DfA rule, and information on critical developments and events concerning women is often no longer available in mass media or on publicly facing social media platforms. Women using social media said that families and friends have advised them not to or banned them from using social media outright out of concerns for their safety or on religious grounds.

DIASPORA USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO SHARE INFORMATION AND RAISE AWARENESS

Outside the country, **diaspora influencers** provide a critical pathway for information they can access and verify, •••

20. This was also reported by The Hindu, 2021; BBC 2021.

CASE STUDY: SOCIAL MEDIA IN AFGHANISTAN AND THE IMPACTS FROM POLITICAL SHIFTS

••• diaspora influencers share via social media networks. Many in the diaspora recognize the information void in Afghanistan and have strived to increase access to information for citizens in-country. These efforts are crucial, they say, as social media is replete with misinformation and fake news. They see it as their responsibility to spread accurate and helpful information. Members of the diaspora, including social media influencers, say they often use social media platforms like X and Facebook to comment on current events and provide practical solutions to people in-country using hashtags in Pashto, English, and Dari. WhatsApp provides another channel for Afghan activists and journalists-in-exile to communicate with one another and those still in Afgha-nistan.

Diaspora communities noted that the lack of information coming out from Afghanistan negatively impacts upon the international community's understanding of the situation in-country. The information that does make it out of Afghanistan is extremely limited and difficult to verify.

THE DfA USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The DfA boasts a strong online presence[21]. The group's first official website dates to 2005[22] and it has since leveraged social media to spread its ideology and to monitor and control the digital behaviour of Afghans[23]. Initially, the DfA used social media to promote embellished, sensationalist accounts of their military victories and condemn the policies and practices of the west. Aside from removing excessively violent posts, social media companies did not begin censoring or banning their propaganda until 2014, when they came under severe public scrutiny to ban posts from the Islamic State. Despite bans placed by Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok on the DfA, numerous unofficial accounts and fake profiles continued to exist.

Since assuming power in August of 2021, the DfA's communication strategies on social media have shifted and broadened to advance their credibility and to gain the confidence of Afghan citizens. Most communications target the Afghan public and focus on the economy, the military/police, and the workings of the government. They are published in Pashto, with some appearing in Dari and English too. However, Pashto is the main language of communication, which limits access to information for non-Pashto speakers.

Social media companies like Facebook have coupled bans on DfA content with efforts to bolster protection measures for its users in Afghanistan. Due to growing concerns about the security of social media users, Facebook created user profile safeguards to protect its users in Afghanistan and to prevent the DfA from accessing account information of citizens[24]. Twitter/X and LinkedIn also provide security coverage for accounts in the country[25]. Twitter/X has become the most popular platform for political dialogue between Afghan diaspora social media users[26].

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21. www.researchgate.net/publication/331220278_The_Taliban%27s_Use_of_the_Internet_Social_Media_Video_Radio_Stations_and_Graffiti

22. Internews, 2022 "Dynamics of social media use in Afghanistan post August 2021". This research remains an unpublished, internal study.

23. Ibid. ; https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/aug/24/tech-savvy-taliban-afghanistan-propaganda-fundraising-recruitment

24. BBC, 2021.

25. Reuters, 2021.

26. Howk, 2022.

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LEVELS OF TRUST, RUMOURS, AND MISINFORMATION

ROLE OF TRUST

Understanding the dynamics of trust in information sharing is crucial for identifying challenges and opportunities to deliver information and services to communities in need. Literature surrounding trust acknowledges that "mutual [learning] and understanding is greatly facilitated by trust-based networks."[27] People within trust-based networks are more willing to exchange without reservations, feel a lower sense of risk, and to relate to one another. The influence of trust-based networks on the flow and use of information can also be understood as "social trust", a concept identified by Internews as a dimension of analysis by which to assess information ecosystems.[28]

Trust can be formed via proximity because it allows for people to develop more in-person interactions and they are more likely to have pre-existing shared experiences, practices, or values. For example, in previous research during the pandemic, Internews showed how community health workers were more likely to be trusted to provide health information than doctors because of that close community connection and shared experience.[29] In the same sense, mistrust can also form because of "perceived differences", i.e., assuming someone or something is not trustworthy because of a lack of shared identity or connection.[30] Besides personal (or cultural) proximity, trust can also be formed through consistency and proven reliability, especially in contexts of conflict where trust breaks down when the opposite occurs and where misinformation and unpredictability are prevalent. The increasing lack of trust and presence of rumours surrounding humanitarian services in Afghanistan is one of these instances, where trust is declining due to a lack of reliable information.

TRUST IN MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Public perception is that the DfA uses TV and social media to share information with the public. *"99 percent of information is shared by the Taliban through social media and TV channels because people do not have time to reach out to local authorities and community leaders to receive information."*[31]

More than half of all respondents reported that their trust in state media, both TV and radio, has decreased since August 2021. This is true for both men and women, though the decline in trust was more frequently reported by women. There were no statistically significant differences between urban, peri-urban, and rural samples. It is worth noting that 1 in 4 men said their trust in both state TV and radio had increased. This indicates a degree of polarisation in attitudes impacted by two specific features: **having received secondary or tertiary education** (this is associated with lower trust in state media) and **having been displace**d (this rendered Afghans slightly more likely to report increased trust in state-owned radio, but not TV).

27. Nilsson, M. 2019. "Proximity and the trust formation process" in European Planning Studies Vol 27, No. 5, pp 841-861.

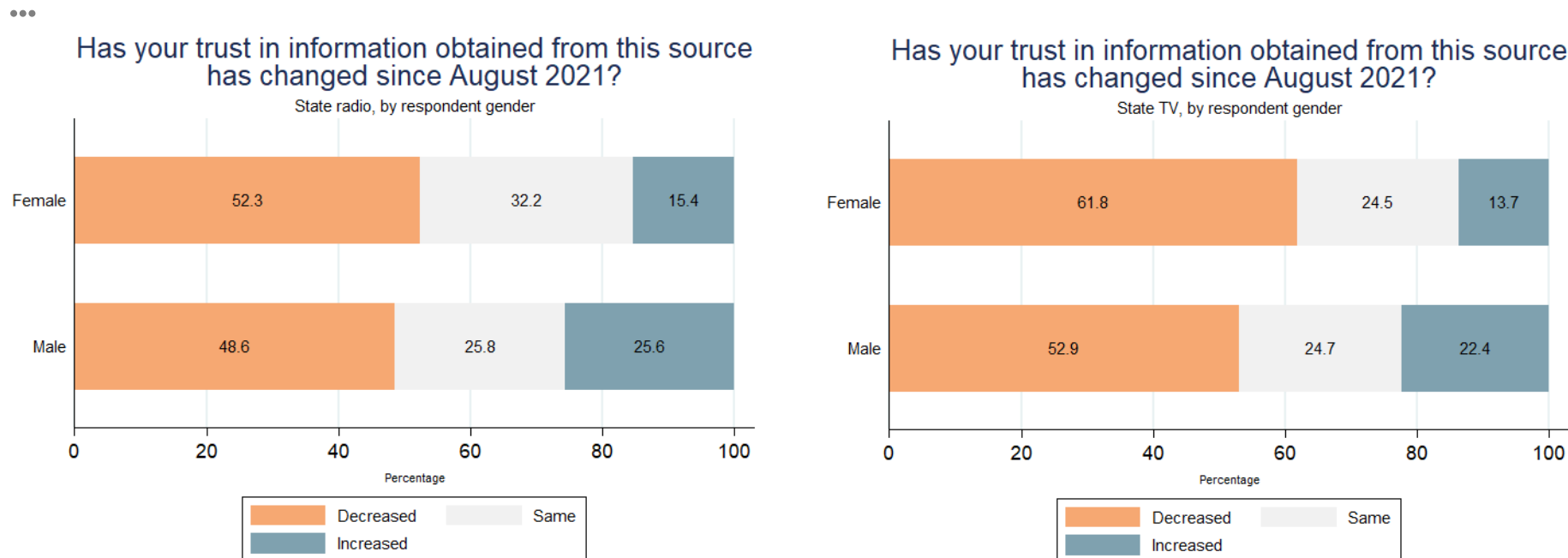28. Internews, May 25, 2015. "Why information matters: a foundation for resilience".

29. Diversity, Distance, and Distrust: Information Dynamics in Afghanistan during the COVID-19 Pandemic", *Information Saves Lives | Internews,* March 2021.

30. Nilsson, M. 2019. "Proximity and the trust formation process" in European Planning Studies Vol 27, No. 5, pp 841-861.

31. R3, FGD1, Herat, Property dealer, male

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Has your trust in information obtained from this source has changed since August 2021?

State radio, by respondent gender

	Decreased	Same	Increased
Female	52.3	32.2	15.4
Male	48.6	25.8	25.6

Has your trust in information obtained from this source has changed since August 2021?

State TV, by respondent gender

	Decreased	Same	Increased
Female	61.8	24.5	13.7
Male	52.9	24.7	22.4

There was substantial variation in trust in state TV and radio channels across regions. Respondents in Badakhshan and Takhar were most likely to report that their trust in state television and radio has decreased since August 2021. In Kandahar, respondents reported substantial deterioration in trust in state radio, but the decline in trust in state television was similar to that in other provinces.

Respondents reported similar levels of decline in trust in private TV and radio channels. Trust among women deteriorated more substantially than among men. Respondents in Badakhshan (88%), Takhar (81%) and Kandahar (66%) reported the highest decline in trust in private television and radio, similar to deterioration levels in state media.

Trust in both online news and social media also decreased, although less than state-owned and private TV and radio. This is in part because respondents do not consider – at least not yet – that social media is being regulated or controlled by the government. They see the government as a user of social media, like themselves. However, one key tipping point was the month of March 2022 when the government announced on social media that schools would re-open, but they did not. This had a significant impact on people's trust in social media. Men more frequently reported losing trust in online news websites (43%) than women (34%), but the decline in trust in social media was similar for both genders. There were no significant variations between urban, rural, or peri-urban locations. Social media is frequently used but not as trusted because of the ease with which people can make fake claims on social media. Facebook is frequently used for example, *"I mostly use Facebook myself although I don't trust it much"*, indicating that **accessibility does not equate to trust**[32].
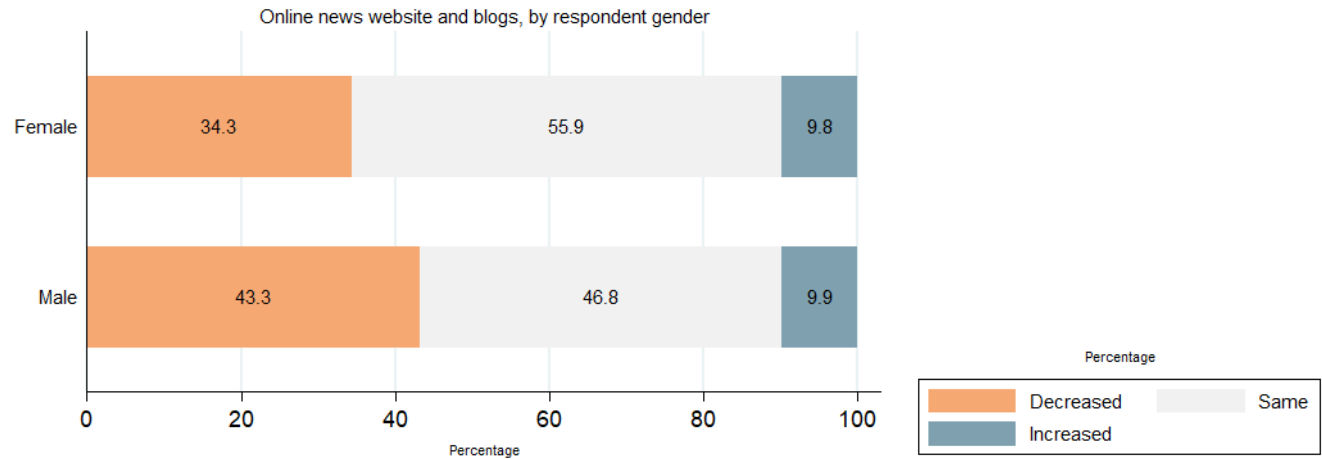
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32. FGD1 Nangarhar

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The source which has best maintained trust was word of mouth, i.e., family, friends and surrounding community. In fact, **word of mouth is the only source that women have not lost trust in.** 1 in 4 women reported increased trust in word of mouth, the highest increase comparative to other sources. This suggests that many women have lost trust in formal information sources, turning instead to the community to receive information. Low levels of trust in other channels of information also explains why so many respondents reported relying on word of mouth, especially among women (see *Sources of information* above).
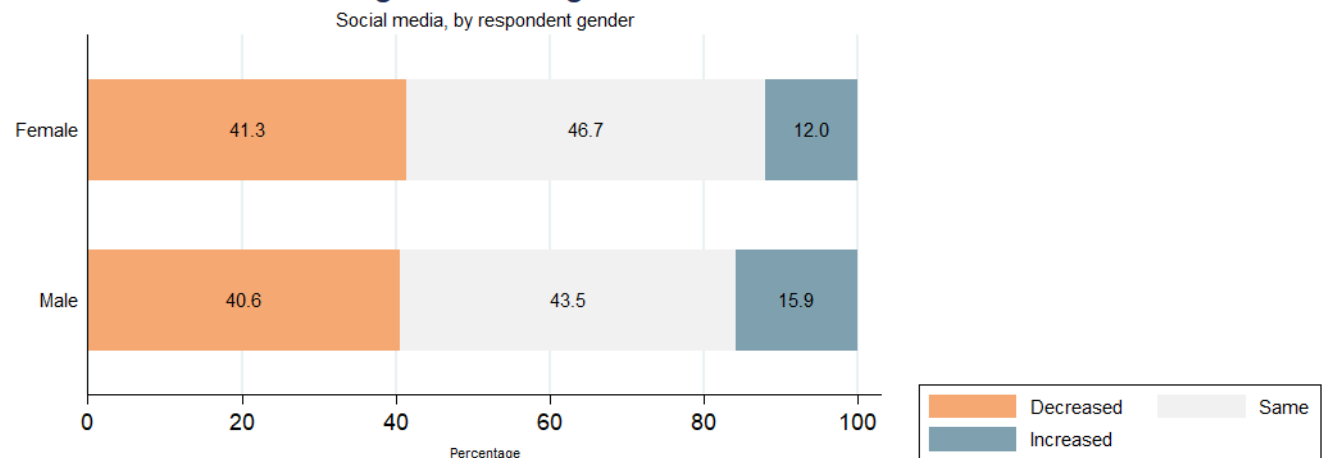
The wide range of formal and informal sources complicates the ability of people to verify the information they consume. Women especially are at risk of protection concerns if they do not receive accurate information. Some participants explained societal restrictions play as much of a role as political restrictions. *"Men underestimate women's abilities to verify, analyse, and communicate information because they view women as unable to be educated and incapable of performing important activities in the community."*[33]

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Has your trust in information obtained from this source has changed since August 2021?

Online news website and blogs, by respondent gender

Has your trust in information obtained from this source has changed since August 2021?
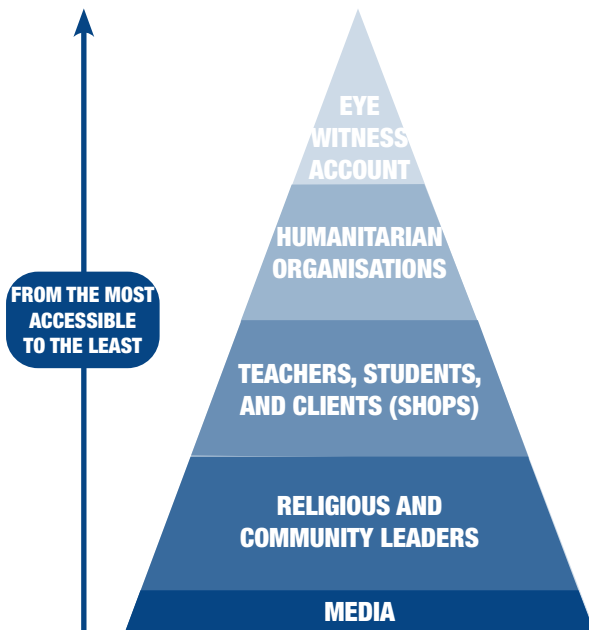
Social media, by respondent gender

33. FGD1 Nangarhar

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Women verify, analyse, and communicate information within the restrictions they currently face. Women rely on informal spaces like bakeries, home visits, and beauty salons (now closed) to gossip and exchange information. It is thus essential to understand how these networks function and how information is verified.

This pyramid visualises sources of information, from most accessible (media) to the least accessible (eye-witness accounts, first-hand information). It is worth noting that humanitarian organisations are the second to last most accessible source of information.

FROM THE MOST ACCESSIBLE TO THE LEAST

EYE WITNESS ACCOUNT

HUMANITARIAN ORGANISATIONS

TEACHERS, STUDENTS, AND CLIENTS (SHOPS)

RELIGIOUS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

MEDIA

PEOPLE TRUST RESULTS
AND WHAT THEY SEE FIRST-HAND

According to the Internews Trust Analytical Framework, **proximity is a key factor determining trust**[34]**.** People tend to verify information with their own trusted sources, whether this is the media or personal networks. People often trust information from their family members or friends. However, they are suspicious of gossip exchanged in places like bakeries if it is information from someone they do not. For this reason, people verify information with multiple sources. Proximity also extends to community representatives. Alley representatives, who represent a block or neighbourhood, were more often trusted than council leaders because they are seen as closer to the community.

People will trust sources that reflect their reality. When the media does not portray the very real and current security threats people face daily basis, trust in that source reduces.

Religious and community leaders are information intermediaries between authorities and communities. In Afghanistan, mosques are both a place of worship and gathering, where many go to seek information. Participants discussed trusting formal (imams) and informal (mullahs) religious leaders and community representatives. People go to them to verify information they heard on the radio or because they know of people in need of humanitarian assistance and want them to be referred to NGOs.

There are strong ties between students, teachers, clients, and colleagues. The same relationship dynamics and proximities exist in other community settings, like between students and teachers, between colleagues, or students and their peers. Many people said they trust their colleagues more than clients, who can share a lot of rumours. Nevertheless, lots of information is exchanged through clientele (i.e., in beauty

or barber shops which have since been shut down for women since the time of this research).

Despite relationships of trust, people exercise caution and verify information with multiple sources before fully accepting it. Teachers even have been known to encourage information literacy. *"As a teacher, I educate my students not to have dogmatic opinions and to avoid considering their ideas as absolute truth. Furthermore, people are verifying information by contacting other sources and cross-checking it."*[35] The ability to cross-check and analyse information is influenced by socio-economic background as it determines one's time to dedicate to verifying information and educational access to do so.

Education is also a reason for trust. For example, many people trust doctors because they raise awareness of important health issues. Educated individuals were described as sources of guidance, also in part because educated people verify information too. Educated people said they trust peer-reviewed journals and other sources.

Trust in the governing authority varies. Sometimes, authorities are considered helpful and collaborative on administrative matters, like getting a work permit. Others are not trusted because of their association with the DfA.

Trust in humanitarian organisations has decreased, largely because of the reduced sense of proximity with aid organisations. Humanitarian organisations are trusted

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34. Internews. "Trust Analytical Framework - Information Saves Lives." Internews, August 8, 2023. https://internews.org/resource/trust-analytical-framework/.

35. SSI 2 Herat, Male, Religious Leader

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as entities themselves, but their information and processes are not. Respondents specifically noted a decrease in the presence of humanitarian organisations. People reported receiving and then verifying information from humanitarian organisations with the groups identified above (friends, family, community and religious leaders, peers at work or school). Humanitarians are also not always considered effective in communities. This is partially due to the lack of communication and general community knowledge surrounding their processes. *"I am not aware of the criteria used to identify deserving households, as the community council and leader of the community are responsible for this process. I am uncertain what kind of information is shared with them and how they make decisions on distributing assistance packages.*[36] *"*

People frequently claimed that aid is not distributed fairly. People also believe local staff are hired based on nepotism and that these staff prioritise their relatives for humanitarian assistance. Whether intentional or not, this exemplifies a severe lack of communication and trust regarding information about crucial humanitarian services, a lack of knowledge (or faith in) about formal complaints processes and a need to clarify the process of information sharing in this setting. Mis-

communication about humanitarian services is related to both inefficient processes of sharing information between different actors (leaders and community members) and to the falling trust in traditional media, as advisories about aid delivery are often discussed on TV and radio news.

The trust in channels varies by location based on two levels of influence: the location where the news is coming from and the location in Afghanistan where the recipients live.

Trust in international sources. For those who have access to it, satellite TV tends to be more trusted as it brings a variety of information and some international stations. Antenna TV is accessed in more rural areas but is often censored. *"Since the Taliban seized power, we cannot trust local media because it is controlled by the Taliban."* Lack of affiliation or allegiance to the DfA, or any other group in power, influences reliability and trust. *"I trust traditional media sources, including international media outlets, because they are reliable and do not provide inaccurate information to maintain their credibility. Additionally, to compete with other media outlets, they have to provide transparent and unbiased information and do not belong to a particular group of people, which makes them a credible source of information."*[37]

Place of residency matters: Many in Kabul trust Afghanistan International because it is based outside of Afghanistan, while people in Nangarhar/Jalalabad do not as trust it as much, with some believing it is "the devil" because of perceived rumours and exaggerations in their reporting. The phenomenon of "fake news" was also discussed, with people noting an increase of exaggerated sensationalist reporting on TV which they felt was designed to make the situation seem better than it actually is. *"They were not sharing this many lies before, but now they are sharing more false information. They are doing this to show the world and others that there is nothing wrong here. People*

cannot afford their two meals, but then they say that everything is fine. There should be true media broadcasters in the country who share true information with people."

IDENTIFYING THE "AUTHORITIES": DISENGAGEMENT AND CENSORSHIP

Decision makers ➡ When people do not trust the government, they turn to alternative authorities. Community leaders share information on regulations, doctors provide healthcare information, and heads of households communicate with the local leaders to inform their families. Although the last resort for lack of visible results, people turn to the police if local council leaders cannot reach consensus about an issue.

Disengagement ➡ Amidst the changes in content on media (news, entertainment, education) and the decline in trust, individuals displayed a general lack of interest in media that did not exist when there was more variety and catered content.

Rumours ➡ Although violence has declined since the DfA came to power, people still need information about security to make decisions about their safety, plan for the future, and make decisions around migration. The decrease in known incidents and makes people nervous for their future stability. Rumours regarding aid delivery have also increased. People increasingly feel the need to verify information, but there is no one trusted source.

Censorship ➡ Increased censorship means it is difficult or dangerous to call out "fake news" if it appears that someone is speaking out against the DfA. Attempts to organise and protest, even via social media networks like WhatsApp, are quelled. ◆

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36. Ibid.

37. R3, FGD 1 Kabul, Student, Female

3. INFORMATION NEEDS

TYPES OF INFORMATION NEEDED, BUT NOT OBTAINED

Respondents were asked what information they need but are not receiving. Women most frequently mentioned that they lack **information on women's rights and gender-related issues** (68%), **jobs and livelihoods** (67%), a**nd education-related news and updates** (67%). This mirrors the recently imposed limitations on women's employment and education, reflecting a decrease in supply but not in demand for more information. Meanwhile, **men reported needing more information on jobs and livelihoods** (64%), followed by information on **development and humanitarian initiatives** (59%).
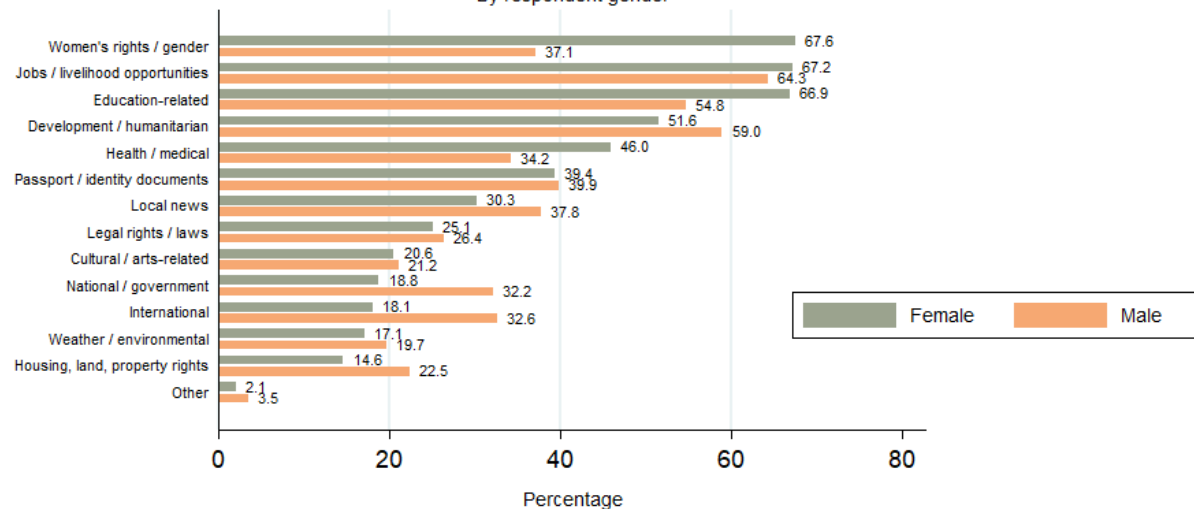
Interviewees in rural areas more frequently reported lacking information compared to their urban and peri-urban counterparts.

Returnees and IDPs lack legal information and information on services. Returnees also more frequently reported needing information on health, along with legal, environmental, and weather-related information. Returnees also most frequently reported lacking information on passport and identity documents.

Older people are less informed and were more likely to report that they lacked information on national/government-related issues. They were also slightly more likely to report lacking information on health, local and international news, women's rights and gender, education, legal rights and laws, culture/arts, weather, and the environment. While variations can be attributed to general tendencies of lower levels of news consumption among the youngest respondents, the results show that information gaps on jobs and livelihoods, education, and women's rights are reported by all age groups.
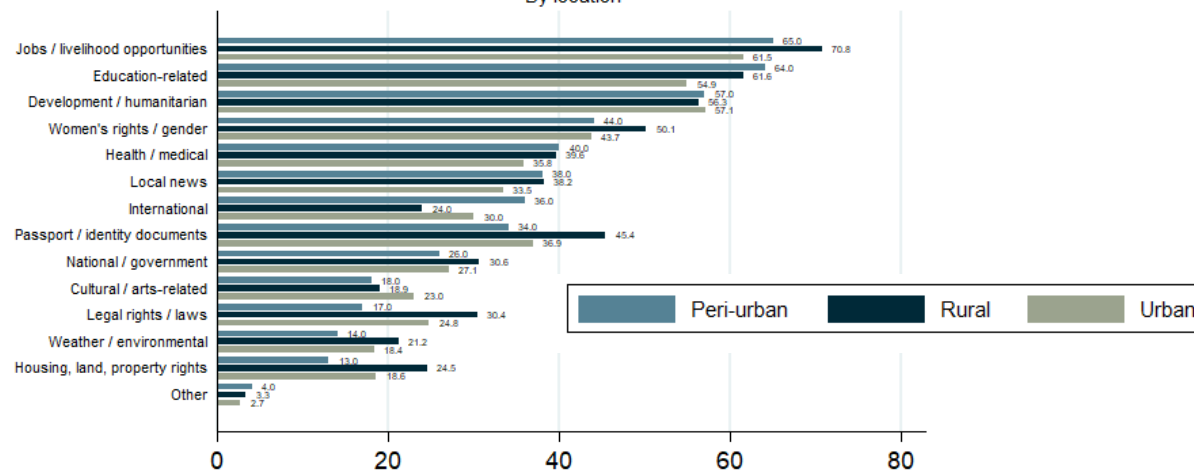

What type of information do you need but are not currently obtaining?
By respondent gender

Category	Female	Male
Women's rights / gender	67.6	37.1
Jobs / livelihood opportunities	67.2	64.3
Education-related	66.9	54.8
Development / humanitarian	51.6	59.0
Health / medical	46.0	34.2
Passport / identity documents	39.4	39.9
Local news	30.3	37.8
Legal rights / laws	25.1	26.4
Cultural / arts-related	20.6	21.2
National / government	18.8	32.2
International	18.1	32.6
Weather / environmental	17.1	19.7
Housing, land, property rights	14.6	22.5
Other	2.1	3.5

Percentage

What type of information do you need but are not currently obtaining?
By location

Category	Peri-urban	Rural	Urban
Jobs / livelihood opportunities	65.0	70.8	61.5
Education-related	64.0	61.6	54.9
Development / humanitarian	57.0	56.3	57.1
Women's rights / gender	44.0	50.1	43.7
Health / medical	40.0	39.6	35.8
Local news	38.0	38.2	33.5
International	36.0	24.0	30.0
Passport / identity documents	34.0	45.4	36.9
National / government	26.0	30.6	27.1
Cultural / arts-related	18.0	23.0	18.9
Legal rights / laws	17.0	30.4	24.8
Weather / environmental	14.0	21.2	18.4
Housing, land, property rights	13.0	24.5	18.6
Other	4.0	2.7	3.3

STORY 3. TUNING IN FOR GOOD NEWS...THAT IS YET TO COME

Abbas, Inayatullah, Abdul-Raof, Jan Muhammad, and Qudrat Khan* are all middle-aged and older residents of Alaskan, a rural village in Kabul Province. While they come from different backgrounds, they all reminisce while deploring the current state of their lives.

"There are no jobs, and I stay home all day. I have tried many ways to survive; for example, I called my friends in Khost province, asking for a job. They said it was all the same! There are no jobs even there," said Abdul-Raof

None of them have a smartphone. Abbas used to, but he had to sell it along with his television to buy food for himself and his family. The friends either rely on televisions or traditional community systems to access information. They all use the radio on their simple Nokia phones.

Jan Muhammad tunes in daily at 6PM to hear the news. He mainly tunes in with the hope of hearing the good news, more specifically that the DfA has resumed the distribution of retirement pensions. He worked hard for his through his service as a military officer but received nothing. However, the radio hardly brings good news, if

they can tune in at all. The remoteness of Alaskan means he often struggles with signal, leaving him just one radio channel to listen to, if at all. *"The only radio waves we can receive belong to the Tolo channel."*

Inayutallah, the youngest of the group, prefers to use the internet to access information but struggles to do so because of cost and low bandwidth.

Trust in media has decreased following the fall of the previous government. In the past, TVs were more trusted given their visual advantage over the radio or word of mouth. *"Hearing is not like observing. Once you see something, you can accept that. And if a TV broadcasts news, it is authentic and acceptable because it has high credit and authenticity,"* said Abdul-Raof. But now they see that the stories on the TV don't match their reality anymore.

For Qudrat Khan, the problem is that no one covers their community. *"We are just consumers of the media; we watch and hear their programs, but no one like you ever comes here and asks about our problems and needs. Many NGOs working in the country have yet to come to*

our community. If the media came to our community, they could raise our voices about our problems and plead".

Regarding engagement with NGOs, some of the men said they were not aware of feedback mechanisms, but Abdul-Raof spoke of frustrated attempts at communication. *"In the past, we tried sending letters and making phone calls but it did not work and they did not pay attention. So, we gave up. We were disappointed. I can show you my phone's call log. We have contact 10 or 15 NGOs on WhatsApp, but they ignore us. So, we gave up on them. We tried the formal and informal ways, but nothing worked."*

Although the five friends can rely on their local council to mediate and relay community issues to decision-makers, they said it is not enough. They want more media coverage, an NGO presence, and communication with them to transmit their voices to those capable of making a difference. They recommend an *"information system or medium on which they could research employment and market opportunities."*
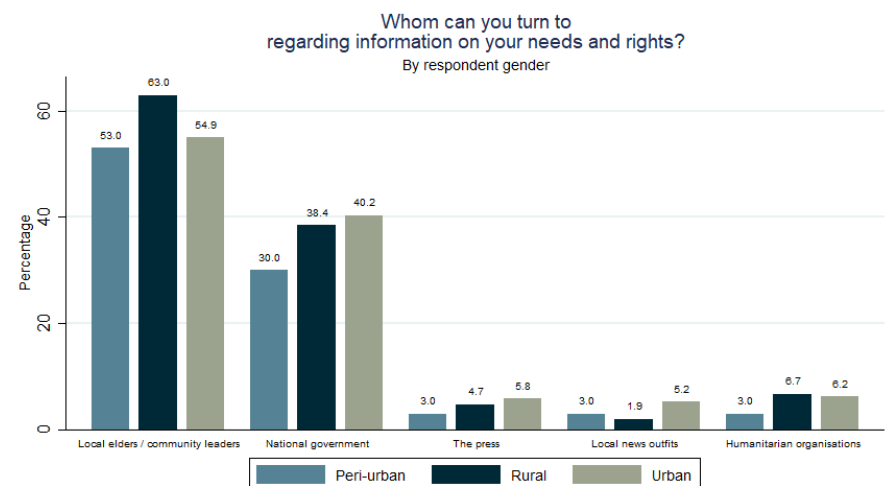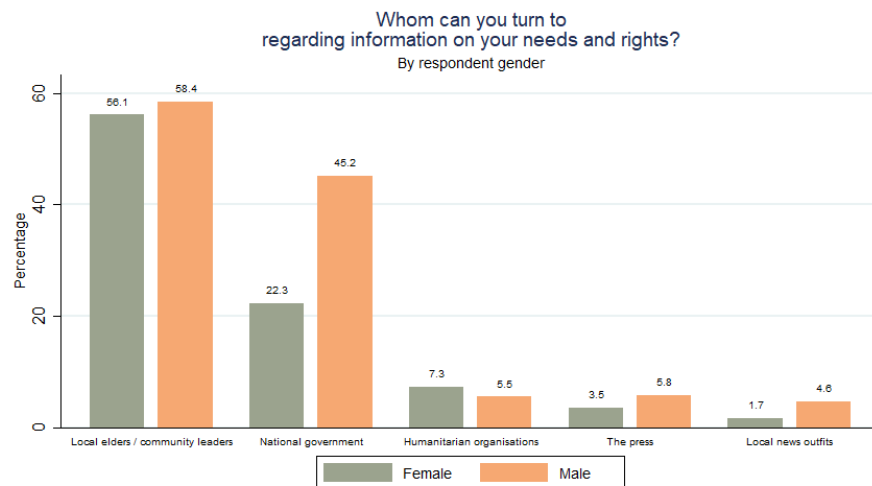
WHERE AFGHANS TURN TO FILL INFORMATION GAPS

When asked who people turn to when they need to fill information gaps, most respondents regardless of locations or gender, said **local elders or community leaders** (58%). This was followed by the national government. Notably, men were twice as likely to turn to the government than women. In comparison, **few reported they would trust humanitarian organisations, the press or local news representatives** to communicate information on their rights and needs.

Interviewees in **peri-urban locations were less likely to trust institutions** than their urban and rural counterparts, especially community leaders and the national government. This may be because peri-urban populations have less established rapport with local as well as national institutions in comparison to urban and rural populations. Peri-urban areas also tend to include more members from underprivileged and displaced groups that live on the outskirts of cities to access urban services.

Whom can you turn to
regarding information on your needs and rights?
By respondent gender

Whom can you turn to
regarding information on your needs and rights?
By respondent gender

Returnees were more likely that IDPs or people who had never been displaced to turn to community elders, community leaders, and the national government. Both returnees and IDPs were more likely to turn to humanitarian organisations, probably because they were most likely to have previously engaged with humanitarians. ♦

Whom can you turn to
regarding information on your needs and rights?
By displacement status
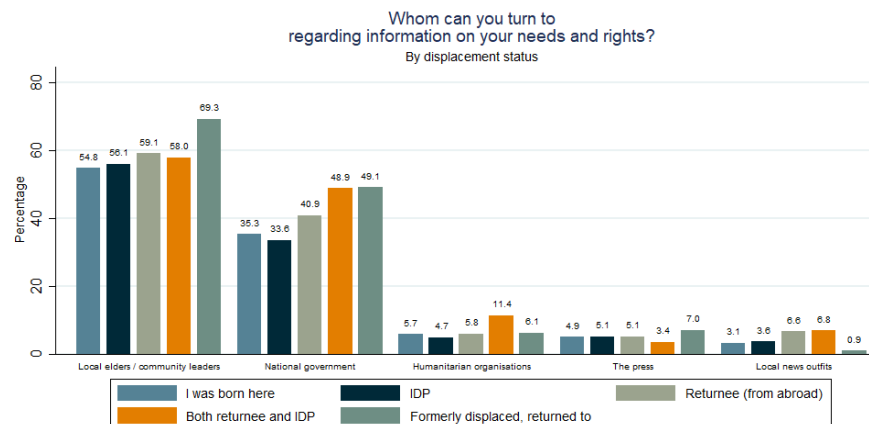
4. HUMANITARIAN COMMUNICATION

People rely more on informal sources of information (i.e., personal and professional networks) than on traditional media and government sources. **Humanitarian organisations fall somewhere in between.** This reveals a contradiction in the aid system: while in many ways provision of international aid and access to geographic areas in need has increased after August 2021, the effectiveness and efficiency of that aid has likely decreased in the perceptions of many Afghans. The majority of respondents expressed frustrations with existing methods of aid delivery. They disagree with beneficiary-selection and feel the communications of assistance has been unclear and inconsistent. This was found in a previous Internews study too. *"Some organisations have come to our aid and provided assistance, while others have not been able to help."*[38]

In addition, throughout the course of this study, **respondents said they share their problems with local authorities before reaching out to humanitarian organisations.** They also said they do not feel they can reach out to humanitarians for help. Instead, requests for assistance, complaints, and feedback take place at the community level via traditional networks of hierarchical leadership. It is important to note, however, that not all issues can be raised to local leaders. Personal or taboo issues are unlikely to be reported to local leaders, leaving them unreported and unaddressed.

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38. FGD 3, Male

The lack of direct communication with aid organisations is a concern shared by respondents, who described the procedures they had to rely on as the following:
Individuals ➡ other community members ➡ council leaders/ elders/ community representatives (Shura) ➡district office ➡ local authorities or aid organisations

For example, people in villages or towns go to their local councils and elders with concerns or for a decision about a subject. The council elders decide on a path collectively and if the issue is not resolved, they escalate it to a district office, who then escalates it to local authorities or aid organisations on the communities' behalf. The councils are composed of different committees, report to different higher authorities, and work with aid organisations. When community councils cannot resolve an issue or requests are left unheard, community members can send a letter directly to the relevant authorities and lodge a complaint, but local leaders are preferred as mediators.

BOX 2. RUMOURS ABOUT AID

The deteriorating livelihoods of the population along with a lack of transparency and understanding of aid distribution criteria, limited aid, aid diversion, and a mismatch between promises and delivery have led to an increase in rumours around aid.

The most common rumour is that community leaders and other representatives redirect aid and favour their friends and relatives during selection processes. Many rumours stem from households who did not received aid but felt they were entitled to it. Such situations can be attributed in part to a lack of clear communication on selection criteria, though there is evidence that aid diversion does exist.

In some cases, respondents said their local councils requested documen-tation from them to receive aid, but the aid was never delivered and they were not given a reason why. *"When Shuras contacted us for humanitarian assistance, I promptly sent them our tazkira, but unfortunately, we have yet to receive any aid. Even when we visit their offices, there are only rumours and no concrete assistance."* Many said if they have an aid card, they will be entitled to aid regardless of the situation.

Word-of-mouth and social media were most blamed for many of the rumours surrounding aid distribution. *"Word-of-mouth is not trusted in our community because in recent years, there have been lots of rumours about aid distribution. People were saying, for example, WFP is distributing food assistance for those who have COVID-19 vaccination cards,* *but when we took those to the WFP warehouse, it was false news."*

The lack of information, transparency, and understanding of selection criteria only furthers the spread of rumours. Haroon a 37 year old man from Nangarhar, said *"there have been rumours that an NGO said they would provide housing for those who have returned from abroad, but that is not true because there are some families who returned to the country from Pakistan after the collapse [of the former government] but they have not received any such aid, and the same can be said of those who are deported from Iran and Turkey"* (FGD1 N). While some returnees do receive shelter and reintegration assistance, people receive incomplete information which then becomes rumours.

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Community councils serve as a bridge between the authorities and the population and are seen as the resolution to most community problems. Community leaders are also relied upon for their first-hand knowledge of the community. These council mechanisms were the main method of feedback engagement under the previous government. While they remain essential in the information ecosystem, many councils have been dissolved by the DfA, and along with that has been the dissolution of the public's trust.

The decrease in trust stems from the belief that the councils do not relay the information or share back information accurately. One interviewee shared a time he believed his family's aid was misallocated. *"My father received fertiliser and seeds through an NGO. When the community council found out, they seized the aid and told my father they were going to sell the fertiliser and seeds to repair the local mosque. My father called the NGO and they referred the issue to the government office In our district. They reached out to our community and provided my father with the aid."*[39]

COMPLAINTS AND FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

Despite humanitarian organisations in Afghanistan having set up a variety of complaint and feedback mechanisms (CFMs), people are unsatisfied in the current feedback mechanisms. At present, there is only one national feedback mechanism provider for the humanitarian system, the Awaaz hotline, "a humanitarian helpline connecting Afghans (IDPs, returnees) and refugees affected by conflict and natural disaster with information on assistance".[40] Individual humanitarian organisations also have feedback mechanisms in place.

By sector standards, a CFM is seen as functional and effective if it at minimum collects feedback, acknowledges and analyses it, and takes action to address the community's issues.[41] However, **communities interviewed said there is a lack of information about how to use CFMs and how to contact humanitarians, resulting in communities giving up (see Story 3). Participants said it was difficult to access feedback mechanisms and provide feedback, and they felt disappointed by the lack of resolution when they were able to do so.** For example, some said phone numbers provided did not work or did not result in any change. *"When I contacted 410, they either did not respond or said that it was not their responsibility and directed me to contact refugee camp organisations. The situation can be quite challenging, and sometimes even when we try to help others, it can be difficult."*

The overall limitations on freedom of expression have also contributed to a decrease in people's willingness to use CFMs. This has pushed communities to rely on their own networks of trust to offer feedback and complaints. Building feedback mechanisms on existing functioning structures, both formal and informal, could build trust and more effective communication.

IMPACT ON PEOPLE'S LIFE DECISIONS

The Afghans who participated in this study were consistently frustrated, disappointed, and confused by discrepancies between information and reality regarding humanitarian assistance. Many said humanitarian organisations do not cater to the actual needs of the population and that processes determining who receives aid are unfair. This is in part due to lack of clarity and transparency in humanitarian processes and a lack of proper communication systems to share accurate information. It is urgent that humanitarian actors address these issues given the current context. People are in dire need of assistance and their trust in systems designed to support them is quickly decreasing.

The miscommunication of information and the perceived and real misallocation of aid to those in need impacts the way people navigate major life decisions, including but not limited to:

Healthcare ➡ With the crackdown on open discussion of women's issues and limitations on women manoeuvring in the public sphere, accessing safe health information is difficult. This is especially true in IDP camps where women and girls are vulnerable at multiple levels, and where health services are limited to NGOs. In interviews, women discussed needing to get operations related to birth issues, cysts that cause severe pain, or issues related to organs shifting due to childbirth. Despite daily pain and discomfort, women are denied permission by their husbands to give birth in hospitals or to operate because their husbands who were worried surgery would affect their ability to have more children. This lack of prioritisation of women's health and lack of bodily autonomy is reinforced by ineffective systems of communication and authority. Women said they do not have a good rapport with the WHO clinics, noting that they cannot speak on the impacts of the political situation with humanitarian organisations. In one example, the woman's husband who refused her access to necessary medical support sits on a community committee,

39. FGD 1 K, Female
40. Awaaz Afghanistan, UNOPS. "410." Awaaz Afghanistan. Accessed August 9, 2023. https://awaazaf.org/
41. Bonino, F. with Jean, I. and P. Knox Clarke. 2014. "Humanitarian feedback mechanisms: research, evidence and guidance". ALNAP Study.

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reinforcing the commonly reiterated feeling among respondents that those representing communities may not always prioritise the needs of all their constituents. This presents a gap in the services offered by the humanitarian organisations and the evident and actual needs of the community. It also highlights gaps in information provision on communicating with communities on the outcomes of medical procedures which ultimately Impact women's health.[42]

Migration ➡ Families decide on whether or not to migrate based on information shared via personal networks or traditional media. This was often discussed in relation to information from the diaspora; people use international news stations, social media, and personal contacts to understand and assess migration options abroad. However, in focus group discussions, people said they do not receive as much information from their relatives abroad as they would like, and they cannot call them as frequently as they want.

Education ➡ Information gaps or lack of accurate information about new regulations impacts people's ability to make timely decisions or prepare for alternatives. The ban on girls' education has not been implemented equally across provinces and in some provinces, there are ways girls can access education, if they know how and have the resources to do so.

STORY 4. A LOCAL TV ANTENNA AND DECISIONS TO MIGRATE

Asmaan* is a 35-year-old cleaner at a hospital in Kabul's 13th district. When she is not busy with work, she discusses news and personal updates with the doctors and patients. She sees these conversations as an essential source of information. Asmaan is illiterate; she especially trusts the doctors because of their education. At home, she relies on her husband and son to provide her with information.

"My only source of information is what I hear from people and doctors. When I come home, I have more time and get more information and news from family members. Because my sons and husband interact with the community daily, they always have things to tell me," she says.

Asmaan cannot read billboards and is reticent about using social media however, she does use Tik Tok, Facebook, and IMO to watch cooking videos and to talk to her son in Iran.

Her family can also only afford a local TV antenna and cannot buy a satellite dish. The local antenna Is one of her primary sources of information. It is through information she received on TV that she decided to migrate to Kabul. *"We came to Kabul from Bamyan province because we saw on TV that the people of the city are very different and comfortable. We also heard that there are more job opportunities in Kabul province, and the people of Kabul have a better lifestyle. One of the other reasons we came here was so that my children could go to school,"* she explains.

Information has also affected decisions about cross-border migration. Because of rumours regarding the treatment of Afghans in Iran and the risks of crossing borders, Asmaan and her family have reconsidered their plans. *"We once planned to go illegally with my family due to unemployment, but I heard through friends and relatives that going via smuggling routes is very dangerous, so we applied for passports. Once we get our passports, we will decide about immigration based on the news and information about the situation of refugees in the country we are considering."*

Like many women in Afghanistan, Asmaan hopes news will soon come that Afghan women can work and access education again. *"I was also happy to hear about the opening of schools on TV. School reopening is a hope for the girls to have a promising future. I don't have a daughter, but when I see the girls of my tribe, neighbours, or my country being deprived of education, I get sad and upset."*

While Asmaan notes that under the DfA, access to information that is neither censored nor controlled by the government has decreased, she says the most significant obstacle to information is financial. She asks humanitarians to provide jobs to the people so they can buy a TV, radio, or mobile phone, and so people can afford internet bundles. She also notes that many people do not know how to contact humanitarians.

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42. SSI, May 2023

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LEARNING WHAT WORKS: FEEDBACK FROM COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND HUMANITARIAN RESPONDERS

Community members and operational actors involved in humanitarian response provided the researchers with information about what works. What emerged was that **direct engagement with communities is the best practice.** One humanitarian organization said they used a multi-pronged approach - community centres, community mobilizers, and community committees[43] - for two-way communication with affected populations. In a 2022 study[44] an international organization noted that they frequently analysed their CFM to discuss the needs of affected communities. They found that many calls to their hotlines were less to do with complaints or feedback, and more for people to share their frustrations and express despair. This highlights the need for two-way communication systems that are open and allow people to provide humanitarians with information not only directly linked to operational activities.

It is important to note that while many community members who spoke with the researchers did not know how to access humanitarians or use CFMs, some did provide anecdotes of time they had successfully used a feedback mechanisms. For example, *"we took part in the implementation of a project that was funded by [a humanitarian organization]. We were provided with a phone number with which we called to share our complaints and suggestions. They were responsive and listened to our concerns and suggestions. For example, they resolved our problems during the project implementation and even extended the project."*[45]

The community approach preferred by respondents extends to other forms of information exchange at the local level, such as radio programs with community feedback broadcasts. Women noted that calling in to religious or psychological programs is a chance for their voices to be heard. Interviewees also noted that wall paintings (as opposed to billboards) are an effective way of raising awareness – they were used frequently during COVID-19. Other methods included pasting brochures on walls and distributing them in stores, along with a phone number for people to call or with information on radio stations relevant to women, such as Radio Begum.

Mobile teams are also an effective way to reach people, especially in more rural or dispersed areas. Mosques, community leaders, and street representatives are also effective ways to reach affected communities. For example, local mosques have been used to discuss Issues and how to address them, with discussions followed by street representatives.

IMPLEMENTING FUTURE RESEARCH – RECOMMENDATIONS AND LESSONS DRAWN FROM THIS STUDY:

■ **A phased mixed methods approach allows researchers to build on results instead of on preconceived notions.** In this case, results from the first quantitative phase and pilot interviews helped determine which provinces to focus on for deeper qualitative interviews. Outcomes from the first phase also displayed a gender discrepancy and allowed for researchers to recalibrate the approach to account for more gender inclusivity. In this case, more female surveyors were added to engage female respondents.

■ **Researchers in the humanitarian sector should reconsider who 'key informants' are before setting up communication systems.** There remains a level of hierarchical selection when it comes to standard research investigations, whereby heads of organisations and local leaders are seen as the only possible key informants, as well as community members who respond to a call to participate, often with an incentive. Alternatively, this research study looked at the key figures in information sharing- those who are talking to the community every day and in every capacity. This approach meant that the following key informants were selected as interviewees for their level of community engagement: taxi drivers, shopkeepers, teachers, healthcare workers, beauticians (banned as a career after the research was conducted), homemakers, as well as the typical engaged religious and community leaders etc. In the quantitative phase, it was clear that trust issues and rumours of corruption were surrounding community and religious leaders, so in order to gain a full perspective it was necessary to reassess who could best inform the research and share true perspectives. These figures chosen could best speak to local norms and information exchange practices.

■ **Designing research and collecting data: local researchers eliminated barriers to entry and resulted in more transparency.** In a context where trust is a rare commodity as it is in Afghanistan, people were not going to give honest reflections in a standard interview format with outside researchers. Having a local research team to conduct such sensitive investigations allowed for the community to

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43. These community committees are different to jirgas or shuras. These are committees of volunteers in IDP camps who are nominated by the community and trained for their role. Meetings are held weekly and monthly with the committee members to exchange Information about community needs and to adapt programming to these needs.

44. Samuel Hall / IOM (2022), Research brief on Mental Health, Unpacking the realities of displacement affected communities in Afghanistan since 2021.

45. FGD K1

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trust them and share their true experiences, also notably in their local language without the hindrance of an interpreter present. Local researchers were also able to provide insight as to which methods and locations were safe and how to navigate discussing sensitive information.

■ **Employing participatory processes** ➡ A participatory approach to research is one that involves the affected community at each step and one that uses reflection and collaboration to turn the research into action that positively impacts the community participating in the research. Researchers must keep these practices in mind and reflect at each stage of the research process to ensure the community's concerns, and safety, are being prioritised and integrated.

■ **Employing social listening** ➡ Social listening is defined as *"Capturing conversations that are ongoing in communities about a specific issue (media censorship) or in a much more general way about anything that is of concern and interest to people."*[46] While traditional research methods of focus group discussions and key informant interviews are still essential, rethinking who participants are for these discussions and the conversations researchers are listening to can dramatically increase the impact of the findings and analysis and produce a more collective knowledge. ♦

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46. Internews/ Posada, A., et al. August, 2022. "Turning Social Listening Data Into Action".
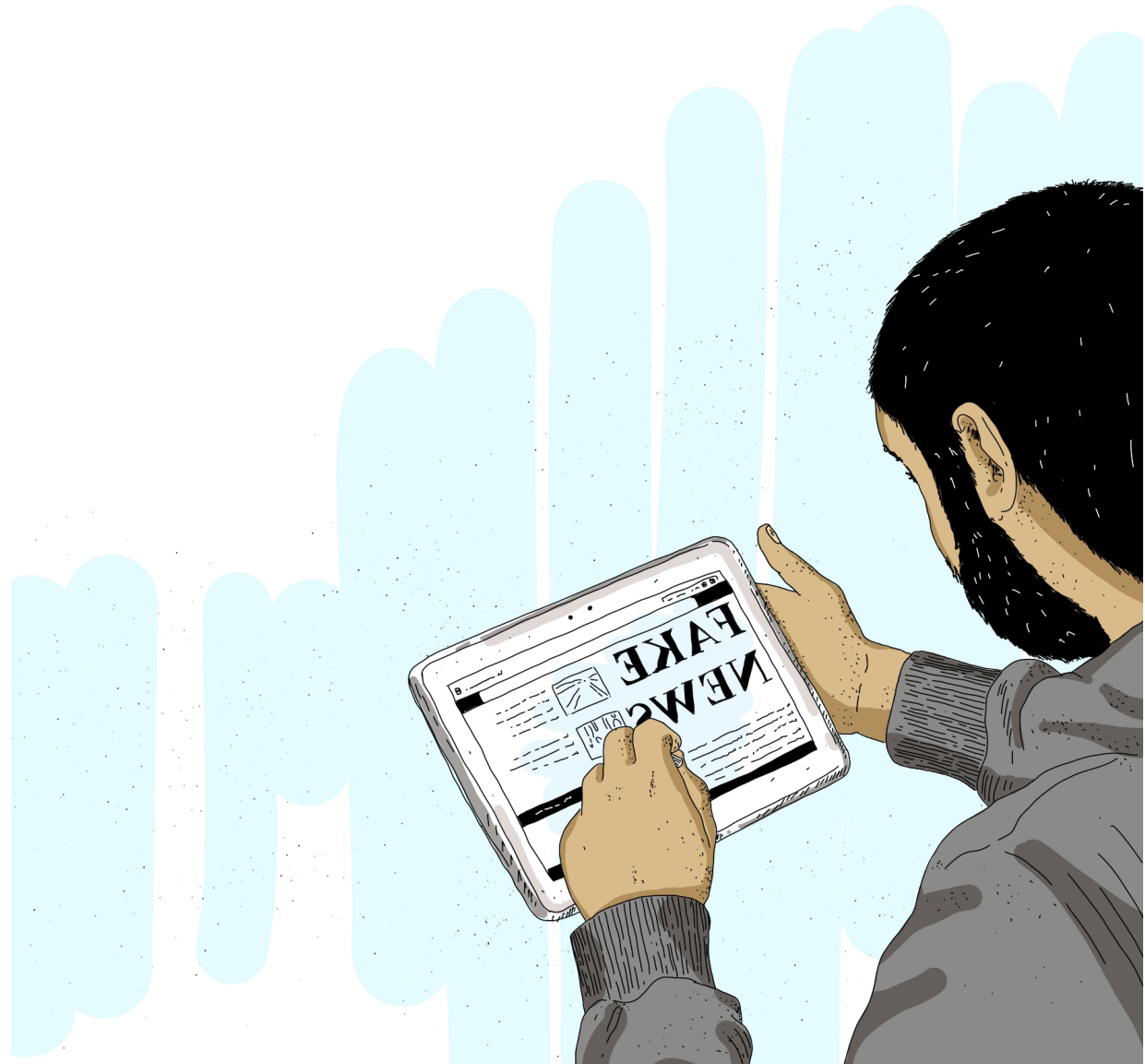
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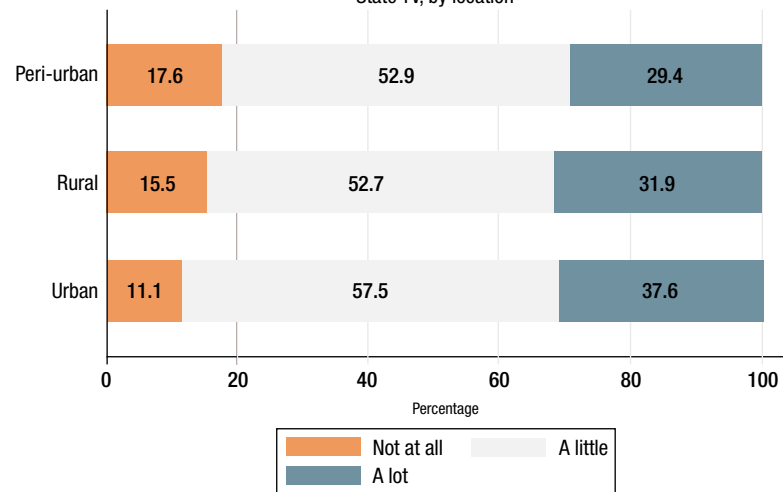- The Hindu. 20 August, 2021. "News, World: Afghanistan updates".

How much do you obtain information through...
Private TV or radio channels, by location
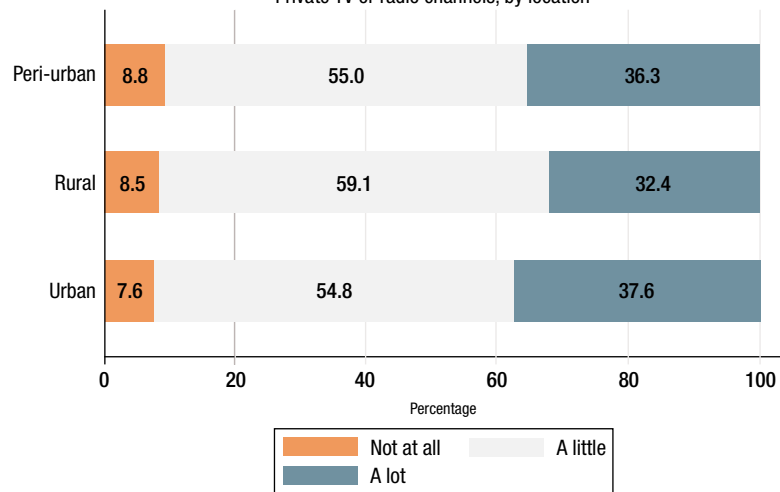
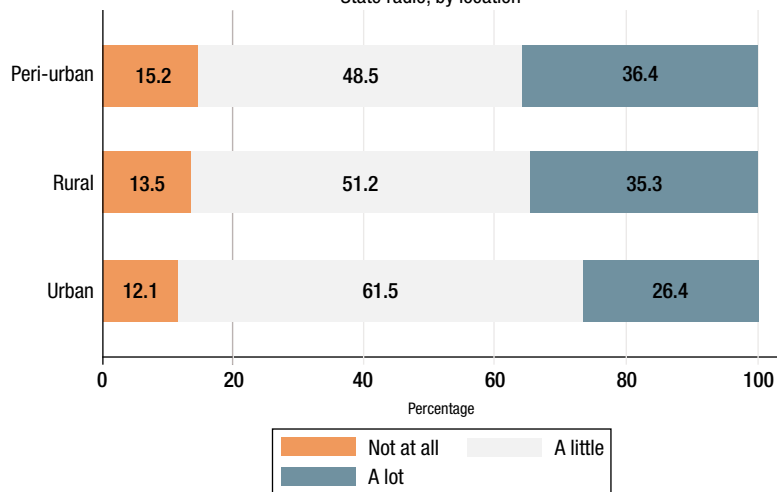How much do you obtain information through...
State TV, by location

How much do you obtain information through...
State radio, by location