

UMass Boston Fulbrighter is at the Forefront of a Media Revolution in Afghanistan

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In the late 1990s, UMass Boston Fulbright Scholar Samiullah Mahdi used to write articles as a high school student for his father's newspaper during the Taliban occupancy of Afghanistan. After returning to Kabul, Mahdi pursued his Bachelor's degree at Kabul University, and also became a full-time journalist during his third year of undergraduate study.



Samiullah Mahdi during the Fulbright Enrichment Seminar in Washington DC, October 2014.

"It was very inspiring and very attractive for the young generation. Journalism and media were new for Afghanistan. It was a new way of expressing yourself, and getting engaged with the society around you, and becoming somebody," Mahdi said.

During the Taliban occupancy, watching TV, much less owning one, was strictly forbidden. It was common to hear stories of people being jailed for watching videos on the Internet. Before the first private television station was launched in 2004, the concept of private media (independent and free media) did not exist. After the Taliban left, there was a revolution in the field of mass media.

"Now we have about 100 TV stations in Afghanistan, and thousands of journalists are working for those TV stations, radio stations, and publication [companies]. There is no way to compare it to what we had 15 years ago under the Taliban regime."

Mahdi says that today, Afghanistan has good laws that protect freedom of expression and access to information. However, despite the relatively "free media environment in



Afghanistan, this issue of security remains a problem,” Mahdi explains. “About 50 journalists have been killed in the last 15 years, mostly by the Taliban.” One recent example involves a vehicle explosion that took the lives of seven Tolo TV employees after the Taliban proclaimed that Tolo TV, One TV, and another TV program are military targets.

Mahdi describes his personal experiences in Afghanistan, where he directed two TV shows, one called “Kabul Debate Live” that featured high-level government officials, activists, and even Taliban members who engaged with live-audiences, like a ‘town hall meeting’, on various social and political issues.

The other show, produced by One TV, called “Nikab” or the “the Mask”, served as a platform for women who suffered from domestic violence, forced marriage arrangements, and other civil issues. Due to the show’s sensitive nature, faces of interviewed guests were covered with masks to protect their identities.

This was the first show of its kind in the country, and it received a lot of attention. “It was very difficult to produce it because no one was willing to come to the show, and businesses and companies were not ready to support it financially,” said Mahdi. “But I can say that the most challenging one was producing Nekab or “the Mask” because of so many heart-breaking stories, so many painful stories of these women [who] were going through a very difficult time. I can say that recording those shows were a part of my most difficult days and hours.”

Hoping to complete his Master’s in Public Administration degree this spring, Mahdi joined UMass Boston because he was impressed with the rich diversity of the campus community and with the city of Boston. In 2012, the Live International Center for Journalism awarded Mahdi the *Knight Journalism Award* for producing “Nekab” and “Kabul Debate Live” TV shows.