



# SOCIAL MEDIA IN AFGHANISTAN

## USERS AND ENGAGEMENT

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## **ABBREVIATIONS**

<b>AGT</b>	<i>Afghanistan Green Trend</i>
<b>API</b>	<i>Application Programming Interface</i>
<b>ATRA</b>	<i>Afghanistan Telecom Regulatory Authority</i>
<b>AWCC</b>	<i>Afghan Wireless Communication Company</i>
<b>CSO</b>	<i>Civil Society Organization</i>
<b>DAIL</b>	<i>Directorate of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock</i>
<b>IEC</b>	<i>Independent Election Commission</i>
<b>IRoA</b>	<i>Islamic Republic of Afghanistan</i>
<b>ISKP</b>	<i>Islamic State in the Khorasan Province</i>
<b>ISP</b>	<i>Internet Services Provider</i>
<b>KII</b>	<i>Key Informant Interview</i>
<b>LFSP</b>	<i>Local Fixed Service Provider</i>
<b>NGO</b>	<i>Non-Governmental Organization</i>
<b>PGO</b>	<i>Provincial Governors Offices</i>
<b>USAID</b>	<i>United States Agency for International Development</i>
<b>UNAMA</b>	<i>United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan</i>
<b>UNDP</b>	<i>United Nations Development Programme</i>

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Access to and use of internet in Afghanistan has grown in the past decade to reach approximately 12% of the population. Social media penetration has followed the same course, challenging traditional media platforms and providing new platforms for public discourse. Social media carries the expectations of propagating change in Afghanistan through open expression, but the reality of its usage provides a need for a more nuanced assessment of its impact on Afghan society.

Social media users represent approximately 9% of the Afghan population, and are a homogenous group of primarily young, urban, and educated individuals. Close to 80% of social media users sampled declare being between 18 and 30 years old, and 96% of them can both read and write – in a country where the adult literacy rate stood at 32% in 2011. Yet, socio-demographic circumstances are not the barriers to social media access directly, but rather to internet access more generally as lack of income or illiteracy. Furthermore, the relation between internet access and smartphone ownership is further confirmed as over 80% of social media users access their accounts solely through their smartphone. In addition, internet service provision remains sparse across the country, especially outside of urban centers.

Social media users limit their usage to a few platforms, namely Facebook and instant messaging platforms. 95% of social media users sampled have a Facebook account, compared to other platforms such as Twitter with a 6% usage rate, Instagram with a 10% usage rate or Snapchat with 1% usage rate. Instant Messaging platforms however also proven very popular.

Media organizations have invested in social media enthusiastically as a new platform for their content, dominating the pages found online along with government, politics & elections related pages. Public pages can be distinguished by the level of commitment and the sophistication of strategies adopted by the teams running them, but also by whether they use social media to broadcast messages unilaterally or whether they leverage interactions with users.

In terms of content, public pages mostly post about government, politics and elections, and security and military matters, largely because this is the bulk of what media organizations publish. Yet, the content that garners the most audience engagement relates to sports, entertainment or national pride. This engagement is defined by the likes, comments, or shares that posts trigger, but the bulk of engagement is driven by likes.

However, engagement with content posted on public pages comes second to interactions with one's network on social media. Social media is primarily an extension of an individual's prior network with interactions primarily with existing family and friends, limiting direct engagement with individuals and ideas outside of established social networks.

While the content related to current affairs is ever-present on social media and social media users are likely highly aware of it, such content triggers limited engagement. A small group of social media users do go on to share and propagate the information they find on social media, and even fewer engage by way of comments. Thus, mobilizing users through social media for a specific cause is not easily achieved.

Overall, the reach of social media is at the moment limited, and popular content is primarily related to entertainment, sports or national pride. Still, social media is already propagating change as it has become a platform for denouncing cases of corruption and injustice, bringing attention to causes that have not yet been addressed on traditional media, and seemingly letting any social media user voice a public opinion. The debates, campaigns and reports of incidents on social media may trigger wider conversations as they become reported on traditional media and transcend the online platforms they originate from.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. BACKGROUND

The fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 brought with it a resurgence of a homegrown Afghan media sector, which has been hailed as one of the success stories of the past 15 years. Television channels, radio stations, and newspapers flourished with the support and resources of international organizations. This support hinged on the belief that a thriving media sector would become a pillar of the country's fledgling democracy. By 2010 there were 175 FM radio stations and 75 terrestrial television stations in Afghanistan (BBC Media Action, 2012) – a striking change for audiences who had relied on either regime-controlled channels or foreign radio since the Soviet invasion. Yet, concerns have persisted over the impartiality and the sustainability of these new media organizations, especially given flagging investments and an ethnicization of media. There are countless examples of Mujahideen leaders who have created their own TV or radio channels to champion the interests of their ethnic group. The ability of the current media landscape to provide a platform for public discourse is in doubt as "*a number of media outlets already play upon ethnic and sectarian tensions*" (BBC Media Action, 2012).

The more recent growth in access to and use of the Internet, and specifically social media, has brought focus to the platform as one that could reenergize public discourse and improve upon traditional media through its user interactivity, broad reach and appeal, and cost effectiveness. Press coverage describes an exploding Afghan social media scene that holds impressive power over political and social life.<sup>1</sup> The lack of restriction and regulation on social media make it easy for free speech to take place, and use of social media has been readily adopted by journalists, activists, and politicians. The Diplomat summarizes the benefits of social media in Afghanistan thus: "*it allows the diversification of voices, different interpretations of events to be shared, thus creating interactions where different issues are raised, discussed and heard. This can also lead to additional pressure on the government*" (Seerat, 2016).

Social media is of course dependent on the availability of internet, leading to the pace of social media penetration differing from that of other media. Just as the Taliban restricted and controlled traditional media, they outright banned internet as they had no control over its content. Afghans waited until 2002, when the Afghan Wireless Communications Company (AWCC) was awarded the first GSM and 2G license in the country, to have internet access. By 2012, there were 44 licensed Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in Afghanistan, including state-owned fixed-line operators, Local Fixed Service Providers (LFSP) and four mobile (GSM) operators (AWCC, Roshan, MTN and Etisalat). Despite this, penetration at that time remained low, as only 5% of Afghans were estimated to have access to internet (Hamdard, 2012).

2012 was a turning point, as Etisalat was awarded the first 3G license, making mobile internet faster, of better-quality, and cheaper for users. Mobile internet became more common as less expensive smartphones became available. The relationship between mobile, internet and social media penetration strengthened as increasingly-common smartphones and faster data made data packages available to a wider population beyond those who had fixed lines and laptop computers. A 2014 study found that 76% of social media users accessed platforms via their smartphones (ATR, 2014). Digital consultancies We Are Social and HootSuite provide similar statistics in their 2017 Digital Yearbook country snapshot, with 12% of the Afghan population using internet, 9% of the population being social media users, and

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<sup>1</sup> See Falke (2014), Herrmann (2015), MacKenzie (2014), Nixon (2014), Tolonews (2016) among others.

8% being mobile social media users (We Are Social, 2017). These figures underline the predominance of mobile technology as a primary access to internet and social media in Afghanistan.

Promisingly, in May 2017, AWCC announced it would launch the first 4G services in the country (AWCC, 2017), whilst China continues to invest in fiber optic cabling in Afghanistan, presumably making fast internet available more broadly (Jahanmal, 2017).

However, despite recent milestones and enthusiastic press coverage of the possibilities that social media offers, the reach of social media remains far below that of traditional media. The 2016 3G coverage map shows that 3G extends to all urban centers, but rural areas and entire provinces (Nuristan, Nimruz, Ghor, Daykundi, and Uruzgan) are still isolated (ATRA, 2016). Furthermore, estimates indicate that only 12% of the whole population has access to internet (Asia Foundation, 2017).

As of 2017, internet and social media users remain predominantly urban and a minority. Previous studies indicate users are usually young and educated, with a preference for Facebook usage above all other platforms. Little more is documented regarding social media users, and even less of who and what they interact with on social media. As such, there is a dissonance between the perceived potential of social media as a new platform for public discourse and what is known or rather unknown of users. This gap in knowledge necessitates a more in-depth assessment of the social media landscape.

## 1.2. STUDY OBJECTIVES AND APPROACH

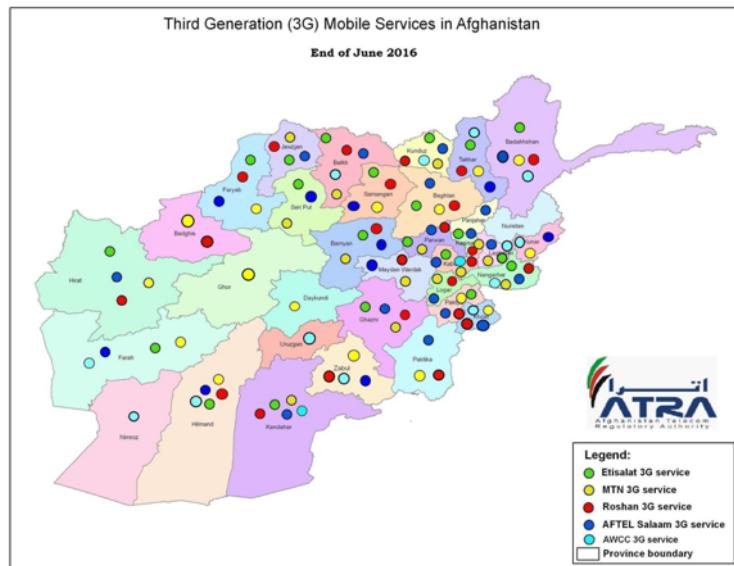
In June 2017, Altai Consulting was mandated by Internews to conduct a study on social media in Afghanistan. The research was borne out of the gap between what was known of social media usage and spread in Afghanistan, and expectations of social media platforms to propagate change through open expression.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

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

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

The first module was a household survey conducted across 8 urban centers: Kabul, Jalalabad, Herat, Mazar-i-Sharif, Kandahar, Lashkar Gah, Bamyan, and Pul-i-Khumri, with a total sample target of 325 respondents.

Figure 1: 3G Services Coverage Map, ATRA 2016



The second module was a landscape mapping, conducted by Altai's sister company Masae Analytics. Using data mining techniques, this module first identified the accounts most liked or followed in Afghanistan, and secondly analyzed the content on a selection of those pages to assess what content elicited the most engagement.

The third and final module consisted of 45 Key Informant Interviews (KII), of which 30 were held with organizations and 15 with social media influencers. The organizational KIIs were divided among media organizations, CSOs, and government.

### **1.3. PRESENTING THE ASSESSMENT**

Can social media be viewed as a platform fostering open expression and social change in Afghan society? This question underpins the present study.

On the outset, several knowledge gaps needed to be filled before being able to assess whether social media users could leverage the platform to trigger change in Afghanistan. Firstly, there was no updated profile of users, whether individuals or organizations, public or private users. Secondly, little was known about content on social media and engagement with content from users.

Section I presents a 360° view of the various social media users, from private users making an individual use of social media, to public users who use social media to disseminate messages on their public position. Section II of the report provides detailed information on engagement, by explaining what is found online and which content triggers reactions.

Section III delves into the categories of usage of social media, from those users limiting their activity to private communications to those using social media to mobilize for a cause.

This approach allows us to compare, contrast and contextualize the debates taking place on social media in Afghanistan.

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**Focus: Defining social media**

Social media is broadly defined as “forms of electronic communication (such as websites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (such as videos).” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) There have been numerous attempts to classify the different types of social media. Many classifications that exist aim to improve marketing strategies per category of social media. This is how Hootsuite, the social media marketing platform, classifies 10 types of social media (Social networks, media sharing networks, discussion forums, bookmarking and content curation networks, consumer review networks, blogging and publishing networks, interest-based networks, social shopping networks, sharing economy networks, anonymous social networks) (Foreman, 2017). A simpler classification comes from Andreas M. Kaplan and Michael Haenlein 2010 article, wherein they try to provide a classification that could encompass forthcoming innovations. This study uses primarily this classification, described in the table below.

Table 1: Categories and Definitions of Social Media

Category	Definition (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010)	Example
Collaborative projects	“Collaborative projects enable the joint and simultaneous creation of content by many end-users”	Wikipedia
Blogs	“Blogs are the Social Media equivalent of personal web pages and can come in a multitude of different variations, from personal diaries describing the author’s life to summaries of all relevant information in one specific content area.”	WordPress, Tumblr
Content Communities	“The main objective of content communities is the sharing of media content between users.”	YouTube, Flickr, Slideshare
Social Networking Sites	“Social networking sites are applications that enable users to connect by creating personal information profiles, inviting friends and colleagues to have access to those profiles, and sending e-mails and instant messages between each other. These personal profiles can include any type of information, including photos, video, audio files, and blogs.”	Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, LinkedIn
Virtual Game Worlds	“Virtual worlds are platforms that replicate a three-dimensional environment in which users can appear in the form of personalized avatars and interact with each other as they would in real life. Virtual worlds come in two forms. The first, virtual game worlds, require their users to behave according to strict rules in the context of a massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG).”	World of Warcraft
Virtual Social Worlds	“The second group of virtual worlds, often referred to as virtual social worlds, allows inhabitants to choose their behavior more freely and essentially live a virtual life similar to their real life.”	Second life

Messaging applications are often excluded from social media classifications – this omission could be based on the fact that they are perceived to be for restricted networks. Messaging applications have become platforms where one can also interact with institutions (some organizations have Telegram channels) and individuals never met face-to-face through groups, and a variety of media content can be shared – videos, pictures, but also voice recordings. They are akin to Facebook when used for their group messaging features, as individuals interact with a wide network in one conversation and share as much content as they want. For the purposes of this study, messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Viber, or Telegram, are classified as social networks.

While there are arguments for and against including any number of sites within the term, this study takes a broad definition, including any online platform, which facilitates interaction with a broader community. This definition includes traditional social media sites, direct messaging applications, content-focused platforms, and others, and allows us to explore the full range of actual use.

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## 2. SOCIAL MEDIA USERS

This section profiles social media users and distinguishes among them to categorize the population of users. Social media users correspond to the array of entities who create accounts that can be personal or for an organization, public or private, and any one individual can be both a consumer and a producer of content on social media – one of the defining features of the medium. While the lines between categories of users can be blurry at best, **there is a clear distinction in intention between those users that make a personal and private use of social media, and those users that use social media as a platform to relay messages publicly.** This distinction between users also corresponds to a distinction between users who are predominantly content consumers versus those who are primarily content producers.

### 2.1. PRIVATE USERS

**Private users are individuals that make a personal and private use of social media. These users are primarily consumers of content on social media.** This study's user survey allows a thorough profiling of private individual users whose characteristics would not otherwise be known. Those users represent the mass of social media users in Afghanistan whose activity is not public.

#### 2.1.1. PROFILING PRIVATE USERS

##### 2.1.1.1. Private users are a homogenous group

**Social media users are a homogenous group of mostly young and educated individuals,** which confirms previous studies' findings.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 2: Social Media Users Characteristics Infographic



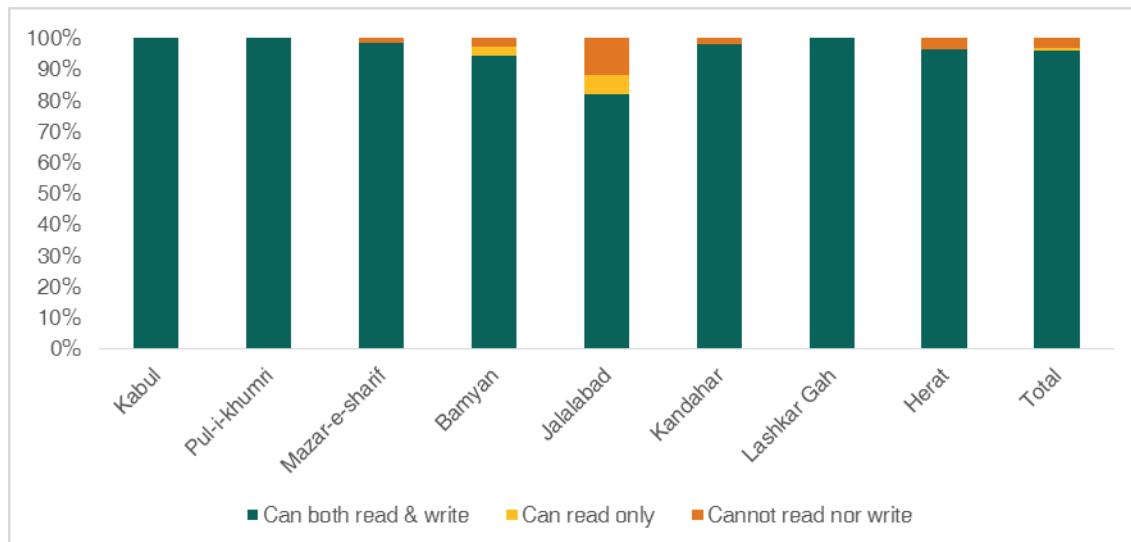
Close to 80% of respondents declare being between 18 and 30 years old. For those users above the age of 30 however, men are more likely to be social media users than women, as the repartition of female users tends to be younger. The Afghan population itself tends to be young, with 40% of the population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

**Social media users are overwhelmingly literate, with no difference across gender lines.** This is an expected result as the nature of social media relies on users being able to navigate written content, but anecdotal evidence shows that illiterate users can also enjoy social media for its picture and video

<sup>2</sup> Icons sourced from The Noun Project, created by Dinosoft Labs, Steve Morris, and dDara

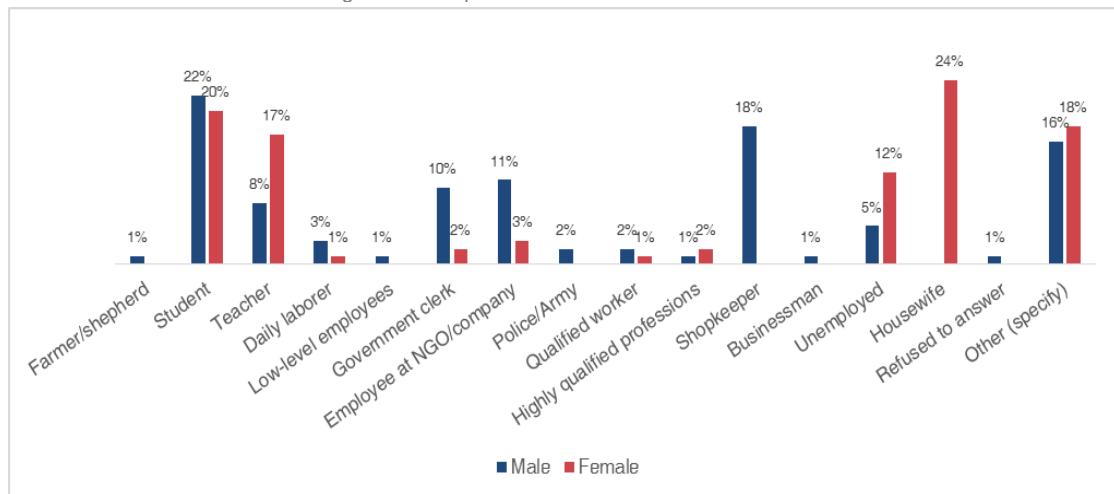
content, or through voice messages. Users in Jalalabad for example are less likely to be literate than in other centers as 82% of them can both read and write compared to over 94% in all other centers. This is confirmed by respondents' level of education as about 80% of social media users have at least been to high school, and 45% of users have been to university. Again, there are few differences along gender lines or between urban centers.<sup>3</sup>

Figure 3: Literacy levels among center populations



**Considering the age and level of education of respondents, it is no surprise that 21% of social media users are students.** This is true for both male (22%) and female respondents (20%), but gender differences reveal themselves - the remainder of **female** respondents are chiefly divided among teachers (17%), and housewives (24%). **Male** respondents on the other hand have a more varied set of occupations as they are shopkeepers (18%), government clerks (10%) or mid-level employees of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)/Companies (11%).<sup>4</sup>

Figure 4: Occupation of interviewed social media users



<sup>3</sup> Figure 3: Sample sizes for each center: Kabul (56), Pul-i-khumri (27), Mazar-e-sharif (63), Bamyan (36), Jalalabad (50), Kandahar (51), Lashkar Gah (25), Herat (53). Total (361)

<sup>4</sup> Figure 4: Sample sizes: Male (189), Female (172)

Respondents come from middle-class households, with heads of households' occupations being mid-income earners (for example: 14% are government clerks, 10% are teachers, and 6% are highly-qualified workers). 27% of households have an average monthly income between 10,000 and 5,000 AFN, and another 24% have an income between 15,000 AFN and 10,000 AFN. The mean income for users is of 23,863 AFN – or a fifth of the yearly GNI Per Capita in the country, which stands at 1,900 USD ppp (World Bank, 2016).<sup>5</sup>

**Although we have a better idea of who social media users are, the absence of rural households is noteworthy. But as the 2016 3G coverage map indicated, rural areas are still underserviced and internet access remains the main barrier to social media access.**

### 2.1.1.2. Social media usage still hinges on internet access

Understanding who social media users are in relation to non-users helps us refine and contextualize social media usage. In practice, social media non-users coincide closely with those who do not access internet.

**Internet usage remains the main bottleneck to accessing social media** – of those who do use internet, almost all have a social media account and access it frequently. **In many ways, internet is synonymous with Facebook.** While this is an expected result, the scale of it is surprising.

**In fact, when filtering along survey respondents to identify those that were social media users it becomes clear that the first filter of internet usage is the main discriminant to social media usage.**

To illustrate, the table below shows that a baseline number of 592 randomly selected respondents in the user survey agreed to being interviewed, of which 381 (or 64%) used internet.

Out of the 381 respondents who use internet, 96% have a social media account. 99% of those with a social media account declared accessing it at least a few times a month. **Once respondents access internet, the vast minority create a social media account.**

Table 2: Filtering social media users

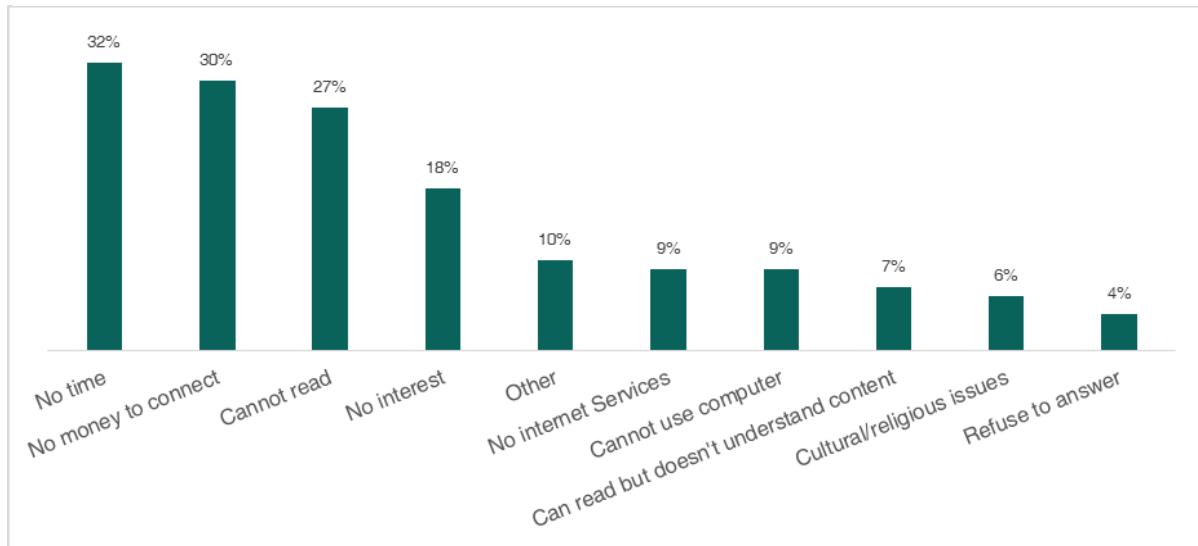
	Total		Male Respondents		Female Respondents	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
The selected respondent in household consents to the interview	592	100%	318	100%	274	100%
The selected respondent uses internet	381	64%	204	64%	177	65%
The respondent has a social media account	365	96%	193	95%	172	97%
The respondent accesses social media at least a few times a month	361	99%	189	98%	172	100%

**Respondents lived in urban centers so availability of internet services was not a barrier to access, but literacy and income continue to be** - 32% of those who do not use internet cite 'Not having the time' as a reason, followed closely by 30% citing 'not having the money to connect'. 'I can't read' follows with 27% of internet non-users citing this issue. Respondents who declare they do 'Not

<sup>5</sup> Those brackets are inclusive of the upper amount and exclusive of the lower. The bracket '5,000 and less', includes households that declare 5,000 AFN as their average monthly household income, and the bracket 'Between 10,000 and 5,000' includes households that declare 10,000 AFN but excludes those that declare 5,000 AFN. 1900 USD ppp corresponds to 129,847 AFN in October 2017.

*have the time*' are most likely using this as an excuse for the true reason that they may not want to share (illiteracy, lack of income, moral values). **It is important to note that the survey focused on urban respondents, and that the nationwide share of individuals using internet is far below what we see in urban centers.**<sup>6</sup>

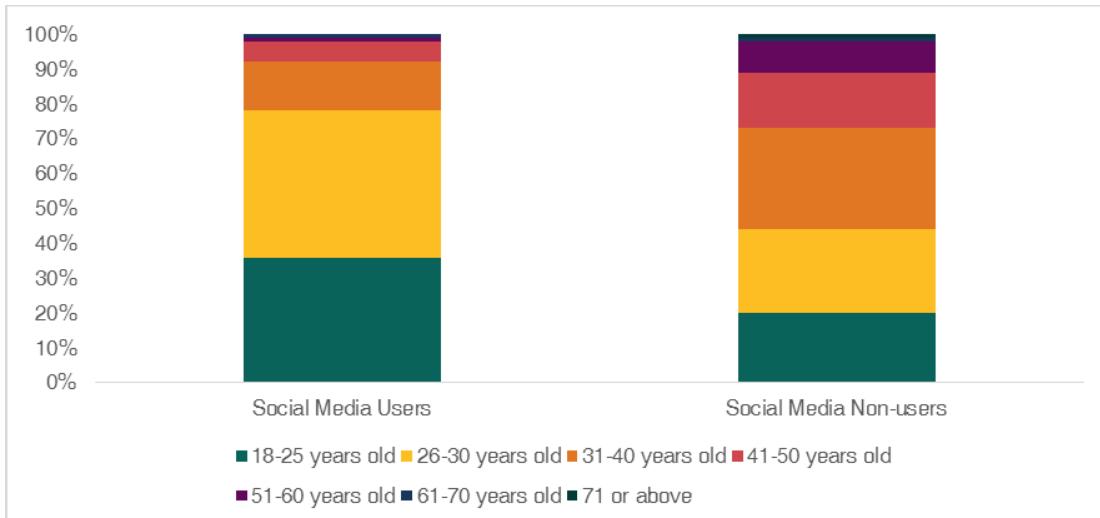
Figure 5: Reason for not using internet



As would be expected, **those who do not use social media are older, less literate, and have a lower income than those that do** – after all, social media non-users are also internet non-users. **Age, education and literacy thus affect internet usage primarily, rather than social media usage intrinsically.**

Older individuals are less likely to use internet - indeed, the age repartition of social media users follows that of internet users. While 78% of internet users are between the ages of 18 and 30, only 43% of internet non-users are. 27% of internet non-users are above the age of 40, compared to 7% of internet users.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 6: Age repartition among social media users and non-users

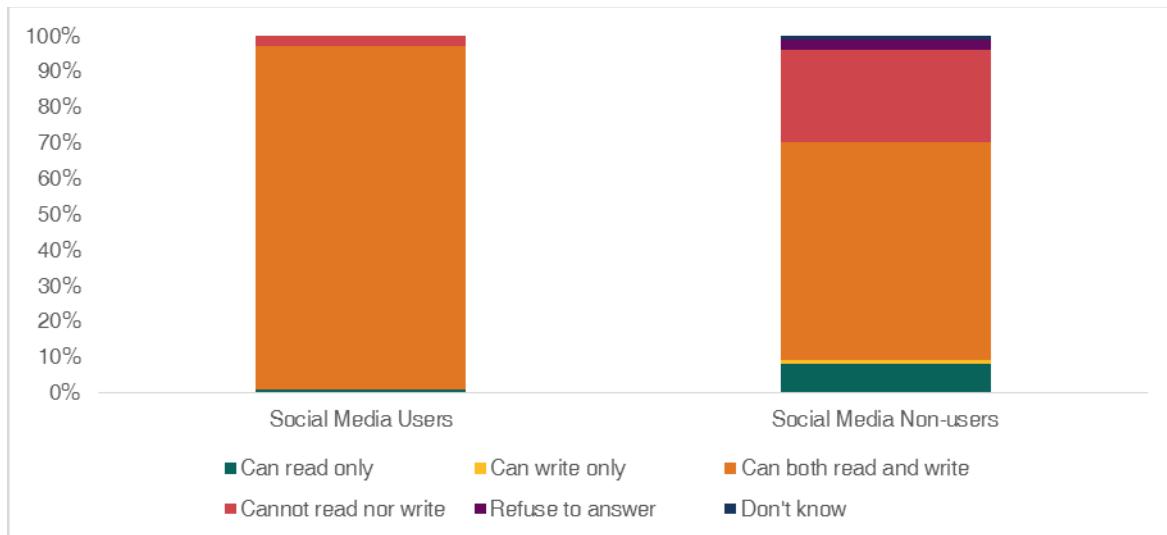


<sup>6</sup> Figure 5: Sample size: Internet non-users (211)

<sup>7</sup> Figure 6: Sample size: Social media users (361), social media non-users (231)

Literacy is a discriminant to internet usage rather than social media usage per se – the proportions of literate individuals among internet users and non-users mirrors that among social media users and non-users. This confirms the answers to why some respondents do not access internet, as 27% of them said they could not read. Over a quarter of social media non-users are illiterate – and only 60% of non-users can both read and write compared to 96% of social media users.<sup>8</sup>

Figure 7: Literacy levels among social media users & non-users



This is further confirmed by the education level differences between the two groups. While close to 80% of the survey respondents qualified as social media users have been to High School or University, 60% of non-users have not gone beyond secondary school. Over a quarter of social media non-users interviewed declared having no education. In addition, social media users have a higher household monthly average income. Indeed, the average for social media users is 54% higher than that of non-users.

## 2.1.2. POPULAR PLATFORMS AND ACCESS

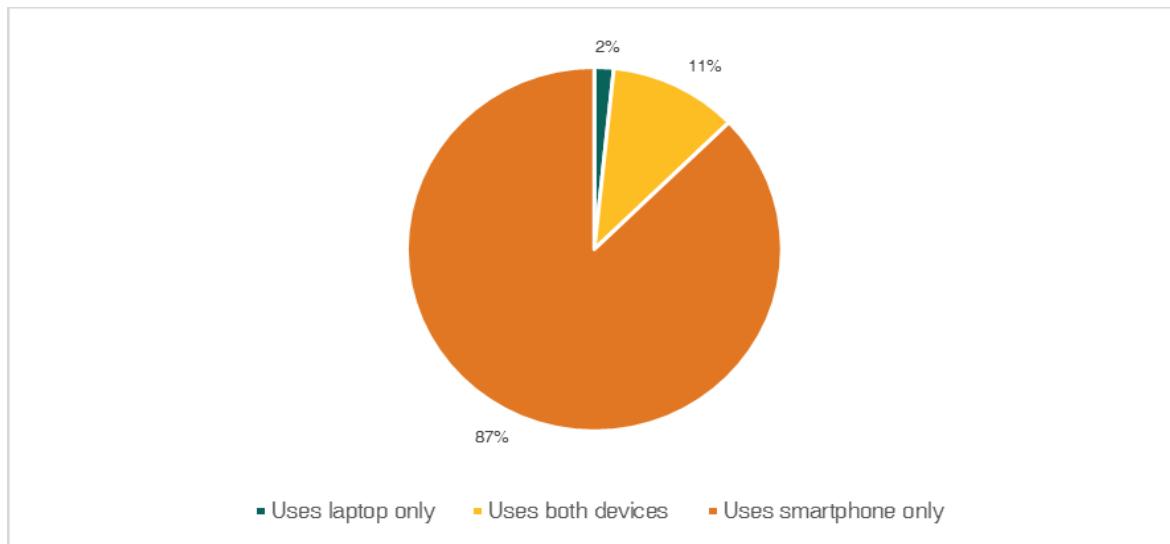
### 2.1.2.1. Access, device, location

**Internet usage and social media usage are as linked to mobile usage as ever**, as social media users rely on their smartphones to access internet – up to 87% access social media only through their smartphone.<sup>9</sup> This is consistent with the fact that social media non-users are less likely to have access to a smartphone than are social media users. Up to 25% of social media non-users do not have a smartphone in the household.

<sup>8</sup> Figure 7: sample sizes: social media users (361), social media non-users (231)

<sup>9</sup> Figure 8: sample size: social media users (361)

Figure 8: Device used to access social media



**Although users access social media mainly through their smartphones, access is predominantly done from home or at work, and very few access social media while in transit, perhaps on public transport, suggesting social media is an activity done in a private setting (for discretion) and which necessitates dedicated attention.** Users primarily access social media at home or at work (for Facebook 96% at home and 44% at work). Access at University or school is at around 10%, while 21% of the sample were students. This reinforces the finding that private settings are privileged to accessing social media.

#### **2.1.2.2. Facebook is the dominant platform, with Instant messaging a close second**

**Social media usage is concentrated on Facebook and messaging applications<sup>10</sup>, whilst other platforms including some generally considered newer and more innovative ones such as Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat fail to appeal.**

The overwhelming majority of social media users have a Facebook account (95%) – accordingly, 75% of users have a Facebook Messenger account<sup>11</sup>. Only 6% of social media users interviewed have a Twitter account. With 10% of declared usage, Instagram is more popular than Snapchat, which has a usage rate of only 1%, and so is still a very niche platform.<sup>12</sup>

Those results echo that of the most recent study on the subject conducted in 2014, wherein 88% of survey respondents reported having a Facebook profile, and only 4% used Twitter. Other popular platforms were Google + which was used by 13% of respondents (ATR, 2014), compared to 6% of the present study's respondents. Furthermore, Paywast usage has disappeared since 2014. Social media analytics platforms estimate current Facebook usage at 95% and Twitter usage at 2% (Statscounter,

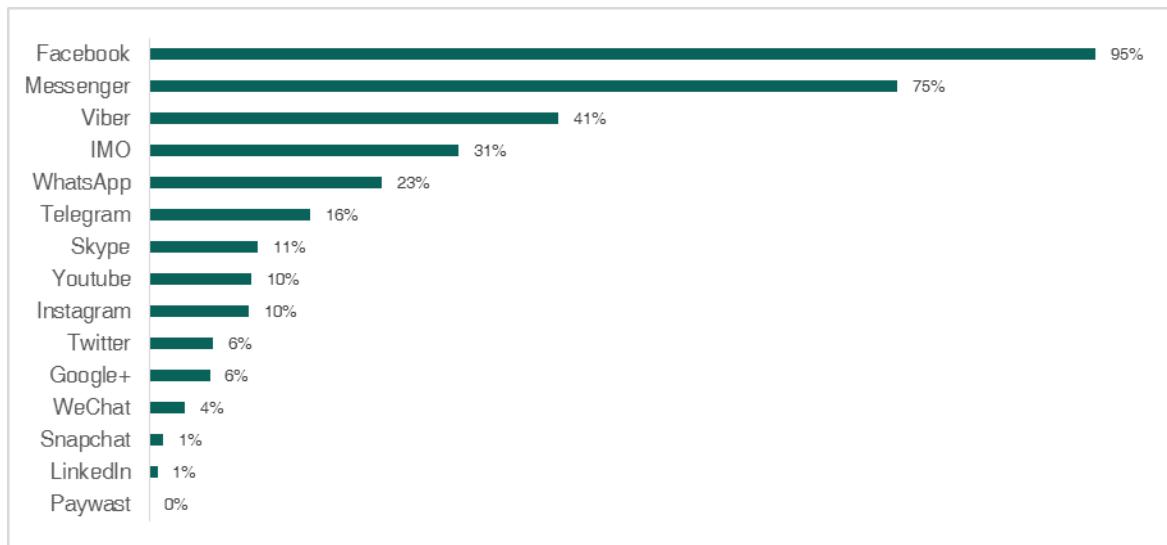
<sup>10</sup> Instant messaging applications include: FB messenger, Skype, WhatsApp, IMO, Viber, Telegram and WeChat – and excludes Snapchat and Instagram.

<sup>11</sup> There is a clear link between Facebook and Facebook Messenger – but having a Facebook account does not automatically mean a person has activated their Facebook Messenger account. This is particularly the case given that access to social media is overwhelmingly through smartphones, where the two applications are distinct and users could have the Facebook app but not the Messenger app.

<sup>12</sup> Figure 9: sample size: social media account holder (365)

2017) - given that the present study focuses on urban areas, nationwide estimates for Twitter usage in particular which include more rural areas are expectedly lower.

Figure 9: Social media accounts of users



**Messaging applications follow Facebook in terms of overall appeal as 84% of social media users report using these.** The most popular messaging application after Facebook Messenger is Viber, followed by IMO and then WhatsApp. Noteworthy is the fact that those messaging apps can be used for talking within groups that go beyond the one-on-one chats, and past research suggests that the call features as well as voice message features on these applications allow individuals who cannot read or write to use them. Such messaging applications are pushing out traditional calls on operator networks. This is notably true for contacting friends or family abroad. **68% of social media users interviewed use a messaging application to talk to friends or family abroad.**

**The majority of social media users use several platforms** – only 16% of social media users have only one social media account. 56 of the 59 individuals who have only one social media account only use Facebook, 2 only have Viber and 1 only IMO.

**The apparent gratuity of social media is key in appealing to users.** Paywast, an SMS-based social network provider launched in 2011, is a subsidiary of UStronics which had been awarded 5.7 million USD by the United States' State Department to develop Paywast. At a specific point the platform had over a million subscribers, surpassing Facebook. However, Paywast has since become a paying service and usage has dropped, as evidenced in the sample of the user survey, wherein none of respondents have an account.

## 2.2. PUBLIC USERS

Private users, whilst representing the overwhelming mass of social media users, are largely consumers of content – whereas **a smaller number of public accounts produce the content and are at the heart of the conversations taking place on social media.** Those public users can be individual users who comment publicly on current affairs or specific topics, or organizations that use social media as a new platform to communicate with their audience.

**The landscape mapping exercise allows identification of the Afghan public pages and Afghan public accounts on Facebook and Twitter, and as such yield an accurate picture of public stakeholders on each platform.**

The count of pages and accounts highlights that those organizations or individuals in the created categories<sup>13</sup> are creating pages more so than in other sectors. It does not reflect the overall engagement or popularity of certain categories accurately.

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### Focus: Landscape mapping methodology

The landscape mapping was conducted by Altai Consulting's sister company Masae Analytics, by extracting data directly from Facebook and Twitter and processing it using datamining techniques. To extract the data available on these social media platforms, the public Application Programming Interfaces (API) provided by Facebook (Graph API) and Twitter (REST API) were used.

A seed list of Facebook public pages and Twitter accounts was designed by Internews and Altai Consulting based on country knowledge and manual search on social media. However, to make sure this landscape mapping was as comprehensive as possible, Masae Analytics developed a "snowball" approach to detect other influential accounts by scanning the network structure of social medias, using the baseline list as a starting point.

Once the accounts having liked each page of the baseline list were extracted, a filter was applied to select those located in Afghanistan and who were sufficiently influential (the Facebook pages with the fewest likes that were identified through the snowball approach have 10,000 followers, but the seedlist included Facebook pages with as few as 33 likes.). This final list of new influential accounts was added to the baseline. These previous steps were applied to this new list of accounts to get other accounts, and so on, until only non-influential/non-Afghan followers/likes were extracted, which means there was no more account of interest.

In this way, 160 new Twitter accounts and 232 new Facebook pages were detected, bringing the total number of identified **Twitter accounts to 236 and Facebook pages to 347**.

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## 2.2.1. PUBLIC PAGES AND ACCOUNTS

### 2.2.1.1. Facebook

A total number of 347 public pages originating from Afghanistan were identified. Among them, **media pages dominate Afghan Facebook in terms of fans<sup>14</sup>, as they capture almost 50 million fans collectively – however the dominant pages in terms of quantity are related to government or politics, as they amount to 29% of Facebook pages identified through the snowball algorithm**. Media pages come second in terms of number (18% of total pages).

**While entertainment pages only represent 4% of total pages, they gather over 30 million fans – the second most popular category after media pages.** This already highlights the attractiveness of entertainment-related content compared to government & politics or military & security, and the imbalance there might be between presence of a certain category or sector and the audience for them.

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<sup>13</sup> Accounts were arranged in the following categories: Media, Entertainment, Government & Politics, Sport, Private Business, Education, CSO, Military & Security and Other.

<sup>14</sup> Fans on Facebook correspond to the users who have 'Liked' the page – and are distinct from Followers (although there is huge overlap). We use the term 'fan' to distinguish from likes on individual posts, but the detailed methodology in the annexes refers to the technical term on Facebook 'Like' for a page.

Table 3: Categories of pages on Facebook

Page Category	Percentage of pages	Number of fans <sup>15</sup>
Media	18%	48,251,927
Entertainment	4%	31,778,193
Other	12%	27,374,830
Government/politics	29%	19,428,689
Sport	9%	14,592,835
Private Business	7%	9,119,950
Education	8%	2,539,334
CSO	10%	2,081,025
Military/security	4%	896,125

Looking specifically at the top 20 Facebook pages in Afghanistan in terms of popularity, we find that 11 of them are Media pages. Yet, **the most popular Afghanistan-based page is Afghanistan My Passion**: with 3.7 million fans, the page posts photos of women in traditional dress, Afghan armed forces, and archive pictures of Afghanistan, appealing to those looking for patriotic content. A post gets an average of 12,251 likes, 263 ‘hearts’, 242 ‘sad faces’, 451 comments, and 320 shares. The number of fans of the page exceeds the estimated number of internet users in Afghanistan. The pages identified are Afghanistan-based but fans are not limited to individuals in Afghanistan. In the case of the Afghanistan My Passion page, the Afghan diaspora is likely to inflate the numbers of fans. Popular figures of social media include Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (IRoA) Chief executive Dr Abdullah Abdullah ahead of president Ashraf Ghani, but musicians Farhad Ghafoor and Aryana Sayeed as well as Cricket star Mohammad Nabi have also a huge influence. Wais Barakzai, an individual posting comments on current events makes the top 20 on Afghan Facebook, and is part of a group of influencers – **individuals formerly unknown by the public who have seized the opportunities from social media to propagate their personal views.**

Table 4: Top 20 Afghan Facebook pages

Name of pages	Page Category	Number of Fans
Afghanistan My Passion	Entertainment	3,720,840
VOA Pashto	Media	3,324,077
Dr. Abdullah Abdullah	Government/Politics	3,213,739
VOA Dari	Media	3,191,666
BBC Pashto	Media	2,948,780
TOLOnews	Media	2,539,727
VOA Deewa - وي. او. اي ديوه	Media	2,527,345
Farhad Ghafoor	Entertainment	2,179,280
Afghanistan Cricket Board	Sport	1,970,984
Arman FM 98.1	Media	1,840,138
Aryana Sayeed آريانا سعید	Entertainment	1,822,332
Tolo Tv طلوع	Media	1,752,897

<sup>15</sup> This corresponds to the cumulative number of fans for all pages in each category. Individuals may be counted double as they may like several pages of the same category. However, the Number of Fans figure remains representative of the relative scale of each category.

<sup>16</sup> روزنامه هشت صبح	Media	1,749,470
Mohammad Nabi	Sport	1,733,057
Mansour	Entertainment	1,645,248
Ashraf Ghani	Government/Politics	1,540,079
LahzebeLahze	Media	1,499,138
Wais Barakzai	Media	1,493,019
ARG – ارگ	Government/Politics	1,482,891
Lemar TV	Media	1,398,940

### 2.2.1.2. Twitter

A total number of 236 Afghan Twitter accounts were identified. **Media accounts represent 38% of Afghan Twitter accounts sampled, and 23% of accounts are government & politics related.** Those categories together encompass 61% of Twitter accounts, whereas they represented 47% of Facebook accounts. This already shows the difference between the uses made of Twitter and Facebook as different types of accounts can be found. **Furthermore, the number of follows are much lower than the fans for Facebook – confirming the gap in usage between both platforms.**

Entertainment, education and sport represent 8% of Twitter pages, compared to 21% of Facebook pages, further illustrating the different audiences on both platforms.

Table 5: Categories of accounts on Twitter

Page Category	% of pages	Number of follows <sup>17</sup>
Media	38%	3,168,786
Government/Politics	23%	3,101,978
Other	16%	555,405
Entertainment	2%	545,102
CSO	7%	452,343
Military/security	3%	432,544
Sport	6%	344,500
Private Business	5%	54,416
Education	0%	19,856

**The top 20 Twitter accounts in Afghanistan also highlight the difference in both nature of audience and size of audience between Twitter and Facebook.** The most popular Afghan Twitter account is TOLOnews, garnering 363,409 follows, a very small amount compared to the scale of fans on Facebook for the same organization (2.5 million fans). Yet, 11 of the 20 most popular Twitter accounts are government & politics related – **Facebook users may be looking to media organizations for information, but the Twitter audience is seeking information on current affairs**

<sup>16</sup> Name of pages is displayed as shown on the page. This page, the only that did not include an English translation in its title, is Hasht e Sobh

<sup>17</sup> This corresponds to the cumulative number of follows for all accounts in each category. Individuals may be counted double as they may follow several accounts of the same category. However, the Number of Follows figure remains representative of the relative scale of each category.

**from primary sources.** The Twitter users of Afghanistan at first look savvier than Facebook users, as they do not solely rely on media sources to relay information.

Table 6: Top 20 Afghan Twitter Accounts

Name of account	Type of account	Number of followers
TOLOnews	Media	363,409
Ashrafghani	Government/Politics	313,888
ARG_AFG	Government/Politics	275,404
USEmbassyKabul	Government/Politics	262,383
SediqSediqqi	Government/Politics	247,252
Pajhwok	Media	227,345
1TVNewsAF	Media	211,383
MASalangi	Government/Politics	208,704
FawziaKoofi77	Government/Politics	188,822
Khaama	Media	158,832
ResoluteSupport	Military/Security	154,785
AimalFaizi	Media	153,878
AmrullahSaleh2	Government/Politics	146,223
USAIDAfghan	Government/Politics	138,033
ACBOfficials	Sport	133,562
AdelaRaz	Government/Politics	132,588
Umerdaudzai2	Government/Politics	120,740
AANafgh	CSO	119,500
afgexecutive	Government/Politics	119,398

## 2.2.2. DIFFERENTIATING BETWEEN ORGANIZATIONS AND INDIVIDUALS

The above landscape mapping shows that organizations and individuals alike use social media as a platform to communicate to a public audience – yet there are noteworthy differences in intentions and strategies between organizations and individuals.

### 2.2.2.1. Organizations

We focus on three types of organizations that leverage social media: media organizations, government bodies and international organizations, and CSOs. Those are the most represented categories of organizations on Facebook, yet there is huge heterogeneity among those organizations.

#### 2.2.2.1.1. Media organizations

**Media organizations represent the largest quantity of pages on Facebook among the pages sampled – they are also the most popular when counting the number of fans.** Local, national and international media organizations alike use social media as it represents a new outlet for their content production.

The most popular media organizations are TOLOnews, BBC, VOA, Arman FM, 8 AM Daily, Pajhwok, 1TV and Khaama press – but many other local radio stations, TV stations or papers also have their own Facebook pages. It is seen as an essential part of their organization and of their operations. **However, different levels of effort are seen depending on their size and capacity, but also strategic vision.**

**Despite the potential for growth for these media organizations, few have a social media strategy.** This is related to the size of the organization in part, as smaller organizations such as Radio Bamyan have a basic usage of Facebook wherein the three full time staff take turns in announcing the radio programs on their Facebook page. Radio Bamyan has a versatile team that works on content production,

management and admin and communication. The manager explains that he is “*responsible for most of the political shows, discussions and debate programs on the radio, but I also post content on Facebook.*”

**On the other end of the spectrum, TOLOnews has a full strategy and team dedicated to their media content.** They have a 10-member staff dedicated to their ‘Online’ department, which takes care of all the online content, from the website to Facebook and Twitter. Kathy Whitehead, the head of ‘Online’ at TOLOnews shares that “*Anything that is digital is our responsibility. We work in shifts, and when there is hot news and breaking news we all work late nights.*”

Figure 10: Screenshot of Radio Bamyan's Facebook page



The TOLO strategy is reliant on a keen understanding of the different audiences on each platform. **Communicating online with local Afghans is done via the Facebook page, whereas they are indexed on Google news and use Twitter for what they call ‘high-level’ audiences such as embassies.** They also differentiate social media platforms from the website: “*We use social media for short and timely posts: like if we have an explosion in Kabul, we just put a short sentence that an explosion was heard in Kabul. And then we wait for the details and confirmations from authorities to put details on our website.*” Additionally, TOLO and Khaama Press are the only organizations interviewed who seem to make use of Facebook Audience Insights<sup>18</sup>, and TOLO news also has a team in Dubai doing the analytics for their social media pages and identifying topics that garner the most interest.

**Even though not all organizations have a dedicated team or strategy, there is a consensus that the content needs to be adapted to the platform.**

The more basic users of social media use it simply as an announcement board for their programs, as Radio Bamyan advertises its radio programs yet does not embed any on their page. Other organizations link or forward the content from their website on social media. For Khaama Press, for whom all content is solely online, there is no need to adapt content for Facebook: “*No we do not need to adapt or rework content, as we only post the contents on the website and then share the link on social media.*”

**However, most organizations mention the need to have content edited and proofread before being posted on social media, and having short sentences and a picture for updates is a must to capture the attention of followers.**

#### 2.2.2.1.2. Government Bodies & International Organizations

**Government bodies and international organizations at every level (local, national, international) are aware that social media presents their best opportunity to showcase their work and connect with Afghans.** The medium allows them to interact with citizens whilst presenting a flattering image of their work and allows them to control their narrative. Agencies such as ministries, provincial directorates, but also city councils, have their own social media pages – preferably Facebook (few government representatives have Twitter accounts). They do not typically have their own strategies, as they follow at-most general guidelines. For example, UNDP and USAID, as international and/or government-linked organizations, follow their international guidelines for their Afghanistan pages, but do not have country-specific strategies.

In terms of capacity, international organizations have dedicated teams and departments embedded in their communication departments, with staff available to recalibrate content and provide translation support. UNDP Kabul’s country office has a department called the communication unit, serving as the communications focal point: “*This department covers all kinds of digital media, video productions, marketing and is responsible for all the communications internal and external.*”

**But smaller organizations also value having dedicated staff.** The Baghlan Province Governor’s Office (PGO) has procedures and teams in place, which probably explains its high popularity on Facebook (11,646 fans on Facebook – ahead of the Kabul Governor’s Office). The PGO’s press manager explains: “*There is good cooperation between departments, if something is needed to be uploaded to Facebook, the staff of other departments comes and gives the report to the technology department or to myself. The press manager also plays the role of spokesman at the PGO. Usually there are several meetings in the PGO so all the staff is aware of upcoming events. They know what to post on Facebook, as the press manager is always present in the meetings.*” The Directorate for Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (DAIL) in Herat also makes a strategic use of social media and has

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<sup>18</sup> Facebook Audience Insights is a marketing tool available to pages operated by businesses which collects information on target audiences, including aggregate information about geography, demographics, and purchase behavior.

a thorough validation procedure: “*First the content is edited by the press manager and then submitted to the Extension manager to check and approve. There is no schedule for publication and it is based on the activities conducted by DAIL or the counterpart projects. The number of posts differs from week to week but averages 4 posts per week.*” Their in-field presence reinforces their social media presence as they attend events to take pictures, videos and collect information.

**There is a consensus among those organizations that posts on Facebook should be text-light and as much as possible include pictures or videos. These are the posts that capture attention and create engagement.**

All organizations consulted preferred Facebook – as it is the medium that reaches the largest portion of the Afghan public. For example, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) stated “*Social media has enormous influence especially Facebook, as people with smartphones and internet use Facebook. The first sources of information are TV and Facebook, then other types of media.*”

**Decentralized organs like the political party Milli Watan or the Independent Election Commission in Mazar-e-Sharif cannot update their pages on their own as they do not have direct control over them.** They have to wait for their national headquarters to put forward content. Milli Watan’s Balkh provincial director explains that “*If there is some news or event, then the provincial manager reports it to Kabul, and according to the importance of the issue the general manager decides whether to make a Facebook post*”. Consequently, some organizations want to have their own, local page, for communicating local issues. Afghanistan Green Trend (AGT) wants every provincial unit to have its own page – there are presently 14 AGT provincial pages and one national page.

#### **2.2.2.1.3. CSOs and Educational Institutions**

CSOs and Educational Institutions make up 10% and 7% of the sampled Facebook public pages and Twitter accounts respectively. **They perceive social media as valuable because it gives them a free platform to advance their goals.** However, this category is composed of largely heterogenous organizations, with equally heterogenous approaches.

**As with other organizations, CSOs face the restrictions that come with having small teams and as such no dedicated department. They usually have good sharing practices to ensure the focal point can pull resources from different departments and rely on their support.**

**Universities however differ, as they are directly communicating to a social media-savvy audience (students), and have better procedures for posting on social media and ensuring everything is proofed before publication.** Kardan University is the only organization interviewed in this category to use Facebook Audience Insights, along with Afghanistan Needs You, a campaign existing solely on social media.

#### **2.2.2.2. Individuals with a public social media persona**

The final group of users in social media are the individuals with public use of social media. **This corresponds to individuals who use social media as a platform to reach individuals for a specific purpose and not just to connect differently to people they already know, or to seek content.** They have a public voice that they use for different purposes. For example, activists find that social media is the medium that will help bring light to their goals or views.

Of the 364 Facebook pages identified, 77 are associated with an individual – be them celebrities or politicians. **Some of them have gained popularity through social media solely, some earned their followers for activities off social media.** The former have become famous spokespeople for issues or personalities on social media solely, as those so-called influencers were unknown to the wider public

prior to social media – this is the case of Wais Barakzai, who is part of the top 20 Facebook pages in Afghanistan.

### 2.2.3. SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN ADVOCACY PLATFORM

Activists in Afghanistan have learned to leverage social media as a new platform successfully, and **citizens that would not ordinarily be drawn into taking a stand outside of the platform, now find a way to support issues and express their opinions due to social media.**

Tahmina Arian is a young, freshly graduated, Afghan woman who chose to create a campaign on social media around the hashtag #whereismyname to protest the Afghan custom of erasing women's names. She had not been directly involved in campaigns previously, but saw an opportunity along with other young women from around the country to utilize platforms they use daily to create a wider conversation. This self-made, spontaneous campaign, exemplifies how social media can enable individuals to engage in social issues they would not otherwise feel qualified to address. Tahmina Arian only used Facebook, but soon created a Twitter account as she realized Twitter was a necessity to bring forward this issue to a different audience of politicians and media organizations.

**Of course, some social media activists have years of experience in advocacy and replicate their activism online.** This is the case for Wazhma Frogh, the women's rights activist. A member of the High Peace Council, and the director of Research Institute for Women, Peace and Security, Wazhma Frogh uses Twitter not only to bring to light women's rights issues in Afghanistan, but to share her views on other current events in the country with her 97,000 followers.

She started using Twitter during the Open Jirga, when relevant stakeholders were still few on Twitter, but since then she notes that all relevant political stakeholders in Afghanistan have grown accustomed to using Twitter. The Open Jirga, launched in 2013 through BBC's Media Action, was certainly a cornerstone for using social media in Afghanistan as it directly concerned Afghan citizens as one of the few opportunities for ordinary people to question Government officials and candidates. Afghans could use their Facebook and Twitter platforms to submit questions for the televised debates or continue the debates.

Figure 11: Screenshot of Frogh Wazhma's Twitter account



#### 2.2.3.1. Social media personalities

Some individuals have gained a status as a public personality due to their social media activity. **This is notably the fact for social commentators who have understood and tapped into the mindset of young Afghans.**

Asad Ziar is a prolific businessman, social commentator and Afghan social media personality. Now followed by over 80,000 people on Facebook through his personal facebook page, he first became popular when he shared a video of Pakistani army personnel conducting themselves inappropriately,

Figure 12: Screenshot of Noor Ahmad Shah Zadran's Facebook page



information on a mix of world events, political comments, and entertainment, with the thread of national unity and pride in the background. **He admits that patriotic content is consistently the most popular, especially when big projects are announced or positive political events are highlighted – any indication that ‘The country is going forward’.**

This is echoed by Noor Ahmad Shah Zadran, a young man describing himself as a photographer with over 46,000 followers on Facebook. He declares wanting to provide updates on events to his followers, but the emphasis of his page is on promoting Afghan National Forces as he freely admits. He sources a lot of his content through official websites of the Afghan National Army and Police, and repackages it for Facebook. He notes that pictures always get more likes and comments. He views his role on social media as a service to his country and as an encouragement to his followers to help ‘improve our country’. **Those accounts have recognized the appeal of patriotic and hopeful messages.**

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### Focus: Recruitment for insurgent groups

Social media is not only invested in by social activists and politicians, it is also a potent recruitment tool for insurgent groups in Afghanistan – The Islamic State in Khorasan Province (ISKP, otherwise known as ISIS) mobilizes traditional media like the radio, along with social media (Facebook, Twitter and Telegram), as outlets for its propaganda (Osman, 2016). While the Taliban were keen to ban internet during its regime, it has since then leveraged social media as a recruitment and propaganda tool. Social media has provided a powerful platform for them to communicate and to control their narrative. Furthermore, the possibility to post pictures and video triggers emotive reactions they could not as easily achieve on radio or paper.

The rise of Telegram and WhatsApp have allowed groups to have chatrooms on platforms that are notable for having end-to-end encryption. Whereas Facebook pages or Twitter accounts can be reported and closed, such reporting of activity is less likely on instant messaging apps. Intelligence organizations must survey or control several social media platforms at once, as insurgent groups increase the number of platforms they use (the Taliban leverage WhatsApp, Telegram, or Viber groups, and members have Twitter and Facebook accounts). As one online group gets shut down, another gets started. This increases the need for resources for intelligence organizations, as insurgent groups invest in different platforms at once to stay ahead. *“When social networking services ban terrorist-linked accounts, channels, and pages, the Taliban will tell its supporters through available means of communication where to find the latest outlets of its news agency, rebuilt through fresh numbers and usernames.”* (Bodetti, 2016)

but this post also attracted a lot of threats and he quit Facebook for a year. However, he started drafting and posting anti-warlord messages again on Facebook, and realized he could post content without having a media outlet edit his content before publication. Now, most of his posts consist of comments on current events such as the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar (as of October 2017) but also memes, and funny videos on his public page. He acts as a source for

Furthermore, social media is not only a recruitment tool but also a window to a wider audience of westerners. Propaganda online does not only serve their primary audience, but also sends a signal to opponents of their continued presence and their strategy online is only a reflection of their relentless strategy on the ground (Hairan, 2010).

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## 2.3. TYPOLOGY OF USERS

A typology of users emerges among both private and public users. Private users demonstrate varying degrees of activity through their frequency of usage. This typology of users will bring further insight once we turn to analyzing categories of usage. On the other hand, public users are differentiated by their networks.

### 2.3.1. PRIVATE USERS

**We have seen that private users are homogenous in their demographic characteristics, but there is a variety in the type of activity and frequency with which they access social media.** Basing ourselves on Facebook users' habits, we find users can be passive, active or hyperactive. **This typology helps understand why some users will make a restricted usage of social media whereas others will disseminate and share information, eventually being the drivers behind online debates and online mobilization.**

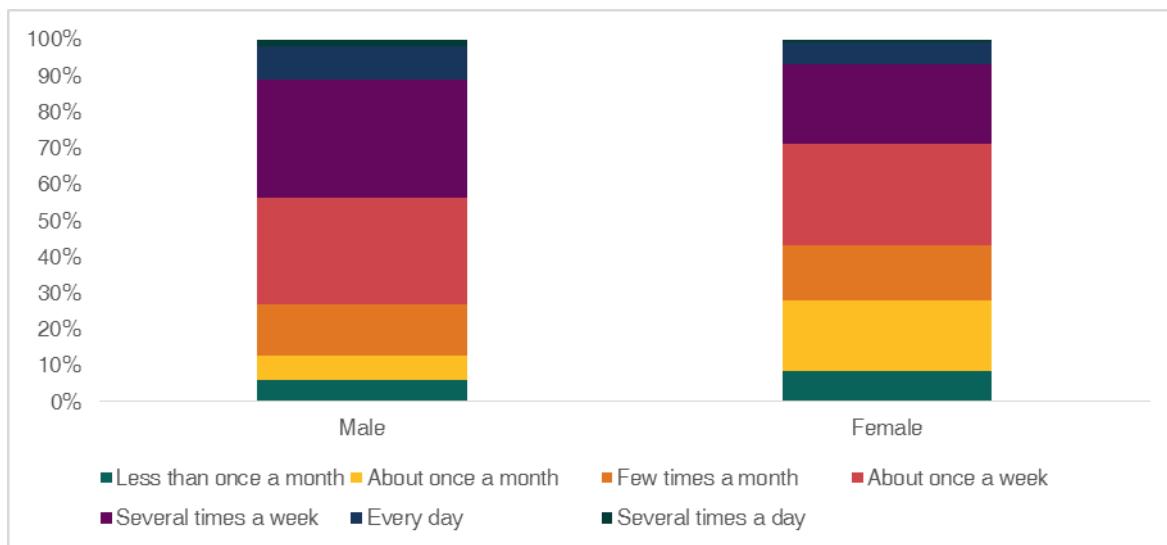
The first category, passive users, corresponds to those who never post on their Facebook page – about 14% of Facebook users surveyed. These passive users do not utilize Facebook as a platform for sharing their own personal views or statements.

Among those that do post on their Facebook page, 66% post at least once a week. Women are less likely to post frequently than men – as 73% of men post status updates at least once a week compared to 57% of women.

Hyperactive users are defined as those that post status updates several times a week. 32% of Facebook users (or 30% of all social media users) match this definition. While there are slightly more hyperactive users among men than women, the more surprising element is that almost half of users interviewed in Kandahar match this definition of hyperactive Facebook users, far ahead of Kabul. Activity on social media is particularly high in Kandahar and Jalalabad as 55% and 44% of users in each city respectively are hyperactive.

If we compare how often people post on Facebook to how often they access Facebook, it seems like the distinction between passivity and activity is not frequency of access – but it does seem to be the discriminant factor between activity and hyperactivity. **Passivity is a choice and is not tied to external circumstances, as there is no significant difference between passive and active users in terms of income, level of education, or even gender. However, the difference between active and hyperactive users is directly affected by gender** (35% of hyperactive users are women, against 51% of active users), and there are no notable differences between active and hyperactive users in terms of privacy requirements or trust in social media.

Figure 13: How often do you share status updates on Facebook?



### 2.3.2. NETWORK ANALYSIS

The network analysis<sup>19</sup> illustrates the relations between each category of public pages on Facebook or accounts on Twitter – to be more specific, follows between accounts. What emerges are that **some accounts are embedded in a network of accounts – they follow as much as they are followed, and are followed not only by a wider public but also by their peers**. In comparison, **some social media accounts are isolated from their peers and do not seek to follow others, limiting their platform as one for unilateral broadcasts**.

Table 7: Public pages types and characteristics

Page type	Characteristics	Examples
Broadcast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use social media as a platform to disseminate message the way they would on other platforms</li> <li>Unilateral relations in their sector</li> <li>Limit interactions with users who engage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ministry of Culture</li> <li>Presidential Palace (ARG)</li> <li>USAID</li> </ul>
Interactive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use social media for differentiated content</li> <li>Multilateral relations in their sector</li> <li>Leverage user engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Afghan Analysts' Network</li> <li>DAIL Herat</li> <li>Rohan</li> </ul>

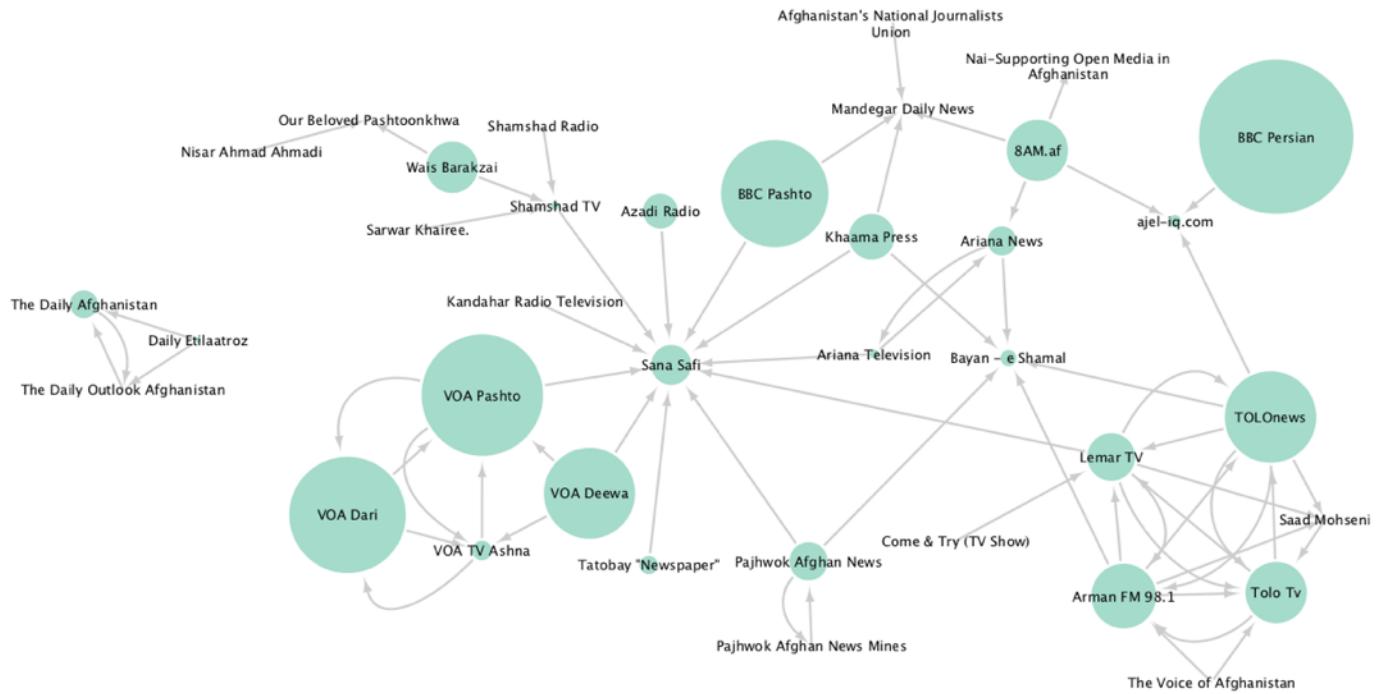
The network analysis of media-related pages on Facebook indicates clusters: there is a VoA cluster, a Pashto Language Media cluster (Shamshad network, Wais Barakzai), and a cluster of Moby Group-owned channels (Tolo, Lemar, Arman FM).

**The network analysis also reveals how specific accounts are influential within a particular category or sector but do not have a wider popularity among Afghan users.** This is specifically

<sup>19</sup> The arrows in the figures below indicate the direction of each ‘follow’ between accounts, while the nodes are sized according to the number of followers for the individual account. Only accounts that are linked to other identified accounts are represented. For example, the arrow goes from BBC Pashto to Sana Safi, which means BBC Pashto follows Sana Safi, and their node is bigger than Khaama Press as they have more followers.

the case for the journalist Sana Safi or Moby Group owner Saad Mohseni. Both accounts are at the center of their own cluster of peers, but do not have a wider audience.

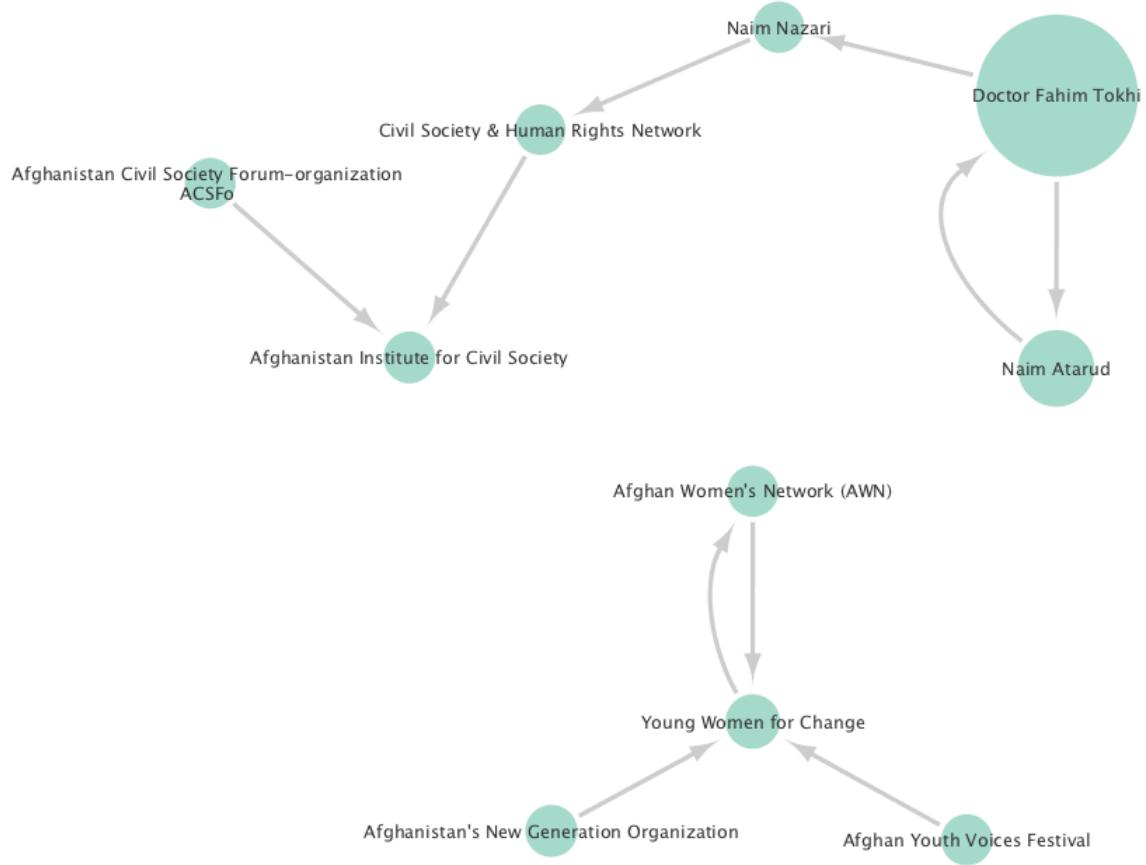
Figure 14: Network mapping, media pages on Facebook



A similar network analysis for media accounts on Twitter becomes unreadable due to the sheer number of interlinkages. **There is an audience of peers on Twitter, wherein users on Twitter value the relationship of peers on this platform, whereas Facebook is used for broadcasting to an audience of private users.**

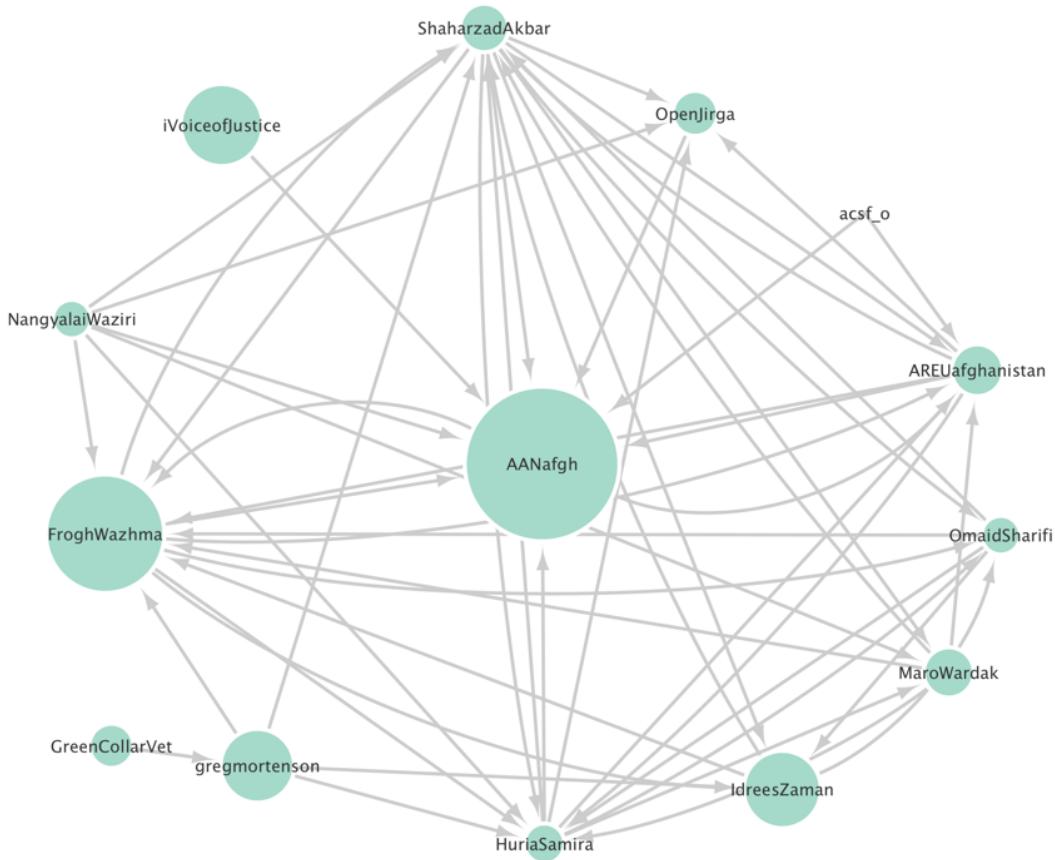
**Looking at CSOs, only two clusters seem to appear on Facebook, whereas on Twitter the level of interconnection between CSOs is remarkable.** On Facebook, a first youth and women rights' issues cluster appears, with Young Women for Change at its center. Another chain of pages appears, but with little bilateral relations and no distinct circle of influence.

Figure 15: Network mapping, CSOs on Facebook



The cluster analysis on Twitter yields many more interrelations. The account at the center of the CSO network is the Afghans Analyst Network – this network of CSO Twitter account being a source of information. More strikingly, three women's rights activists (Frogh Wazhma, Huria Samira and Shaharzad Akbar) have a wide appeal and are influential among their peers.

Figure 16: Network mapping, CSOs on Twitter



Strikingly, looking at the government & politics pages on Facebook, the most popular pages of those kind are isolated within their own networks. The Ashraf Ghani page and the ARG page follow each other, but are not followed by any other government & politics page – similarly Dr Abdullah Abdullah and the page of the Chief Executive – Afghanistan follow each other – but are only followed by one other page. This highlights a clear conclusion:

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

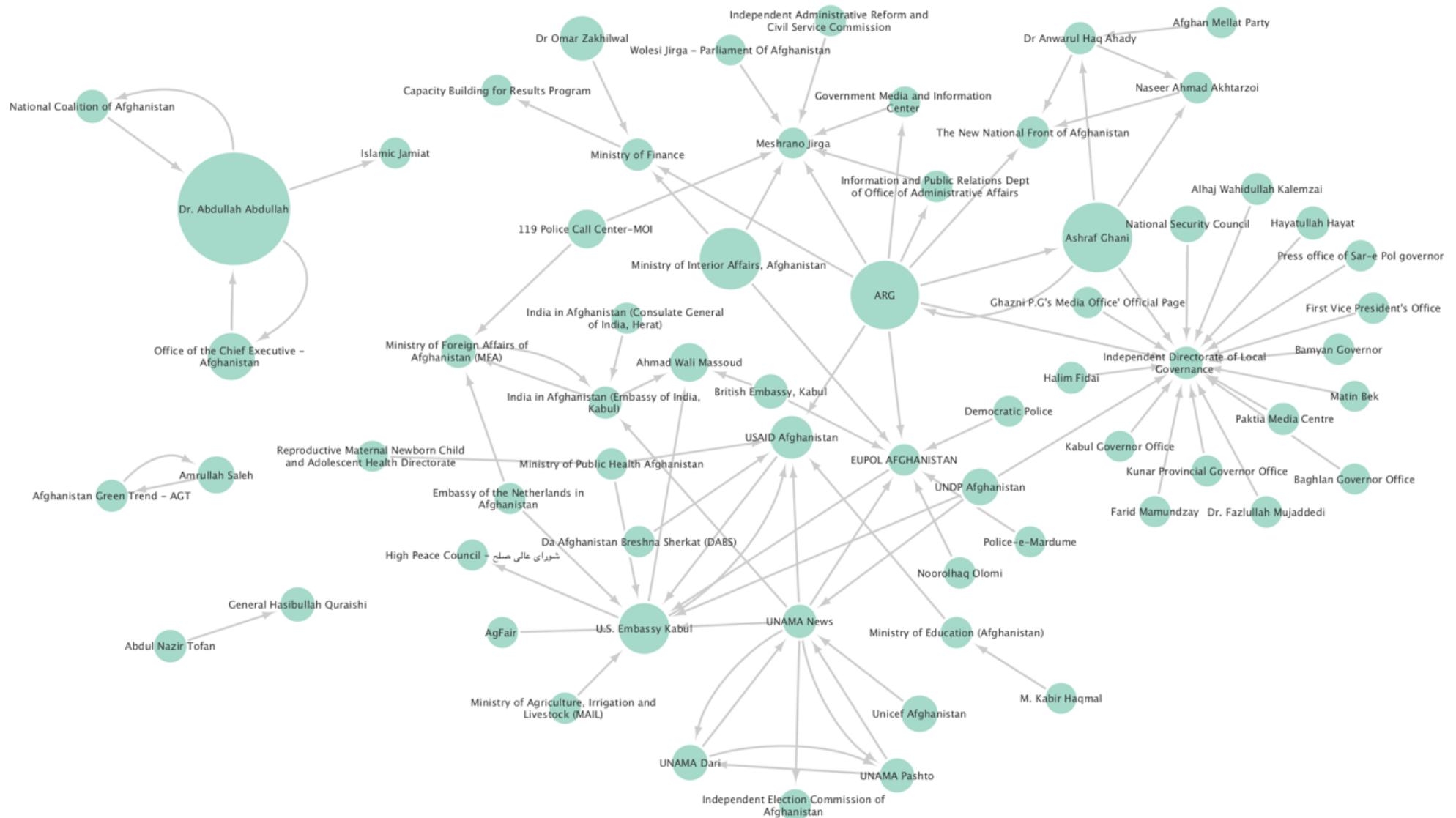
The most influential<sup>20</sup> pages within this category's network are USAID and UNAMA, but the most influential Afghan government pages are Meshrano Jirga and the Independent Directorate of Local Governance. Those pages specifically seek to highlight governance issues at different levels and the work of different government organs. (see Figure 17)

Similar analyses were conducted for each category of pages, and it comes as no surprise that Resolute Support appears at the center of Military & Security pages, whereas the Afghanistan Cricket Board is at the center of the sports accounts' network.

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<sup>20</sup> For the purposes of this analysis a page is considered to be influential among their peers when they are followed by pages of the same category. This does not indicate that they have more fans overall than other pages.

Figure 17: Network mapping, government & politics on Facebook



## SECTION SUMMARY

Social media is populated mostly by private users, who are young and educated. Social media users prefer Facebook over all other platforms, but instant messaging is influential in how Afghans relate to each other too. Twitter appeals to a higher-level audience, with accounts focusing on media and politics more so than on Facebook.

**While social media can reach Afghans quickly and at low cost, its actual reach is limited and far below that of television or radio.** Social media users correspond to a group of young, educated and urban Afghans. Rural, older, and illiterate Afghans are left out of conversations happening online, and while some might be an indirect audience to social media pages (as children might be showing Facebook content to them once in a while or they might hear conversations about it), they are in effect inactive on social media. Internet remains the main barrier to social media access, especially in rural areas who do not benefit from 3G coverage.

Public pages sampled on Facebook are mostly media-related (18%) or government & politics related (29%), which leads us to believe that private users can use social media as a source of information on current affairs, but **there is a clear distinction between pages that are broadcasting information without interacting with users or other pages, and pages that are well embedded within a network and leverage the interactive aspect of social media.**

### **3. CONTENT AND ENGAGEMENT**

While we have presented the array of social media users and the rationale behind organizations and individuals making public accounts, we have yet to understand what content is found on social media. **This section will present the types of content that is found on social media, as elicited through the content analysis, and how users engage with different types of content.**

Engagement with content comes in steps on Facebook: at first likes represent the easiest, least committal, type of engagement. The second level of engagement corresponds to sharing posts, which similarly to likes does not involve further content creation. Commenting and posting directly on someone's account are the final stages of engagement and presumably much more rare.

**By understanding how users choose to engage and in reaction to which content, we can identify the types of content that will capture interest and create conversations.**

#### **3.1. WHAT CONTENT CAN BE FOUND ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

The landscape mapping showed us that most of the 347 public pages identified were government & politics (29%) or media-related (18%), yet that number of pages was not a good indication of popularity as government & politics gather 12% only of overall fans counted. The number of fans for a page might indicate an interest in the organization behind the page or a willingness to follow updates from them, but it does not indicate what content actually makes users react – or rather, engage.

Among the identified accounts on both Facebook and Twitter, a limited number of pages/accounts of interest were selected by Internews and Altai Consulting in order to conduct a content analysis. Published content and related people's reactions (likes, shares, retweets, Facebook reactions like "love", "haha" or "sad", and comments) from those accounts have been extracted over the past year. 41,127 tweets, 80,657 Facebook posts and 3,113,907 Facebook comments were collected this way.

All content was categorized among the following topics:

- Security & Military,
- Religion,
- National Pride & Civic Engagement,
- Entertainment,
- Education,
- Government, Politics & Elections,
- Sports,
- Other

**It was important to categorize content, as accounts may fall in a general category but make posts on a variety of topics, as exemplified through media accounts.** Thus, not only is it possible to understand the types of content posted on social media, but it is possible to assess which content generates the most engagement.

##### **3.1.1. FACEBOOK**

**The majority of posts from the accounts selected for content analysis are posts with links (52%), mostly due to the prevalence of posts with links to articles from media accounts.** Indeed, 73% of TOLONews pages, 97% of Khaama Press posts and 89% of 8AM Daily News are links. **Media**

**accounts use Facebook as a platform to link to their other platforms.** The content analysis does not reveal whether users actually click on the links to read articles or if they simply browse headlines for each – but the latter seems more likely as many organizations noted that their follows on Facebook were larger than their audience on other media.

**Pictures are also prevalent on Facebook, as 28% of the content analyzed include one or more picture. Not only do pictures capture the users' interest and can appeal to illiterate users, they do not necessitate as good an internet connection as videos.** 82% of Afghanistan My Passion's posts, the most popular Afghan Facebook page, are pictures – the administrators of the page having well understood how to make their content appeal to most.

Video content can be found (12%) but speed of connection is still a concern – media organizations such as TOLONews (22%), VoA Pashto (25%) and 1TVNews (15%) are prone to using videos, and so is journalist Sana Safi (33% of her posts)- but Dr. Ramazan Bashardost takes first place as 90% of his posts are video clips. As Facebook is his main platform to communicate, and as texts might not be reachable to all potential Facebook users (and indirect users to whom content might be shown) the video clips are the opportunity to articulate his position.

Finally, only 8% of content analyzed was text only – indicating that **Facebook is utilized as a visual social media platform.**

**In terms of topics, government, politics & elections, as well as security & military are the two most common topics posted about. This is most likely due to the prevalence of media organizations in the accounts selected for analysis.** However, education and sports are other frequently occurring topics – and as evidenced in section 3.2.2, it is likely due to the engagement they generate.

### 3.1.2. TWITTER

Twitter use is less visually driven than Facebook, as text only posts are much more frequent: 44% of posts against 8% of Facebook posts analyzed. This again highlights not only the difference in purpose for users of each platform but also the gap in audience expectations. **Twitter is for a higher-level audience expectant of sharp and concise commentary while Facebook can rely on visuals to convey information more broadly.**

**Just as for Facebook, there are large amounts of links found on Twitter (46%), and as for Facebook this is driven by media organizations sharing links to their websites.**

The tweets fall mainly into the categories government, politics & elections, as well as security & military – more so even than on Facebook. There seems to be little room on Twitter for education, entertainment or sports as few posts concerning these topics were identified.

## 3.2. WHAT CONTENT ELICITS THE MOST ENGAGEMENT

**Engagement is measured through likes, shares and comments on Facebook, and through replies and retweets on Twitter. Likes are the lowest level of engagement, followed by shares and finally comments or posts are the highest types of engagement. We measure overall engagement as the totality of reactions, but we also look at the more prevalent types of engagement – or drivers.**

Engagement is driven overwhelmingly by likes, which affect overall reactions, but the drop from average number of likes to average number of comments or shares shows there that users are not taking the step to engage themselves differently with content. Unexpectedly, shares are as rare as comments.

The table below presents the average of each type of engagement, per Facebook account selected for analysis, and for all posts.

Table 8: Average engagement per post, selected Facebook pages

Facebook account name	Average count of engagement for all posts		
	Likes	Comments	Shares
TOLOnews	1038	28	24
Pajhwok Afghan News	1509	32	45
VOA Pashto	2032	66	68
1TVNewsAF	489	23	20
Khaama Press	1506	26	20
روزنامه هشت صبح	1030	34	15
کانکور	529	65	25
Afghanistan My Passion	12251	451	320
پناهجویان هزاره هزاره	222	2	3
Wais Barakzai	1486	83	104
Afghanistan Cricket Board	4126	174	83
Arman FM 98.1	3025	102	111
دакتر فهیم توحی	8047	357	172
Afghanistan In My Heart	1185	125	227
Dr. Abdullah Abdullah	1793	73	22
آزاده جرگه . جرگه آزاد .	143	4	13
آریانا سعید Aryana Sayeed	3317	370	49
شنا سافی Sana Safi	2449	136	15
احمد سعیدی Ahmad Saeedi	2145	176	79
Salam Afghanistan .	1442	214	24
Farhad Darya	4655	410	89
Dr. Ramazan Bashardost	2591	107	233
Afghanistan's National Journalists Union	7	0	2
Young Women for Change	4	0	2

Engagement on Twitter is even lower, as a result of the smaller audience. Similarly to Facebook, engagement is predominantly through likes rather than retweets, even among a more specialist audience.

Table 9: Average engagement per tweet, selected Twitter accounts

Name of account	Average count of engagement for all tweets	
	Likes	Retweets
Bsarwary	10	7
ArianaTVN	2	2
AimalFaizi	3	1
FroghWazhma	6	1
SediqSediqqi	23	5
ARG_AFG	56	14
LNajafizada	10	5
FawziaKoofi77	25	3
Moonzajer	5	1
MASalangi	33	14
AmrullahSaleh2	182	98
RahmatullahN	57	22
AnisaShaheed1	23	2
Alizadaofficial	2	0
HekmatKarzai	123	14
Ashrafghani	500	161
AdelaRaz	18	3
Umerdaudzai2	10	2
SalehRegistani	15	2
Afghanmusik	0	0

### 3.2.1. ACCORDING TO POST TYPE

**Posts with links might be prevalent on Facebook, but they do not elicit as high an engagement as posts with pictures or videos** – for the 9900 posts with links from TOLOnews over the analyzed period, the average count of likes was 917, the average count of comments was 22 and the average count of shares was 9. In comparison, the 508 picture posts made by TOLOnews over the same period elicited an average of 2225 likes, 64 comments and 49 shares. This confirms the thought that links might not be clicked and explored.

Afghanistan My Passion mostly uses pictures in its posts – each post with a picture elicits an average of 13,657 likes and a slew of other reactions (290 ‘Hearts’, 258 sad faces, 475 comments and 308 shares). The only other account to trigger this amount of engagement is Aryana Sayeed’s – while she posts comparatively fewer picture, each elicits an average of 14,189 likes and 944 comments. Her

videos in particular trigger the most comments of all accounts analyzed: an average of 1576 comments for each of her videos. Her text only posts garner an average of 94 likes in comparison.

**The audience on Facebook expects pictures or videos as content and reacts to this more so than links and text only posts.**

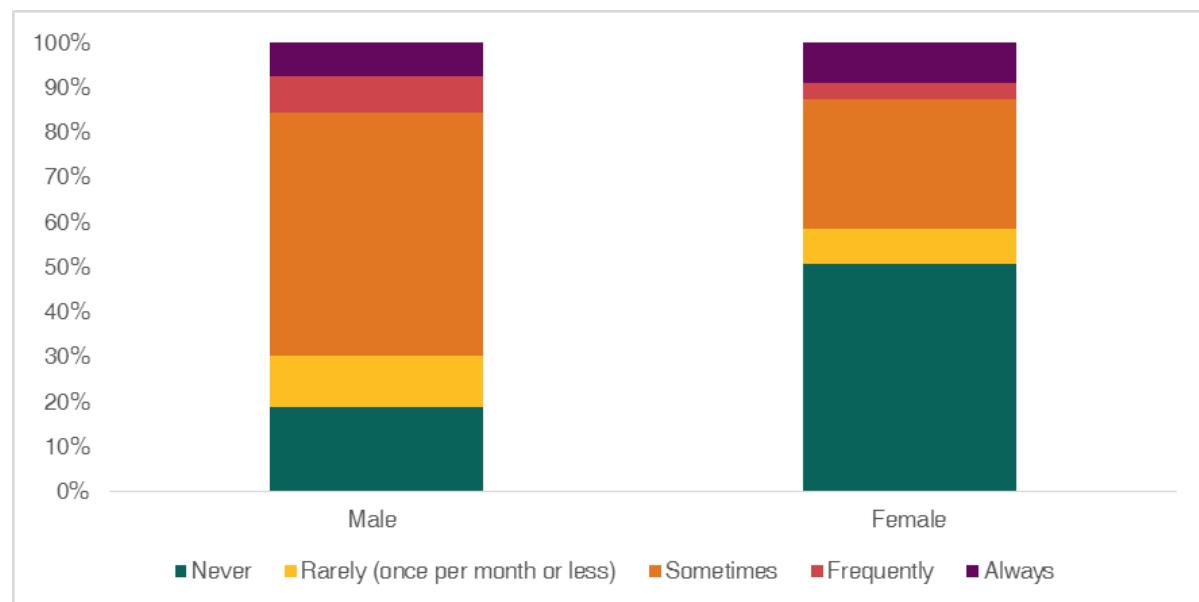
When it comes to the types of content that might be shared, pictures and videos are not commonly shared, whether they have been taken by the user directly and then shared on their account, or taken from another account and propagated.

Over a quarter (33%) of respondents never share pictures taken themselves and over half (63%) never share videos taken themselves. Expectedly, women are less likely to share photos on Facebook – note that we don't mean photos of the person herself, just photos taken herself. Likewise, they are less likely to share videos.<sup>21</sup> Naturally, we might have expected users to be more likely to share content from other pages, but this is even more rare, as 38% never share pictures from other accounts, and 56% never share videos from other accounts.

However, there is a clear distinction between users to be made. 22% of hyperactive users frequently or always share photos they take themselves on Facebook, compared to 11% of passive users. Likewise, they are more likely to share photos or videos taken by other users.

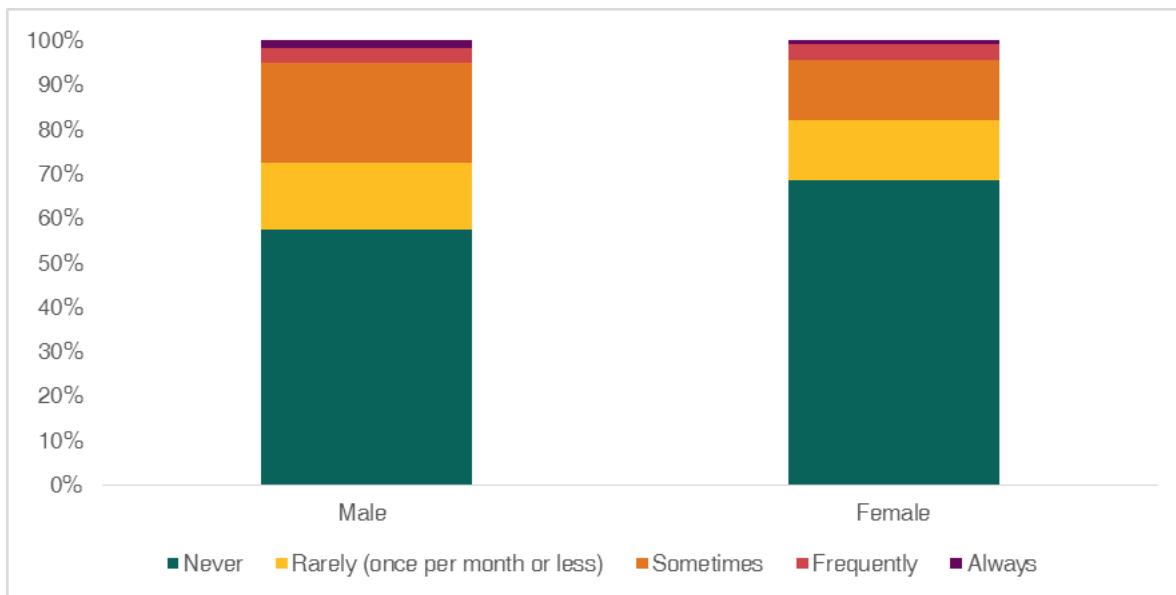
The preference for pictures over videos is explained by the quality of internet connections, as videos consume more data and are slower to load.

Figure 18: Do you ever share photos you take yourself on Facebook



<sup>21</sup> Figure 19: sample sizes: male Facebook user (186), female Facebook user (156)

Figure 19: Do you ever share videos you take yourself on Facebook?



**A similar analysis can be conducted on Twitter, however reactions (likes and retweets) are at a much smaller scale across all accounts.** Overall, the accounts that generate the most reactions are that of Amrullah Saleh (leader of Afghanistan Green Trend), Ashraf Ghani, Hekmat Karzai, and the Presidential Palace's official twitter account. **Clearly the political stakeholders lead the Afghan Twittersphere, and in contrast to Facebook, the tweets with links elicit almost as many reactions as tweets with pictures.** Hekmat Karzai's tweets with links are liked an average of 173 times, compared to an average of 98 likes for tweets with pictures.

### 3.2.2. ACCORDING TO POST TOPIC

**The reaction to topics is different on Facebook than it is on Twitter – with Facebook users more likely to engage with entertainment posts whilst Twitter users react to sports but also security & military posts.**

Summing all types of engagement per topic on Facebook, we find that entertainment posts get 10% more reactions than all other posts do on average – **making entertainment the most popular topic across the board, followed closely by sports (9% more engagement than the overall average).**

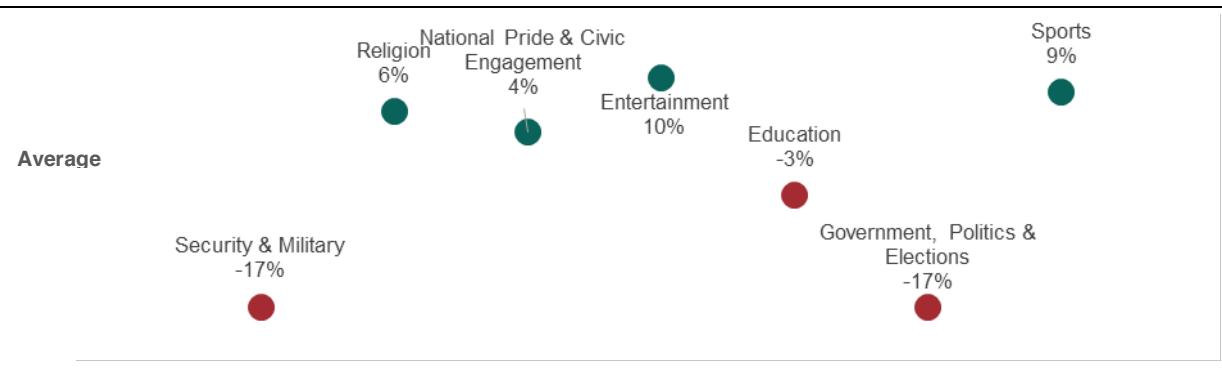
However, the trends diverge when we look at comments. Comments are far less frequent than likes – when entertainment posts on TOLONews get an average of 1,236 likes, they get an average of 35 comments. This phenomenon is replicated across accounts and topics: sports posts on Afghanistan My Passion get an average of 10,785 likes, but an average of 122 comments. The content that collects the most comments relatively is national engagement & civic engagement, followed by sports, whilst the posts triggering the most shares follow the same trend as likes.

While security & military, as well as government, politics & elections, rank among the highest occurring type of content on Facebook, they do not elicit the same rate of engagement as other, 'lighter' topics. In fact, they both garner 17% less engagement than overall engagement across topics.

**Social media users may follow media accounts, and as such are updated on security & military issues, as well as government, politics & elections, but they remain relatively passive when coming across such content.** They are keener to engage with entertainment and sports.

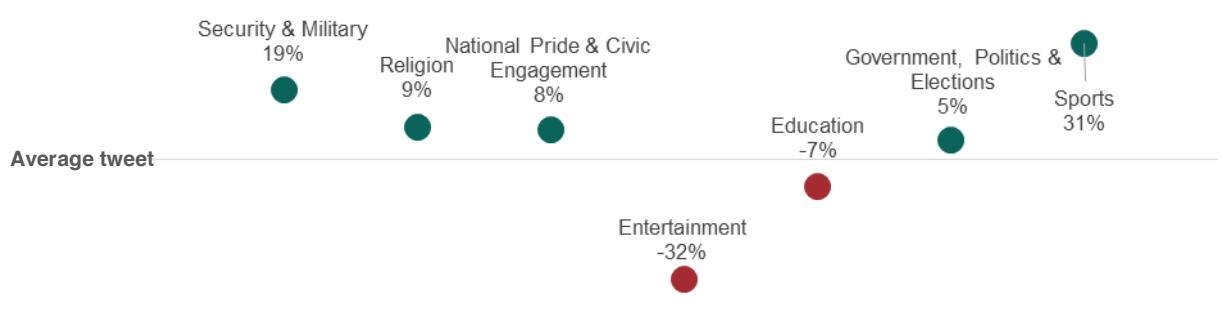
The ranking of each topic in terms of engagement generated is summarized in the following graph. Religion seems to rank highly as well, but the boundaries of this topic, as defined by a curated lexicon to identify such content, are murky – religious mentions and undertones are present across many topics.

Figure 20: Public's overall engagement to content compared to an average post, Facebook



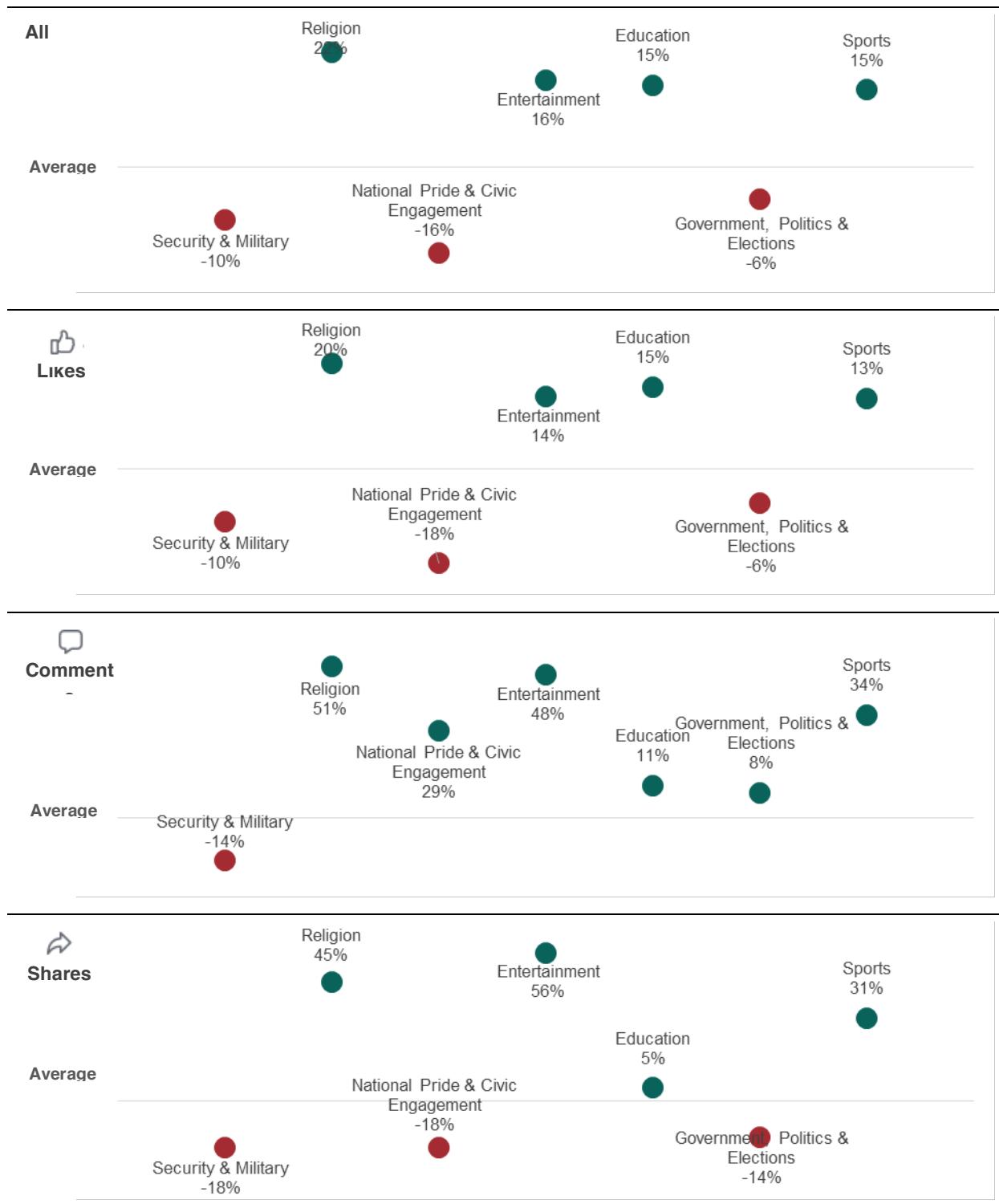
**Twitter users on the other hand, are much less likely to react to entertainment posts** – those posts generate 32% less engagement than the average. Sports remains a popular topic, but there is a reversal of appeal between entertainment and security & military, and government, politics & elections, as they are now engaging content on Twitter. **This is also testament to the difference in audiences between Facebook and Twitter, as Twitter users have a clearer intent to collect specific information from the social media platform.**

Figure 21: Public's overall engagement to content compared to an average tweet, Twitter



However, this above analysis is biased on the account selection, and some accounts are specialist accounts (Afghanistan Cricket Board for example) – selecting only generalist pages which present a diversity in content and with a high number of fans could yield different results. Below, the five main media pages from Facebook were selected to compare engagement – namely TOLOnews, Pajhwok Afghan News, VOA Pashto, 1TVNewsAF and Khaama Press. **Media pages not only post on a variety of topics to a high frequency, they attract the highest number of fans on Facebook.**

Figure 22: Public's engagement to content compared to an average post, top 5 media pages

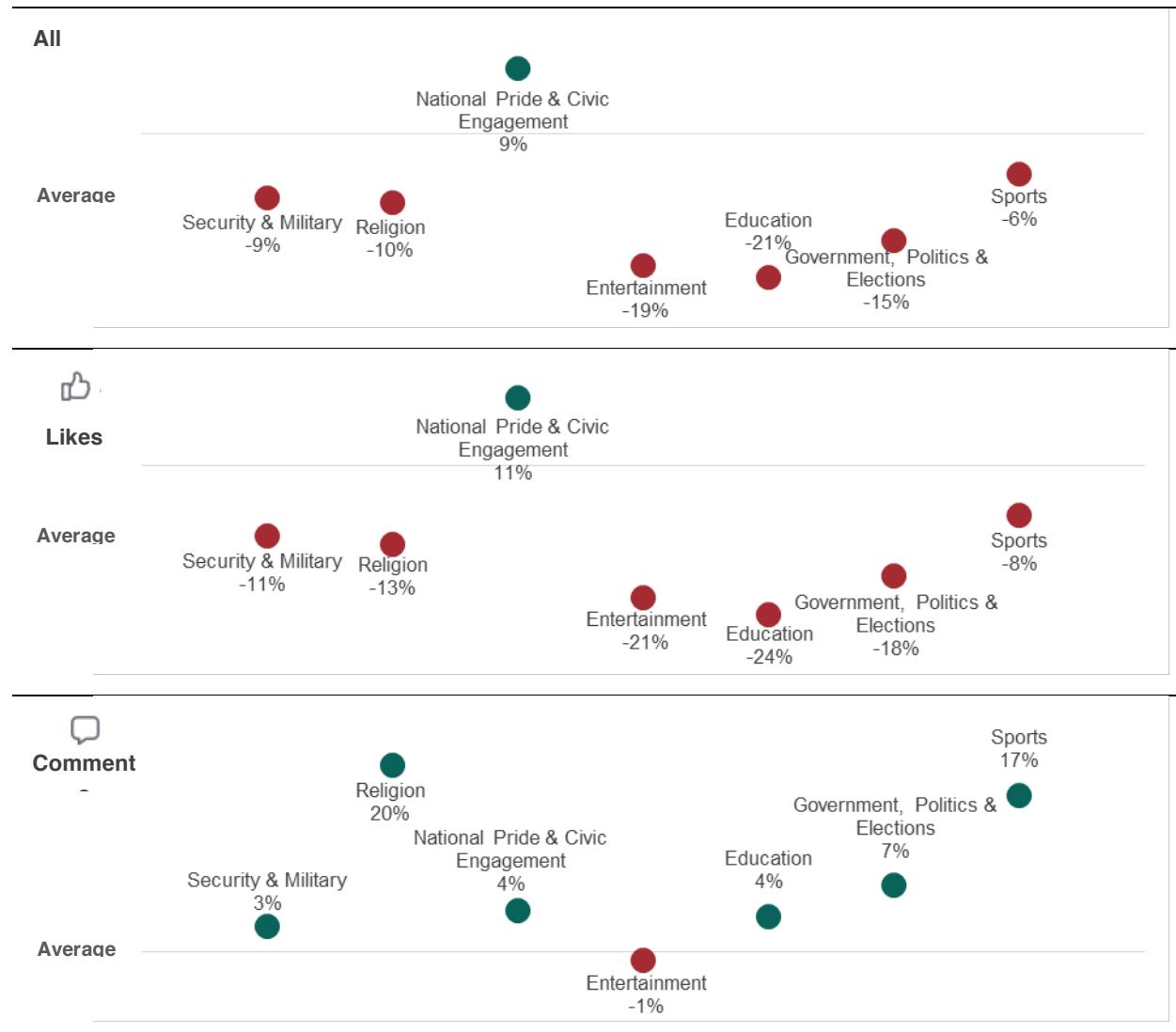


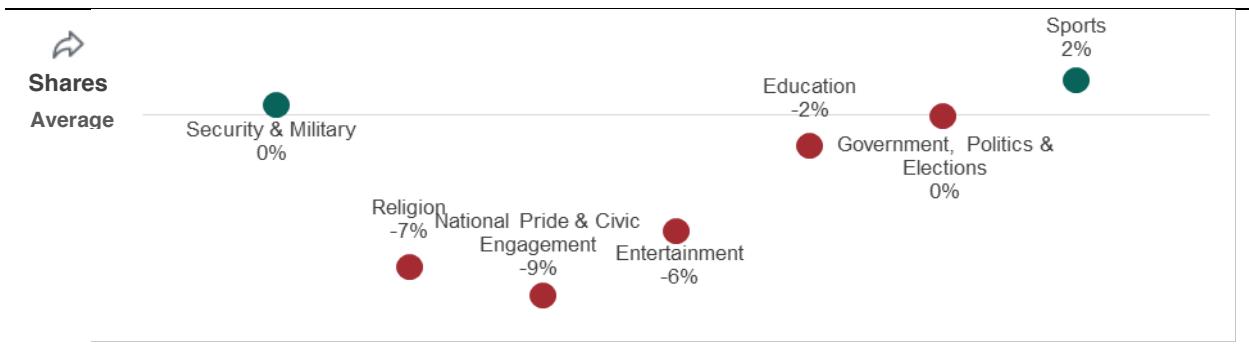
As already noted, most media outlet posts are links to their own website, **whilst the remaining content generally includes pictures or videos, confirming the preference for visuals to text posts in order to capture attention**. Furthermore, most media posts concern security & military or government, politics & elections. However, reactions come mostly on religion, entertainment, education and sports posts – and this pattern is mostly driven by likes. **But when focusing on comments and shares, the**

**most successful topics are entertainment and sports. These are the two topics triggering active engagement on media pages.**

Media pages post the most frequently of all categories, and the trend of engagement to their content influences the overall engagement trend. Yet the most popular page is not a media one, but rather Afghanistan My Passion, a patriotic page posting on a variety of topics, which triggers the most engagement overall from its 3.7 million fans, as each post averages 12,251 likes, 263 ‘hearts’, 242 ‘sad faces’, 451 comments, and 320 shares. Grouping Afghanistan My Passion with a similar page – Afghanistan in My Heart – we focus on the engagement on those pages.

Figure 23: Public's engagement to content compared to an average post, patriotic pages





**Those two accounts are not as active as media pages but elicit more engagement on average, and this might be related to their intensive use of pictures and coverage of a broader variety of topics.** As expected for this page, national pride posts garner the most reactions, especially likes. However, looking at more active engagement such as shares and comments, sports captures interest the most.

**The consistent attractiveness of sports topics across platforms and accounts is explained by the ability of this topic to be entertaining and patriotic, and to provide unity and levity at once.**

### 3.3. QUALITY OF ENGAGEMENT

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

#### 3.3.1. COMMENTS

Masae Analytics compiled the comments to the content analyzed and ran a lexical analysis on them to identify the most commonly occurring words in relation to specific content on Facebook. **The word clouds below for education-related content and civic engagement-related content are striking in their similarity.** The methodology to identify education or civic engagement related posts relied on specific lexicons which, especially for education, allowed little overlap.<sup>22</sup>

**The most commonly occurring words in comments to both types of content are Taliban and Ghani – cementing the current hold of the Taliban insurgency over the mindsets of Afghans, whereas Ghani is cited in relation to all types of content.** The civic engagement word cloud has the words Honor, Law and Peace also stand out, with more negative words filling the background ('Corruption', 'Death', 'Shame', or 'Traitor'). The education comments however are overwhelmingly negative – Taliban, Death, Ghani, Enemy, Security and Shame are at the forefront of reactions. Online conversations on education topics veer into current affairs and security concerns.

<sup>22</sup>We first categorized all the content according to a lexicon matching specific content (i.e. 'university', 'degree', 'graduation', etc. for education; 'election', 'minister', etc. for government). Then we extracted comments for each type of content and counted the highest occurring words in English, Dari and Pashto combined. We then translated all those words and filtered out some of the words ('the', 'and', but also 'Allah' as it is a fixture in each comment) to then create the wordclouds.

Figure 24: Comments on national pride & civic engagement (left) and education (right) wordclouds



### 3.3.2. NEGATIVE ENGAGEMENT

### **3.3.2.1. Sockpuppetry**

Numerous organizations and users cite ‘fake profiles’, or sockpuppetry, as disruptive to their online activity. Social media allows, and even in some ways encourages, the possibility of anonymity, and some individuals do take on alternative identities. This is the case for women who do not want to reveal their name on social media out of safety concerns, but the reversal is true as some men use female names to approach other women online.

Kandahar National TV and ASR TV both point out the need for regulation of social media as fake accounts are common and seem to be an impediment to their online activity, as Kandahar National TV's administration manager puts it: "*We have rules for social media use but the government is not able to implement them, so now everybody can make fake pages freely and I would like to implement the rules to avoid all these fake profiles*"

The main challenge for the Afghanistan Needs You campaign is the multitude of similar pages using the same name, while Herat University finds it an issue when some users wrongfully claim to be students of theirs.

### **3.3.2.2. Online abuse**

Engagement with content can be negative in that users make derogatory, discriminatory or even violent comments in reaction to certain content. For Tahmina Arian, the woman behind the #whereismynname campaign, this has been experienced through online harassment as she receives lurid messages from strangers constantly. She is not the only woman to experience online harassment – it is so prevalent that women in universities do not share their real names in class as they do not want men to harass them or find them again online. **Social media has been a double-edged sword for women's rights activists.** For Frogh Waghma, **Twitter can be used to name and shame individuals for their wrongful attitude but social media is routinely used to question a woman's integrity and respectability.**

Online abuse can lead to physical threats – Tahmina Arian has been groped in the street, Wazhma Frogh routinely receives threats, and Asad Ziar is cautious to never post pictures of himself or reveal too much online to limit risks to his personal safety.

On a wider scale, the violent language online can instigate and propagate violence between political, religious or ethnic factions.

## SECTION SUMMARY

The content on social media predominantly concerns government, politics & elections, as well as security & military, most likely due to the prevalence of media organizations in the accounts selected for analysis. But they are not the content that garners the most engagement. **Social media users might follow news outlets and be flooded with content relating to current affairs, but they engage mostly with content relating to sports, entertainment or national pride.** Furthermore, **engagement is highest for posts that include pictures and videos.**

**This engagement is overwhelmingly driven by likes**, whilst comments and shares are marginal on Facebook. CSOs and activists may perceive an appetite for discussing social issues and for change, but active engagement (comments and shares) is predominantly focused on sports and entertainment. This doesn't negate the benefit of social media in bringing new supporters to specific social issues and providing passive support to these, but **the wider picture reveals that social media is primarily an extension of an individual's prior network and a space for entertainment.**

## 4. CATEGORIES OF USAGE

Private social media users are overwhelmingly young and literate, while the public social media accounts creating a lot of the content at the center of social media interactions are varied in their ability to leverage social media to their benefit. Engagement with content is led by follows and likes, comments and shares being limited and triggered by specific topics – namely entertainment and sports. Those two topics capture the attention of users across platforms, with current affairs topics such as government & politics and security & military finding an engaged audience on Twitter primarily.

**With this understanding of who users are and of their engagement on social media, we turn our attention to four categories of social media usage. Those are private communications (typically the extension of a person's network outside of social media), getting and sharing information, promoting and exchanging ideas, or mobilizing behind a cause.**

Assessing the potential of social media to foster open expression on governance issues necessitates gauging the more common social media categories against each other. Ultimately, the second and third categories are two sides of the same coin. They are key to ensuring that the promotion of ideas and the mobilizing of a cause can occur at all – it is the measure of the possibility of news spreading. The final category, mobilizing, reveals whether social media can ultimately effect change in Afghanistan.

### 4.1. PRIVATE COMMUNICATION

The first category of usage is private communication, which is also the dominant form of usage, as all users partake in them. **Users perceive social media as an extension of their network thus favoring interactions with individuals known outside of social media, however a set of hyperactive users do engage with a wider network of individuals and do so actively by commenting and sharing more than passive users.**

The focus of the analysis is on Facebook and instant messaging platforms, as other platforms such as Twitter have too low a user sample from the user survey to draw any conclusions.<sup>23</sup>

#### 4.1.1. FRIENDS & FAMILY ARE AT THE HEART OF INTERACTIONS

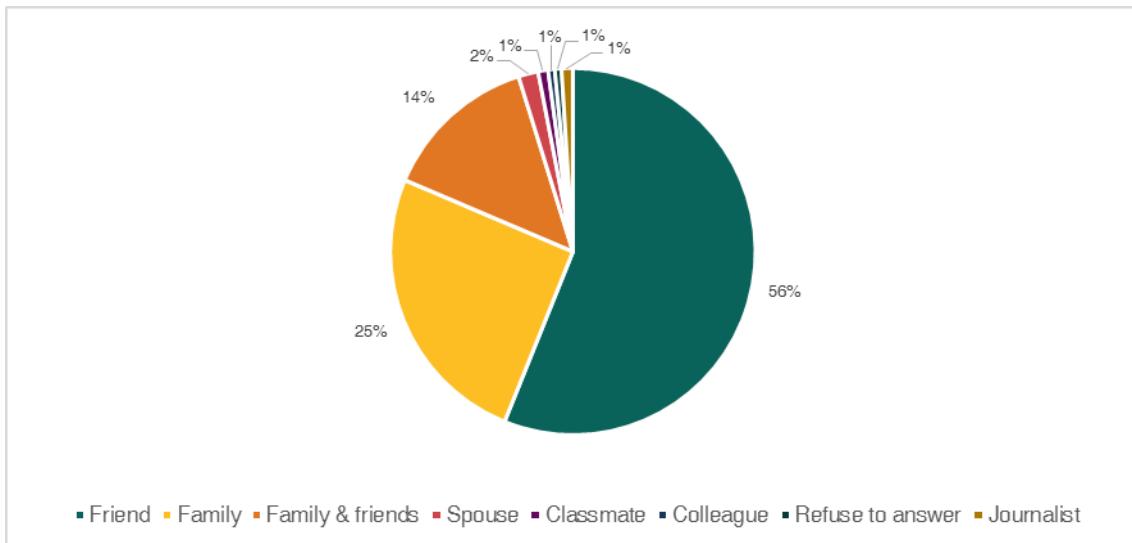
**Unsurprisingly, Facebook users interact the most with their Facebook Friends.** Those Friends are mostly individuals met face-to-face and outside of social media, as 56% of Facebook users say that they interact with a friend the most on Facebook, followed by family (25%) 'family and friend' (14%) and then 'spouse' (2%).<sup>24</sup> **Not only do users primarily interact the most with individuals they know, they restrict their Facebook Friends to specific circles of trust, especially women.**

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<sup>23</sup> 6% of the total sample, or 23 individuals, use Twitter

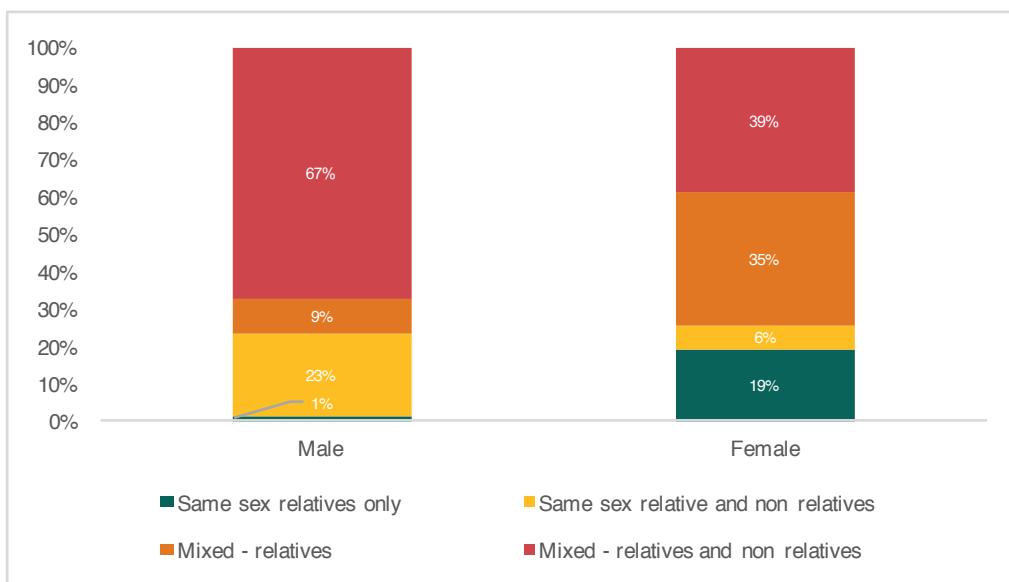
<sup>24</sup> Figure 25: sample size: Facebook users (342)

Figure 25: Who is the person you interact with the most on Facebook?



Indeed, almost 20% of female respondents declare being Friends only with same-sex relatives on Facebook – and 35% of female respondents declare only being Friends with relatives on Facebook. **This reflects the well-documented wariness of Afghan women to interact with individuals beyond their direct family on social media, as they are targets of harassment.** On the other hand, 67% of men declare being friends with a mixed-gender group of people that include both friends and family.<sup>25</sup>

Figure 26: Who are you friends with on Facebook?



**The primary use of Facebook is to extend interactions from ‘real-life’ on social media. Social media is then simply a means to continue interactions when they cannot do so otherwise.** This is confirmed when 60% of Facebook users declare talking to Friends outside of Afghanistan on

<sup>25</sup> Figure 26: sample size: male Facebook user (186), female Facebook user (156)

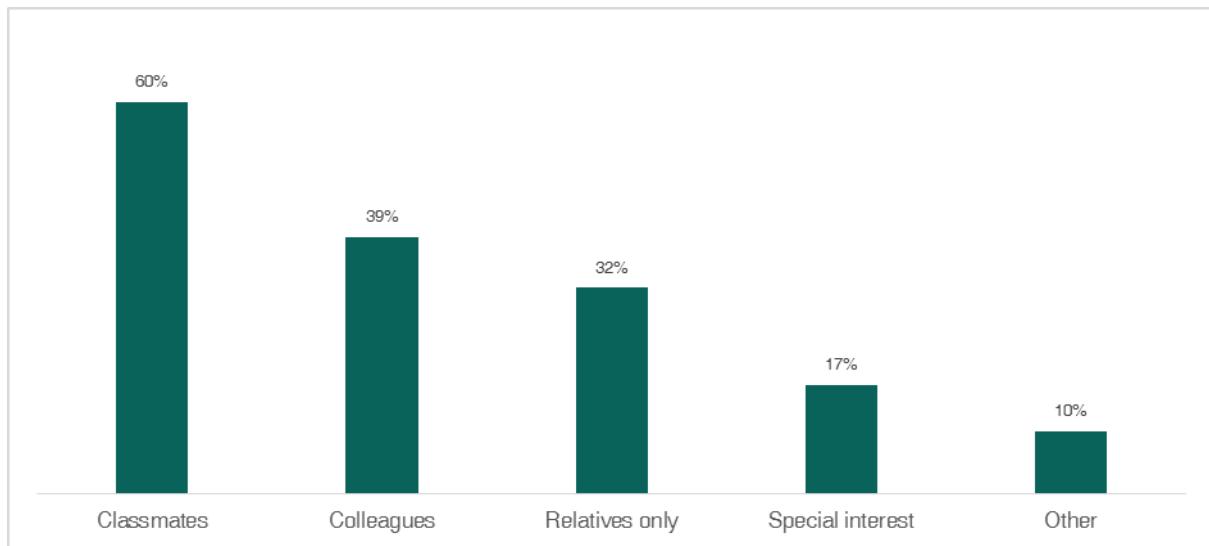
Facebook and 53% to family outside of Afghanistan. Women, however, are less likely to have interactions on Facebook than men. Men consistently have more interactions with different groups than women: 98% of male users interact with friends in Afghanistan compared to 82% of women, 88% of Male users interact with family in Afghanistan compared to 65% of female users, and 72% of male users interact with friends in Afghanistan compared to 46% of female users. However, when it comes to interactions with family abroad, women are just as likely to interact with them as men.

#### 4.1.2. BEYOND INTERACTIONS WITH FRIENDS: STRANGERS & GROUPS

**Interactions are not restricted to individuals met face-to-face, as 58% of Facebook users declare interacting with people they have not met before** – however there is a large gap between men and women once more as 74% of men say so, compared to 39% of women. These strangers may be other private users but also celebrities, journalists, or politicians.

Interactions with other private users never met before can take place in private groups – those are common on instant messaging and Facebook. 49% of respondents are part of a private group on Facebook, and those are particularly popular among college students since 60% of respondents are part of a group with students from the same faculty. Groups are also common between colleagues (39%) and relatives (32%), but can also exist for other interest groups.<sup>26</sup> **We do not have information on participation in groups on instant messaging, but anecdotal evidence suggests they are also very popular.** The added value of Facebook groups is the ability to upload documents, and to more easily send links. They provide interactions with many within a circle of trust.

Figure 27: What kind of private group are you a part of?



Recalling the typology of Facebook users, passive users are less likely to be part of a private group on Facebook – only 26% of them are compared to 54% and 51% of active and hyperactive users. Again, there is a behavioral choice to limit participation on social media.

#### 4.1.3. INTERACTIONS ON INSTANT MESSAGING APPLICATIONS

Instant messaging applications are also used to interact with strangers – some more so than others. Telegram and Messenger users are more likely to do so (50% and 46%) than WhatsApp, Viber, IMO or Skype users (20%, 19%, 25% and 15% respectively). **This is likely due to the fact that Telegram**

<sup>26</sup> Figure 27: sample size: part of a Facebook group (168)

**and Messenger can be used as channels for marketing (as ASR TV does with Telegram), and that a Facebook profile is associated to Messenger making it easy to know more about strangers.**

Talking to individuals abroad on social media is common, but some particular platforms are more commonly used to do so. 80% of Telegram users and 70% of IMO users talk to friends abroad, – whereas around 60% of users of other platforms do so. As for family, 89% of Telegram users talk to family abroad, and 77% of IMO users do so.

Telegram is the most versatile platform as it is used for different interactions: 34% of users talk to colleagues on it, compared to about 14% of users of other platforms, for example.

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### **Focus: The Afghan Diaspora on Social Media**

The Afghan diaspora, spread predominantly in Iran and Pakistan but including populations across the globe, heavily influences social media in Afghanistan. First generation migrants abroad face fewer barriers to internet access, whilst second-generation Afghans of the diaspora have presumably higher literacy than Afghans resident in Afghanistan. Typically, they would follow Afghan politicians or news sources. Afghanistan My Passion says it is located in Germany although the API shows posts from Afghanistan – presumably administrators are partially part of the diaspora. They contribute to the overall number of likes on pages related to Afghanistan, and they also affect the languages and scripts used on those pages – not all second-generation Afghans in the diaspora are able to read Dari or Pashto, and this contributes to the use of English language or Latin script in posts and comments online.

They also drive usage in Afghanistan indirectly, as they provide an incentive for users in Afghanistan to go on instant messaging platforms or Facebook to stay connected despite the distance.

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## **4.2. GETTING AND SHARING INFORMATION**

The second category of usage corresponds to individuals using social media platforms to get and share information. **The following sections show which information users are seeking through follows, how likely they are to share it, and how impactful social media has been on their information consumption habits.**

### **4.2.1. FOLLOWS**

**Following pages or accounts is common and is the necessary step to be able to view content on Facebook or Twitter.** Follows denote a general interest for some content, but it is not a marker of enthusiasm for it.

#### **4.2.1.1. Facebook**

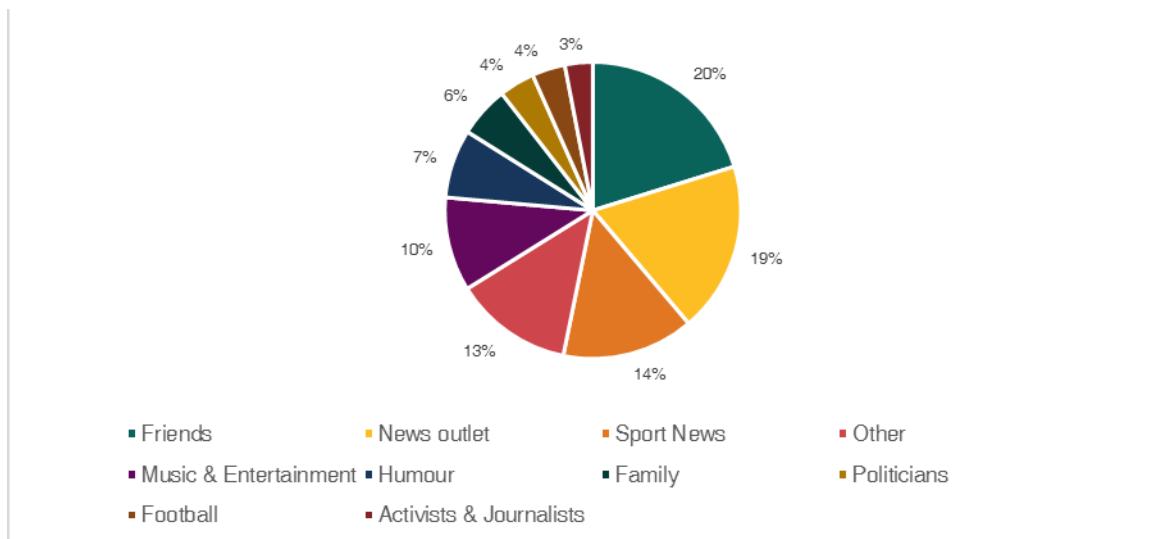
On Facebook, 79% declare following public pages – passive users are less likely to follow public pages as 62% say they do compared to over 80% of active and hyperactive users.

**According to the user survey, respondents declare following a diversity of pages on Facebook, but the more popular types of pages are news outlets (64% of Facebook users follow news outlets), Humor or entertainment pages (62%) and sportsmen (57%).** This echoes the results of the landscape mapping outlined earlier, as 10 of the top 20 most popular Facebook pages in Afghanistan

are news outlets, and the category of pages that has the most fans is media pages (31% of total fans counted), followed by entertainment pages (20%), and government pages (12%).

When asked what their favorite page to follow is however, 20% of users declare it is that of a friend, followed closely by 19% declaring they prefer news outlets and 14% sports news. **While the interest in news pages, entertainment and sports is confirmed, Facebook users still primarily value Facebook as an extension of their own ‘real-life’ network.**<sup>27</sup>

Figure 28: Who do you enjoy following the most on social media?



#### 4.2.1.3. Twitter

The Twitter landscape mapping shows directly what kinds of accounts are followed: 10 of the top 20 accounts in Afghanistan are government & politics related. **Media accounts garner the most follows, followed closely by government & politics account.** Those two categories of accounts together account for 73% of overall follows on Afghan Twitter. However, this is to be interpreted as an indication of the type of usage done on Twitter versus Facebook. The audience is different, and so are the intentions for use.

#### 4.2.2. SHARING

The content analysis showed that shares are very rare relative to the amount of posts and the amount of likes for each post. Users are indeed unlikely to share content on other individuals' pages. 87% of users declare commenting on known individuals' accounts while 60% do so on unknown individuals' accounts. Again, this is driven up by hyperactive users, as 71% of them comment on unknown individuals account compared to 53% of passive users.

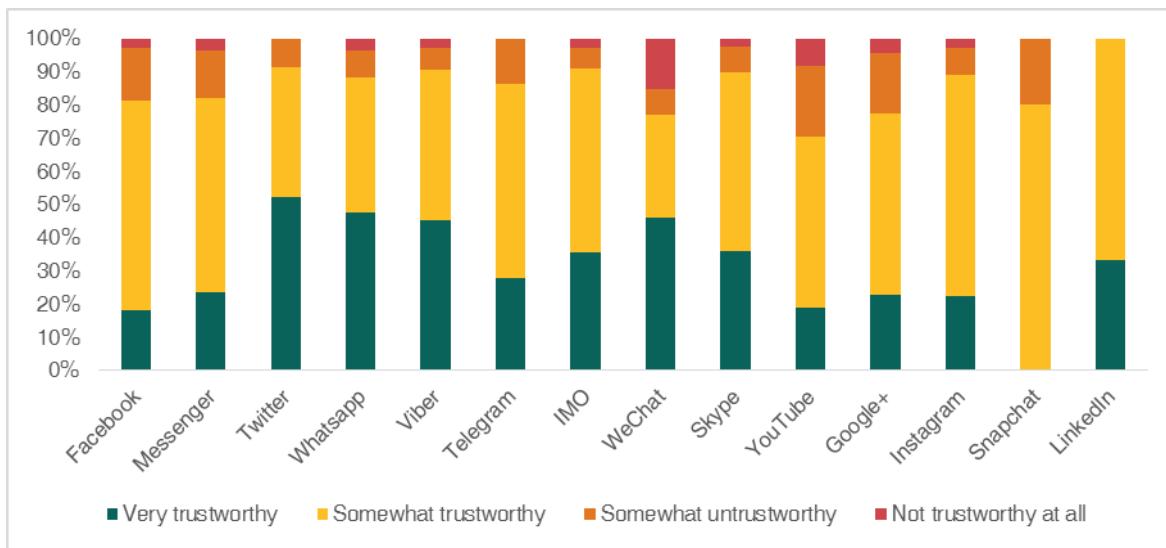
Similarly, 78% of users declare sharing content from known individuals' accounts while 49% share from unknown individuals' accounts. Hyperactive users once more engage more widely as 63% of them share from unknown individuals' accounts. **Sharing is limited and mostly practiced by hyperactive users.**

<sup>27</sup> Figure 28: sample size: social media users (361)

#### 4.2.3. A COMPETING SOURCE OF INFORMATION

**Social media has already begun impacting users' reality by being another source of information, one which they overwhelmingly trust.** Looking specifically at Facebook, 84% of users think the information on the platform is somewhat trustworthy or very trustworthy.<sup>28</sup> Women are more likely than men to find the information very trustworthy (27% vs. 11%), but overall, they lean similarly towards a trusting approach to social media. Those with a higher (high school and university) education are more likely to show distrust towards social media however, as they are more critical towards content.

Figure 29: How trustworthy do you think the information is on each platform?



**Social media has already permeated aspects of daily lives by becoming a resource to collect information, so much so that users turn to it to collect information the way they might turn to TV.**

**In fact, social media and Facebook in particular, is ahead of radio or newspapers for providing certain news.** When looking to learn about celebrity or entertainment news, 78% of users declare turning to Facebook and 79% watch TV for such information, compared to 28% citing radios and 6% newspapers. A similar pattern is true when asking how users learn about current affairs, the government's position, or sports. TV is still the main media through which users receive breaking news (88%) but Facebook comes in close second (71%) and is far ahead of radio and newspapers.

**However, Facebook has not yet become a platform for marketing,** as only 47% of users cite Facebook as a resource for collecting information on products or to learn about special offers (compared to 57% and 53% citing TV). **It has also not yet become a viable marketplace.**

**Social media hasn't supplanted other communication forms as 86% of users would call a person to check in on their safety while only 21% would look at the person's social media to do so.**

#### 4.3. PROMOTING & EXCHANGING IDEAS

The third category corresponds to the use of social media to express and propagate ideas. In this sense, public users are those most likely to be making this type of use. For different organizations, social media

<sup>28</sup> Figure 29: sample size: Facebook users (342), Messenger users (271), Twitter users (23), WhatsApp users (84), Viber users (148), Telegram users (58), IMO users (112), WeChat users (13), Skype (39), YouTube users (37), Google+ users (22), Instagram (36), Snapchat (5), LinkedIn (3)

has become an effective communication medium. Its apparent cheapness, speed and ease of use appeal to organizations as a communication platform competing with other traditional media.

**The network analysis separated those pages that had multilateral relations and were embedded in a network of peers, from the pages that do not seek to follow others, limiting their platform as one for unilateral broadcasts. We witness this continued dichotomy among public pages, wherein some pages are for unilateral broadcasts, and others make the most of the interactivity on social media.**

#### 4.3.1. GOVERNMENT & INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Government and international organizations find benefits in social media as it is the means for them to showcase and explain their work with speed and on the cheap. Although all organizations see value in having a social media account, there is a clear disparity between organizations that seek to use social media for its interactivity, and those that see it as a unilateral tool of communication.

**Organizations in general view social media either just as a cheap platform to showcase their work without particularly seeking to engage with the audience, or on the contrary they seek involvement from the audience leveraging the opportunities of social media.** The former is the case for The Ministry for Culture, who simply posts announcements without seeking to make any use of the interactive features of social media.

UNDP and USAID are also part of the former category. They find social media is an efficient way of communicating with their audience, however, this audience is not just an Afghan audience but an international one. For USAID in particular, their stakeholders are U.S citizens and while they do translate their content into Dari and Pashto, the goal to communicate to Afghans is in some cases secondary.

**Smaller organizations such as Baghlan's PGO, the IEC, or Jalalabad City Council on the other hand make strategic use of social media as they utilize those platforms for the specific purpose of having a two-way conversation with citizens.** There is a clear idea that they can pool information from social media on their own performance and remit. DAIL in particular in Herat utilizes social media not just to convince citizens of their added value and testify of the work they do, but also to improve their activities. For their press and media manager, social media shows "*how active a directorate or agency is so people can start believing in the strength and the capacities that exist.*"

#### 4.3.2. MEDIA

Media organizations perceive a lot of benefits and opportunities from social media – **media organizations of different sizes highlight the cheapness, speed, and supposed ease of using it. Notably, social media helps them increase their audience** – many note that their audience across platforms has increased but not with the same rate. **This confirms that audiences on Facebook may like the page of a news outlet, browse headlines, but not actively look to read all the content or all transfer to another platform of the outlet.**

#### 4.3.3. CSOs

The same advantages apply to CSOs: social media is cheap and fast. **But for CSOs, the international reach is key in gaining and fostering support for their activities.** Furthermore, many individuals are willing to show support to CSOs (through follows, friend requests, likes), which they would not do ordinarily. **Many users would follow a cause or like it, but going out and protesting on behalf of them or being an activist is a level of engagement fewer would be able to commit.** Social media allows different levels of engagement and could reflect better the mindset in society relating to certain

issues. This support may be limited online, but it is felt by CSOs such as the Afghan Women's Network as it brings them an awareness that there is an audience and a support group for their activities.

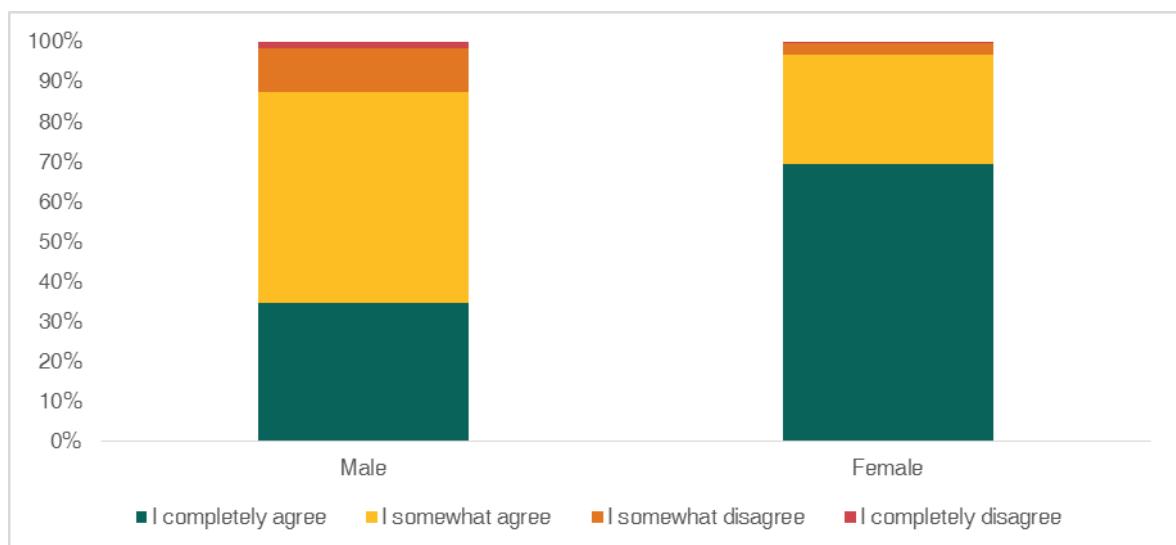
Social media rivals other communication platforms, as Kardan University finds that social media is accountable for 30% of their outreach: *"Besides social media we use billboards and prints like brochures and booklets and posters. Social media accounts for 30% of our marketing and communications' impact. We know it's 30% because when we have new students coming in we ask them where they heard about us."*

#### 4.3.4. PRIVATE USERS

There is a lot of trust in social media and its ability to foster change – this trust itself can foster conversations on social media and push stakeholders to invest in it.

**Overwhelmingly social media is perceived as a space for free expression – 92% of respondents find that social media gives them the opportunity to say things they wouldn't otherwise say. This ability to say things, show support, and be forward with opinions is a sign of trust in the platform and of safety within its confines.<sup>29</sup>**

Figure 30: Social media gives you the opportunity to say things you wouldn't otherwise say in person, or on radio/print/TV



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#### Focus: Direct and indirect costs

Organizations have repeatedly cited the low cost of social media in communicating to their audience. While social media does not bear extra costs on the face of it beyond access to internet, it pulls and diverts resources for organizations.

The bigger and more successful organizations on social media have all dedicated staff allocated to handling their online presence. The cost of creating content for it is also present, as DAIL Herat sends staff to take pictures and needs staff to format content. Bigger organizations may also want to boost their content on Facebook, hence paying the platform to promote its content.

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<sup>29</sup> Figure 30: sample sizes: male social media users (189), female social media users (172)

For media organizations, the wider audience on social media can be a diversion of their traditional media audience. ASR TV in Herat speaks of the strain that online platforms can place on their traditional media “*Facebook is nowadays competing with TV channels, if people have access to Facebook then they can read what they want from Facebook and get the information, while with the TV broadcast they need to allocate a specific time to watch a specific program.*” Anecdotally, users cite using Facebook as a news platform – indicating that Facebook headlines are what they see and they do not read full reports. So, social media users might have access to more news outlets and browse through more news items, but if they restrict their activity to just browsing, they are not actually getting more in-depth information.

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## 4.4. MOBILIZING PEOPLE AROUND A CAUSE

We try to gauge how social media can be leveraged to mobilize people around a cause – the final category of social media usage is revelatory of how social media can actually trigger wider change in Afghan society.

### 4.4.1. PERCEPTION OF USERS

**Social media is perceived to have had an overall positive effect on social issues by private users, but women are more likely to perceive a positive effect than men.** As a reminder, women are less prone to engage through posts, comments and shares, and are less active, as only 24% of Facebook female users are hyperactive vs. 38% of male Facebook users. Their tendency to view social media positively can be construed as a personality trait “Women are more positive” or be a sign that they have felt social media’s positive effects more so than men.

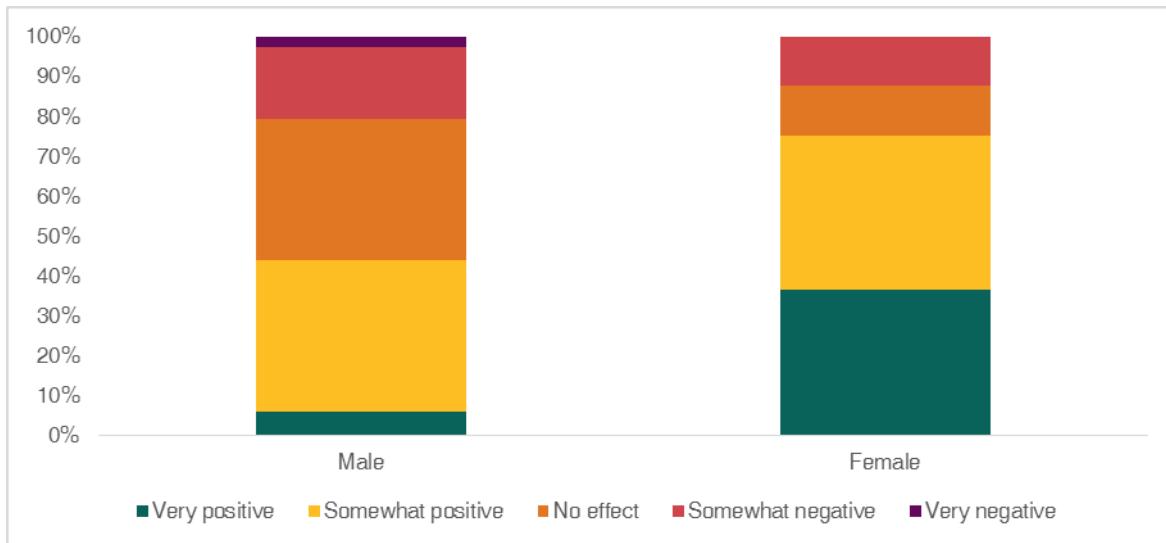
Private users overwhelmingly find that social media has had a positive effect on corruption as 62% believe so. **Corruption is frequently reported on social media, which has led to a wider awareness of its occurrence.** When it comes to privacy, 69% think it has had a positive effect on privacy, and again women are more likely to think so. This is counterintuitive as women are wary of having their information available online and feel vulnerable to harassment, but it also means there is an avenue for individuals to chat with people without the scrutiny of one’s family for example.

The disparity between women’s and men’s perception is better understandable when it comes to the effect of social media on gender – this is the question for which the gap between men’s and women’s answers is at its widest. 44% of men think it has had a positive impact – versus 75% of women. This is also the question for which there is the strongest negative perception as 21% of men believe it has had a negative or very negative effect on gender.<sup>30</sup> **Social media is changing the way young Afghan women can relate to individuals beyond their family, from talking to members of the opposite sex privately to posting pictures of themselves online, but as we noted previously this behavior is restricted among women.**

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<sup>30</sup> Figure 31: sample size: male social media users (189), female social media users (172)

Figure 31: Do you think social media has had a positive or negative effect on gender?



#### 4.4.2. PUBLIC USERS & SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

Organizations perceive direct benefits from social media in that it is an apparently cheap, quick and easy platform to communicate with their audience. CSOs are more likely to view social media as a true agent of change as they have benefitted from positive feedback. Furthermore, social media influencers have learned to leverage their social media presence to advance their views and goals. **There is belief among public users that online conversations can have an impact on policies and society at large. The embodiment of this belief is the existence of social media campaigns. We talked to architects of two Afghanistan-originated social media campaigns.**

The first one, Afghanistan Needs You, centers on a Facebook page and a website, with the aim to convince young Afghans that their country still offers some opportunities. Started in September 2015, the campaign's open goal is to “*prevent brain drain and illegal migration as well as to be a voice of hope.*”

In effect, the campaign relies on video interviews of Afghan personalities or citizens encouraging people to stay and partake in the reconstruction of the country. Interviewees include political leaders (such as Amrullah Saleh from Afghanistan Green Trend), musicians such as Afghan Star contestant Arash Barez or social media activist Modaser Islami. Pictures of young Afghans holding signs are also shared on Facebook, as well as news reports or testimonies of individuals having undertaken the journey to Europe as migrants.

Afghanistan Needs You declares having reached over 10 million individuals through Facebook, and the medium is particularly useful as they aim to appeal to an international audience. In fact, the second most important group in their audience is located in Germany. They justify using Facebook as their plan was to have the widest reach possible and to target young people specifically “*The focus is on Facebook because this is the only highly used social media in Afghanistan and our target audience is on this platform.*”

The only strategy in place as to how and when content was posted was to “*post contents at the time when there is no other hot news in the media, because at those times people would not focus on our contents.*” Furthermore, in order to have the highest impact, Afghanistan Needs You boosted around 40% of its posts and paid Facebook from the funds garnered by volunteers. They also make use of Facebook Audience Insights.

**For all their effort, the page now has about 79,000 fans on Facebook, but its further impact on the perception of Afghanistan of potential emigrants is at best difficult to assess as it is not information that the campaign can gather.** Furthermore, the campaign relies on volunteers and there is only one permanent member behind it.

Another social media campaign making waves at the time of this study was rallying around the hashtag "#whereismyname". Started by a group of young Afghan women in August 2017, the hashtag aims to confront and expose the common practice of silencing the names of Afghan women in daily life. Tahmina Arian is part of the group of 10 young women from Kabul and Herat at the origin of the hashtag campaign. They had the idea upon noticing the increase in funding for projects focusing on gender that missed out on this basic fact. Men do not pronounce women's names in public, they are not on wedding invitations nor on their funeral tombs, and they felt that reclaiming their name and breaking that taboo could provide a new sense of identity to women.

They have had an overwhelming amount of international exposure, with features in the New York Times, the UK independent, the BBC, CNN and a long list of media organizations reporting their endeavor. Yet they do not wish to get involved with an international NGO or organization, as they believe they need to preserve the trust from the Afghan population and the perception of international involvement would be detrimental to their campaign. They do not want to be associated with western efforts as they are a home-grown campaign. In addition, they have been featured on national media and on TV – they have made waves in country due to the online campaign.

**It is impossible to tell whether campaigns of these types can affect change directly, but they can create conversations that with momentum can translate to real life interactions.** Social media activity can be a stepping-stone for communication on other media, as influencers such as Naim Nazari or Wazhma Frogh report being contacted by TV channels or radio shows to intervene on topics they have posted about online.

#### 4.4.3. SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN EFFECTIVE REPORTING TOOL

**One of the means of enacting change through social media is to leverage online platforms as reporting tools.** Local government bodies in particular have leveraged it as a source of information. The IEC is actually relying on users' contributions via social media to help fulfill its mission. The IEC finds value in social media as it is cheap and can be an anonymous means of reporting electoral fraud. IEC Provincial acting director Fazel Ahmad Hayati explains "*for example there was some issue with polling which was posted on Facebook that made us aware of these problems. In remote areas especially, if people access Facebook, it is a good source for learning about the realities on the ground in these places compared to other media types.*"

Social media can bring awareness to authorities of realities they are not aware of, and shift attention to very specific issues, bringing them closer to the population. The Baghlan PGO for example cites a time when Facebook users notified them on their Facebook page that there were insurgents in Dand-e-ghori district and as a result the PGO was able to react and send armed forces.

**Jalalabad city council and DAIL Herat have also had direct requests or complaints on social media that they were able to address directly.** The DAIL Herat press manager cites examples of how social media has helped improve their activity. For example, during the pruning season they received comments and messages requesting content specific to the agricultural activities of the season. Users expect the content and the activities of DAIL to be relevant and helpful to their own agricultural activity. They have used social media to hold DAIL accountable – and in return it has decided to improve on their activity: "*Social media gives the opportunity to people to ask for things which they could not ask for directly, it is just a matter of sending a message or commenting.*"

**Local government has invested itself in the interactivity of social media and is pulling information from citizens through it, bridging a communication gap.**

**Social media has also become a way of pointing out corruption and to name and shame individuals for their actions.** Users complain online and give examples of their experiences in the face of corruption, and while legal repercussions are not common, the scandal that can be brought on the perpetrators has created an awareness that corruption may go unreported to the police, but stories will appear online. **For Frogh Wazhma, this means that her words carry weight and legitimacy, and other members of the peace council are aware of the reach of her voice on social media. This self-policing in front of individuals denotes a certain awareness among the governing class that there is now a new pressure they face.**

## SECTION SUMMARY

Private communications represent the most common usage of social media as all users engage in them, but the other usages create distinctions among users. Most users follow pages and Facebook has become a trusted platform to get information, but few share and propagate information and even fewer engage with it through comments. There is a high awareness of the content, but it is not shared between users. Hyperactive users are those that engage more with content.

Public users are seizing opportunities to promote their ideas and their content on social media, but mobilizing is much more rare. While users often perceive there to be a positive effect of social media on society, mobilizing occurs through online campaigns or specific reports of incidents. Measuring the impact of such mobilization is difficult in a country where protests are often the scene of violence and avoided by most, and the rule of law consistently fails to be applied. Reporting incidents, or ‘naming and shaming’, is social media’s most impactful aspect.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

### **MAIN FINDINGS**

The study objectives were to gain understanding of the social media landscape in terms of stakeholders and content; to describe users' consumption patterns, modes of engagement, perceptions and expectations; and finally to understand how traditional media, the government and CSOs leverage social media platforms. Furthermore, an overarching question throughout our research was whether social media could be a disruptive media that would trigger social change in Afghan society.

We set out to fill knowledge gaps on the social media stakeholders in the first section, before turning to what type of content is available online and how users are engaging with such content. A third and final section categorized usages and implications of those usages.

#### **Social media users are homogenous and concentrated on Facebook**

We found that users are predominantly young, urban and educated – and that internet access remains the main barrier to social media access, thus excluding a greater portion of lower-income and rural households. Indeed, there are numerous socio-demographic differences between internet users and non-users and lack of income or illiteracy are cited among the main barriers to access by non-users. The relation between internet access and smartphone ownership is further confirmed as over 80% of social media users access their accounts solely through their smartphone.

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

Private users may be homogenous, but public users diverge between organizations and individuals that leverage social media with varying ability. Media organizations have invested in social media enthusiastically, dominating the pages found online along with government, politics & elections related pages, but organizations have varying commitment and strategies to use social media – some organizations are satisfied using social media as another platform to broadcast messages unilaterally, whilst others are committed to making use of the interaction with users which is afforded through the platform.

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

Content on social media relates mostly to government, politics and elections, and security and military matters, largely because this is the bulk of what media organizations publish. Yet the content that garners the most audience engagement relates to sports, entertainment or national pride.

Engagement is overwhelmingly driven by likes, whilst comments and shares are marginal. This shows that the majority of engagement is superficial, with likes being the type of engagement which require the lowest level of effort from the audience, while comments and shares show a much greater investment by users.

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

Social media is primarily an extension of an individual's prior network and a space for entertainment. Interaction is primarily with existing family and friends, limiting direct engagement with individuals and ideas outside of established social networks. The exception to this would be popular public pages such

as those maintained by traditional media outlets or public figures, however the more limited active use (likes versus shares and comments) still reduces direct engagement.

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

Private communication is the primary usage of social media, and while almost all users are subjected to content relating to current affairs, a limited number share and propagate information with even fewer engaging through comments. There is a very high awareness of current affairs among social media users, but very limited engagement. Thus, mobilizing users through social media for a specific cause faces many hurdles, but the practice of reporting wrong-doing through social media is common and the most direct impact social media has on Afghan society.

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#### **Focus: Social Media is Disruptive**

Negative language and content festers on social media, so much so it can be disruptive to the electoral process. During the run-up to the 2014 elections, candidates and their followers led fierce social media campaigns, defaming opponents instead of simply setting opposing narratives. Fear that the online vitriol would turn to clashes led a number of parliamentarians to ask for a momentary social media ban (Bezhan, 2014), and UNAMA published a press release calling for candidates to “control their supporters”(UNAMA, 2014)

The UN Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Afghanistan and head of UNAMA at the time, Ján Kubiš, said: “There has been a disturbing tone in some social media platforms, and we urge supporters of the candidates in the Afghan Presidential elections to refrain from inflammatory statements, hate speech or statements which promote divisive ethnic mobilization. This includes rhetoric that brings back memories of tragic, fratricidal, factional conflicts in the 1990s that cost the lives of tens of thousands of civilians.” (UNAMA, 2014)

The wider political implications of a social media that enables uninhibited and fractious language are less of a concern for day to day users at present, who are more concerned with fake profiles and direct negative engagement to their content. There is a clamoring for regulation in order to tackle this issue. Most organizations and users tend to simply ignore individuals making negative comments, or for example in the case of Naim Nazari, try to engage privately with them to understand their point of view.

No respondent was aware of or keen to use the built-in reporting tools on Facebook that allow anonymous flags on discriminatory or violent language. The impunity on social media is taken advantage of, and there is wishful thinking that the Afghan government should be able to police accounts and content on social media with little attention given to the readily available tools, as incomplete as they may be.

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### **ASSESSING SOCIAL MEDIA’S POTENTIAL FOR CHANGE**

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

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

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

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

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## 7. ANNEXES

### 7.1. METHODOLOGY

#### 7.1.1. USER SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The user survey methodology was outlined in the inception report and was approved by Internews prior to fieldwork.

##### 7.1.1.1. Location and sample

The user survey took place in 8 different urban centers – with sample targets differing in each center based roughly on a size category for each (50 interviews for large centers, 25 interviews for smaller centers).

Table 10: Sample target and result per urban center

Center	Sample Target	Sample achieved	Share of total sample achieved
Kabul	50	56	16%
Pul-i-Khumri	25	27	7%
Mazar-e-Sharif	50	63	17%
Bamyan	25	36	10%
Jalalabad	50	50	14%
Kandahar	50	51	14%
Lashkar Gah	25	25	7%
Herat	50	53	15%
Total	325	361	100%

Budgetary and time constraints were balanced with methodological best practices. In order to find respondents, areas targeted were urban and peri-urban neighborhoods that may not be representative of the entire country. However, we employed a randomized respondent selection (outlined below) so as to have a representative sample of urban Afghan social media users.

##### 7.1.1.2. Respondent selection

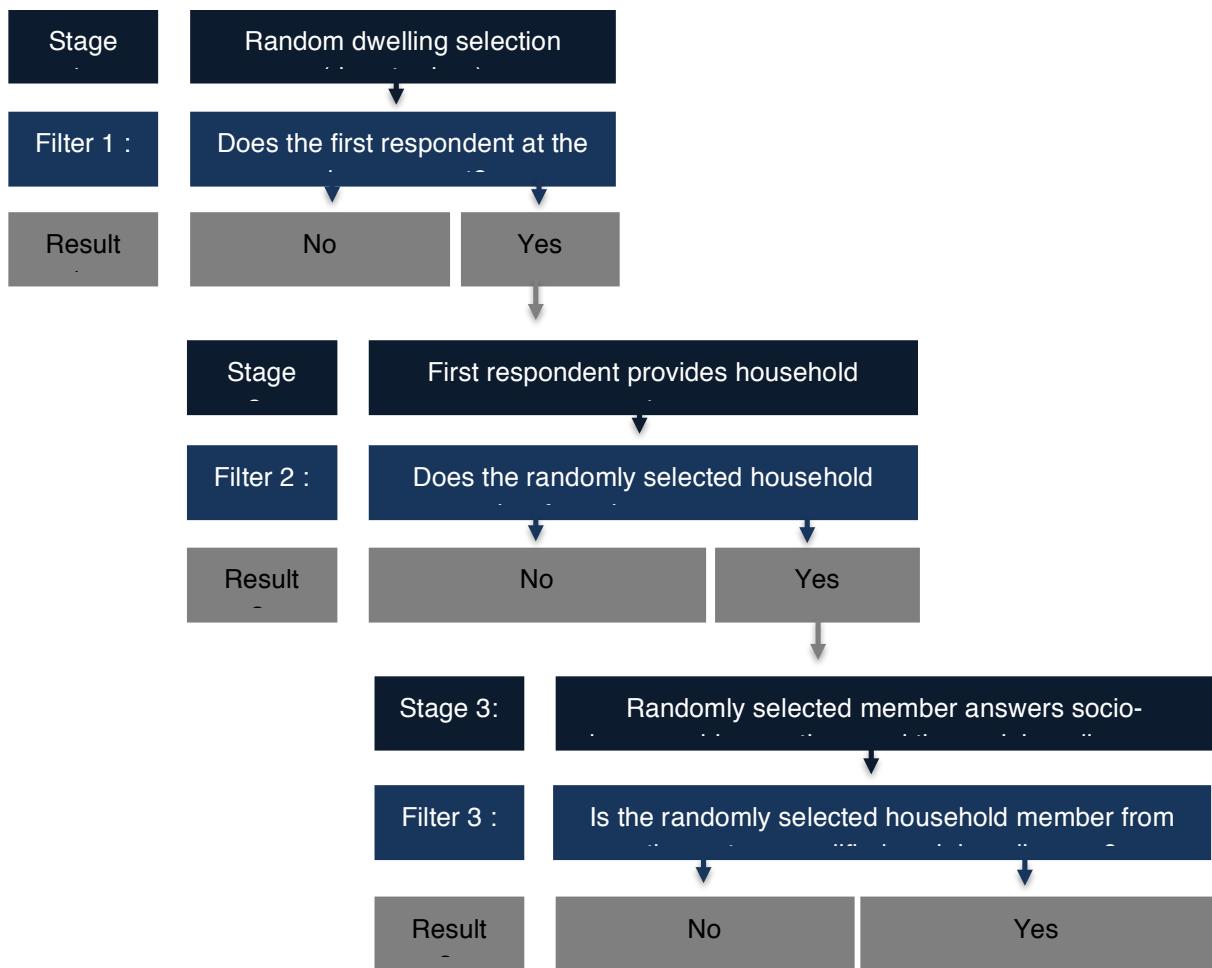
The intention was to conduct the survey by going door-to-door following a specific randomized dwelling selection ('left-hand side approach')<sup>31</sup>.

<sup>31</sup> The supervisor first selects starting points (one different for each interviewer), keeping in mind that all individuals should have the same likelihood to be interviewed and interviewers should all have different starting points. Enumerators take the last digit of the date (ex: 12th). From the starting point, they choose the household on the left associated to this number (ie: enter in household # 2 on your left). Once the interview is finished, they count the appropriate number of households (and not houses) on the left and enter for the next interview: In urban areas, 10 households (i.e.: enter in household # 12). For instance, if a building is very

Once at the door, the first respondent would describe the household roster upon consent. A random<sup>32</sup> household member would then be selected from the roster for interview. If that person consented and was present, they would answer a series of questions on their socio-demographic situation, as well as a series of filter questions to ensure they were indeed social media users. Figure 1 below illustrates the process.

Only qualified social media users would continue the questionnaire and answer the 'social media survey'. The sample target of 350 corresponds to 350 fully completed social media surveys. This process enabled us to have a diverse set of respondents, and also to compare the socio-demographic data of those qualified social media users with non-users.

Figure 32: Respondent selection process



large with numerous households, several interviews can potentially be conducted in it. In rural areas, 5 households (i.e.: enter in household # 7). If the left hand is not applicable (e.g. all houses on one big road), the household should be counted as on the right in their order of appearance from the starting point and beginning with the left. The rule for counting the households remain the same.

<sup>32</sup> Random selection was automated within the mobile-based electronic data collection form used by the enumerators

The survey questionnaire included a series of questions that enabled us to filter social media users. In order to be a qualified social media user, respondents had to:

- Have a social media account (as defined in the inception report and including messaging applications);
- Access the account regularly (at least a few times a month).

### 7.1.2. KII METHODOLOGY

On the outset, 45 KIIs were due to take place. Those KIIs were divided between organizational KIIs and influencer KIIs.

#### 7.1.2.1. Organizational KIIs

Organizational KIIs aimed to highlight how organizations leverage social media platforms to advance their goal and missions. A total of 30 KIIs were organized:

- **10 with media outlets;**
- **10 with government organizations;** and
- **10 with CSOs.**

The list of target organizations was built so as to address organizations that were active on social media (according to the KPIs listed during the landscape mapping), and to provide a diversity of organizations within each group. We held half of the organizational KIIs in the provincial centers, in parallel to the user survey, and upon the user survey's completion, the remainder of organizational KIIs were conducted in Kabul.

The KIIs relied on open-ended questions. The KII guidelines are presented in the annex, and consist of a module common to all organization type, and a second module specific to each organization type.

The final list of organizational KIIs is listed in 6.2.1.1.

#### 7.1.2.2. Influencer KIIs

A total of 15 KIIs with social media influencers were to be completed, either face-to-face where possible, or through the Internet, with most prominent account holders.

Those KIIs started prior to the landscape mapping, and overlapped with it, as they were intended to both help direct the mapping exercise, as well as confirm findings and understand influencers' background, positioning, objectives, and perspectives on the social media scene in Afghanistan.

An initial list of influencer targets was shared with Internews, yet many of the targets were either unavailable or unresponsive, which led to finding replacements. The final list of influencer KIIs is listed in 6.2.1.2.

The influencer KIIs were different for each respondent, but all of them focused on similar themes:

- Motivation behind social media profile and platform choice
- Main objective of their social media presence
- Content creation
- Effect of social media presence on their real life (opportunities and challenges)
- Perception of Social Media in Afghanistan

### 7.1.3. LANDSCAPE MAPPING METHODOLOGY

The landscape mapping was conducted by Masae Analytics by extracting data directly from Facebook and Twitter and processing it using datamining techniques.

#### 7.1.3.1. Data extraction

To extract the data available on these social media platforms, the public Application Programming Interfaces (API) provided by Facebook (Graph API) and Twitter (REST API) were used. These APIs allow to collect and store automatically high amounts of data of different types:

- Metadata on accounts/pages: number of likes/friends/followers/posts, identity of followers/likes...
- Indicators on published content: number of likes/shares/comments on each tweet/post
- Published content: text from posts/tweets/comments, pictures, videos...

All this available data was extracted according to a list of Facebook pages and Twitter accounts agreed between Altai Consulting and Internews (enriched by Masae Analytics, see section below).

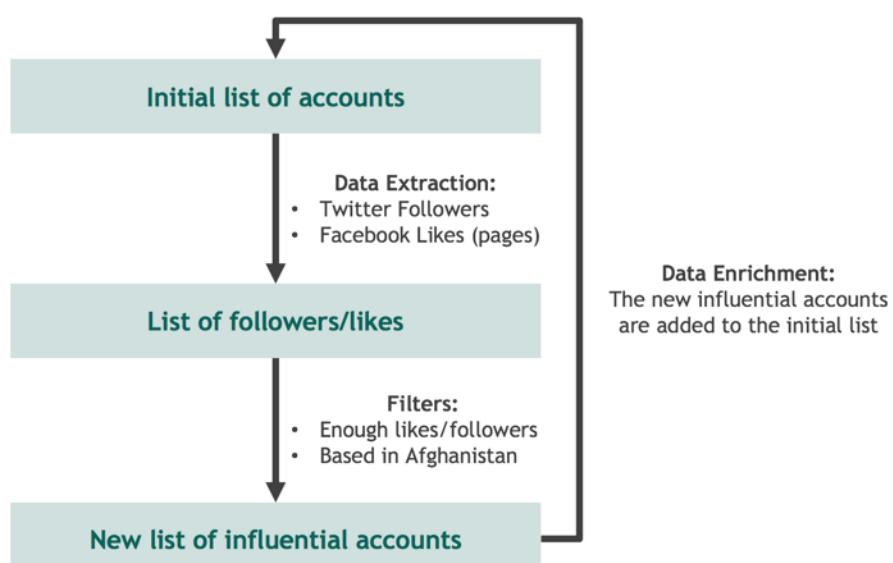
The data extracted covered a one-year period: **16/08/2016 – 16/08/2017**.

#### 7.1.3.2. Accounts identification

A seed list of Facebook public pages and Twitter accounts was designed by Internews and Altai Consulting based on country knowledge and manual search on the social media. However, to make sure this landscape mapping is as comprehensive as possible, Masae Analytics developed a “snowball” approach to detect other influential accounts by scanning the network structure of social medias, using the baseline list as a starting point.

The followers/likes of the baseline list were extracted and considered as potential candidates to be accounts of interest. A filter was applied to select those from Afghanistan and who were sufficiently influential (enough followers/likes). This final list of new influential accounts was added to the baseline. These previous steps were applied to this new list of accounts to get other accounts, and so on, until only non-influential/non-Afghan followers/likes were extracted, which means there was no more account of interest.

Figure 33: Snowball Algorithm for Account Identification



This way, 160 new Twitter accounts and 232 new Facebook pages were detected, bringing the total number of identified **Twitter accounts to 236** and **Facebook pages to 347**.

Finally, this list was manually cleaned by Altai Consulting to keep only the relevant pages/accounts.

This final list of accounts was delivered to Internews in Excel files and contained the following main information on each page/account.

#### **Facebook:**

- Page name
- Page category
- Page description
- Number of likes
- Number of times someone talked about the page
- Declared country
- Declared city

#### **Twitter:**

- Account name
- Account creation date
- Name displayed on Twitter (usually “real name”)
- Account description
- Declared location
- Verified/Not verified account
- Number of followers
- Number accounts followed by this account
- Total number of tweets since creation

Among these lists, a limited number of pages/accounts of interest were selected by Internews and Altai Consulting in order to conduct a content analysis.

#### **7.1.3.3. Content analysis**

From a small number of particularly interesting accounts/pages, published content and related people's reactions (likes, shares, retweets, Facebook reactions like “love”, “haha” or “sad”, and comments) over the past year were extracted. **41,127 tweets, 80,657 Facebook posts and 3,113,907 Facebook comments** were collected this way.

The objectives of this content analysis were the following:

- Understand about what topics Twitter accounts and Facebook pages publish some content
- Analyze the reactions of people regarding these topics

Doing this implies being able to categorize some English, Dari and Pashto textual content. The following methodology has been used to achieve this:

- **Step 1:** all tweets and posts were processed thanks to a Natural Language Processing algorithm to draw a list of the 200 most used words, in English on the one hand, and in Pashto/Dari on the other hand
- **Step 2:** Pashto/Dari words were translated by an Afghan translator

- **Step 3:** this translated content was analyzed by Altai Consulting to detect the most discussed topics on social media. The following categories were identified:
  - Security and Military
  - Religion
  - National Pride and Civic Engagement
  - Entertainment
  - Education
  - Government, Politics and Elections
  - Sports
- **Step 4:** for each category, a list of keywords was built both in English and Pashto/Dari, using the most used words in data, but also manually added words
- **Step 5:** going back to the data, each tweet/post was assigned one or several categories if it contained any of the keywords of these categories. 80% of all the content was categorized this way

Once each tweet/post was categorized, the distribution of categories published by each selected account and overall were generated. Also, for each account and overall, the average number of reactions to each category of posts were processed:

- Facebook:
  - Number of likes
  - Number of Facebook reactions (“love”, “haha”, “waw”, “sad”, “angry”)
  - Number of comments
  - Number of shares
- Twitter:
  - Number of likes
  - Number of retweets

For each account and overall, for each type of reaction, a comparison with average reaction was done to see if people tend to react more to specific topics than to others.

Besides, the same analysis was conducted by breaking down the content by type of content:

- Text only
- With a link
- With a picture
- With a video

In addition, a temporal analysis was conducted. Distributions of tweets/posts over weekdays and time of the day are presented for each account. The hours used for time of the day are the following:

- Morning: 6am-1pm
- Afternoon: 1pm-6pm
- Evening: 6pm-12am
- Night: 12am-6am

The results of this full content analysis were delivered to Internews in two Excel files, one for Twitter, one for Facebook.

## 7.2. SAMPLES

### 7.2.1. KII SAMPLE

#### 7.2.1.1. Organizational KIIs

The final list of 30 organizational KIIs are listed below.

Table 11: Organizational KIIs Sample

Type	Name of organizations	Location
Media	TOLOnews	Kabul
	8am Daily	Kabul
	Spogmai FM	Kabul
	Khaama Press	Kabul
	Pajhwok	Kabul
	Kandahar Journalists Center	Kandahar
	Radio Bamyan	Bamyan
	ASR TV	Herat
	Enekas Radio	Jalalabad
Government	Kandahar Radio Television	Kandahar
	Ministry of Culture and Information	Kabul
	U.S. Embassy Kabul	Kabul
	UNDP Afghanistan	Kabul
	Afghanistan Green trend	Kabul
	Adalat Party	Kabul
	Baghlan Governor's Office	Pul-i-Khumri
	Chamber of Commerce & Industry	Mazar-e-sharif
	DAIL	Herat
CSOs	Milli Watan Political Party - Balkh Province	Mazar-e-sharif
	Jalalabad city hall	Jalalabad
	Afghanistan Needs You	Kabul
	Kardan University	Kabul
	Afghan Women's Network (AWN)	Kabul
	Development and Support of Afghan Women and Children Organization	Kabul
	Kandahar Journalists' Center	Kandahar
	Nangarhar Cricket Academy	Jalalabad

Bamyan Ski Club	Bamyan
Herat University	Herat
Nangarhar youth organization	Jalalabad
Independent Election Commission - Mazar Office	Mazar-e-sharif

### 7.2.1.2. Influencer KIIs

The original list of influencer KIIs included a variety of profiles. However, many of the targets were unavailable or unresponsive, despite repeated attempts. Several replacements were identified but most attempts to contact them were unsuccessful. As a result, only 8 influencer KIIs could be conducted by the end of September. The list of influencers interviewed with their credentials is listed below.

Table 12: Influencer KIIs Sample

Name of respondent	Influencer credentials
Asad Ziar	Current affairs commentator with over 80,000 followers on his personal Facebook profile and 175,000 likes on public page
Naim Nazari	Executive director at Civil society & Human Rights Organization with over 35,000 followers on Facebook
Noor Shah Ahmad Shah Zadran	Commentator with over 45,000 likes on Facebook
Tahmina Arian	Member of the group behind the #whereismyname campaign, active on Facebook and Twitter
Razaq Mamoon	Journalist based in Australia, his page 'Razaq Mamoon's Web Blog' has over 27,000 likes
Wazhma Frogh	Women's rights activist with over 90,000 Twitter followers
Ahmad Shuja	Commentator of policy, security and human rights in Afghanistan, founded Impassion Afghanistan (first social media consultancy in Afghanistan) and 30,000 Twitter followers
Shafi Sharifi	Director of PR at Roshan Connects – the Roshan Connects page has close to 1.3 million likes

### 7.2.2. USER SURVEY SAMPLE

The original sample target was 325 completed interviews across the 8 urban centers. We exceeded the sample target, achieving 361 interviews.

During the first day of fieldwork it became apparent that there would be more female respondents than male respondents as female enumerators had more luck finding respondents that were home. In order to correct for this bias, male enumerators' working hours were changed to the evening, to ensure that they would capture respondents at home.

As a result, there are almost as many female respondents as there are male respondents (172 and 189).

Table 13: Gender repartition per center

	Male Respondents		Female Respondents		Total
	Count	%	Count	%	Count
Kabul	24	43%	32	57%	56
Pul-i-khumri	19	70%	8	30%	27
Mazar-e-sharif	31	49%	32	51%	63
Bamyan	23	64%	13	36%	36
Jalalabad	25	50%	25	50%	50
Kandahar	25	49%	26	51%	51
Lashkar Gah	15	60%	10	40%	25
Herat	27	51%	26	49%	53
Total	189	52%	172	48%	361

While at first it may seem that women are just as likely to be social media users as men, several biases are important to remember. Female respondents are in households that consented to having a woman interviewed in the first place – typically a more liberal household. Secondly, women are more likely to be at home and available and as such female enumerators could complete interviews at a faster rate.

### 7.2.3. CONTENT ANALYSIS SAMPLE

The content analysis is the final stage of the landscape mapping exercise. Whilst we identified **236 Twitter accounts** and **347 Facebook pages** in the Afghan social media landscape, we selected **20 Twitter account and 24 Facebook accounts for the content analysis with Internews input.**

Table 14: Content analysis selected accounts

Facebook accounts selected	Twitter accounts selected
TOLOnews	Bsarwary
Pajhwok Afghan News	ArianaTVN
VOA Pashto	AimalFaizi
1TVNewsAF	FroghWazhma
Khaama Press	SediqSediqqi
روزنامه هشت صحیح	ARG_AFG
KanKor	LNajafizada
Afghanistan My Passion	FawziaKoofi77
پناهجویان هزاره هزاره	Moonzajer
Wais Barakzai	MASalangi
Afghanistan Cricket Board	AmrullahSaleh2
Arman FM 98.1	RahmatullahN

دکتر فہیم توختی	AnisaShaheed1
Afghanistan In My Heart	Alizadaofficial
Dr. Abdullah Abdullah	HekmatKarzai
آزاده جرگه . جرگه آزاد .	Ashrafghani
Aryana Sayeed اریانا سعید	AdelaRaz
شنا ساپی Sana Safi	Umerdaudzai2
احمد سعیدی Ahmad Saeedi	SalehRegistani
Salam Afghanistan •	Afghanmusik
Farhad Darya	
Dr. Ramazan Bashardost	
Afghanistan's National Journalists Union	
Young Women for Change	

As much as possible, we wanted to have overlap between the KIIs and the accounts selected for content analysis. In the end, four accounts overlapped: TOLO News, Pajhwok Afghan News, Khaama Press and Wazhma Frogh.