

The Intersection of Media Affordance and Religion: A Thematic Analysis of the Islamic Coverage of the Taliban's Official Organ Shariat Newspaper

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between religion and media has been one of the topics of research interest. This study employed the media affordance concept and explored the religious coverage of the Shariat newspaper, which is the official organ of the Taliban government. The study examines how the official organ of the Taliban government covers and contributes to Islamic content dissemination and how it is used to distribute its ideology. Employing a mixed quantitative and qualitative analysis, this study found that the Taliban used the media's spatiotemporal, technological, and socio-lingual affordances to spread their narrative and Islamic issues through this publication. At the same time, through thematic analysis, this study noticed that Islamic topics susceptible to multi-interpretability were also covered in this newspaper. However, the quality of the content published might not be convincing and comprehensive enough for the reader who wants to satisfy their curiosity. In addition, it was noticed that a selective approach was employed in writing these issues to serve ideological justification.

Keywords: Afghanistan media, media affordance, religious broadcasting, Islamic topics, Shariat newspaper.

ABSTRACT

Hubungan antara agama dan media telah menjadi salah satu topik yang menarik untuk diteliti. Penelitian ini menggunakan konsep keterjangkauan media dan mengeksplorasi liputan agama di surat kabar Shariat, yang merupakan organ resmi pemerintah Taliban. Studi ini meneliti bagaimana organ resmi pemerintah Taliban meliput dan berkontribusi pada penyebaran konten Islam dan bagaimana media ini digunakan untuk menyebarkan ideologinya. Dengan menggunakan analisis campuran kuantitatif dan kualitatif, studi ini menemukan bahwa Taliban menggunakan kemampuan spasial, teknologi, dan sosio-bahasa media untuk menyebarkan narasi dan isu-isu Islam melalui publikasi ini. Pada saat yang sama, melalui analisis tematik, penelitian ini melihat bahwa topik-topik Islam yang rentan terhadap multitafsir juga dibahas dalam surat kabar ini. Namun, kualitas konten yang dipublikasikan mungkin tidak cukup meyakinkan dan komprehensif bagi pembaca yang ingin memuaskan keingintahuan mereka. Selain itu, terlihat bahwa pendekatan selektif digunakan dalam menulis isu-isu ini untuk melayani pembenaran ideologis.

Kata kunci: Media Afghanistan, keterjangkauan media, penyiaran agama, topik-topik Islam, surat kabar Shariat.

Introduction

As an essential element of modern society, the press has played a constructive role in establishing modern globalized civilization. Although the governments in third-world countries, including

Afghanistan, have dominantly controlled these potent tools (Wojcieszak et al., 2019: 71), they have significantly contributed to public awareness and social and political upheavals. One of the dominant functions of the press in Islamic countries is their enlightening role in spreading Islamic teachings, nurturing social responsibility, and advocating fairness and justice (Mughtar et al., 2017: 555).

The emergence of Islamic content in Afghanistan's media dates back to 1873 when the first publication, called *Shams-ul-Nahar*, was published under the guidance of Sayed Jamaluddin Afghani -the well-known Islamic modernist- during the reign of Mohammad Azam Khan (Ahang, 1970: 7). Afghanistan's media history is full of stories and content influenced by religious teachings and religious people. Although not always positive, the religious outlet has been instrumental in the country's national cohesion and mobilization of the masses in the advent of crises and aggressions (Qiang & Pamirzad, 2023: 5). Afghanistan's religious issues coverage dates back to the early days of media burgeoning. For instance, the tenth issue of *Shams-ul-Nahar*, the first publication in Afghanistan has covered an article about the benefit of reciting the *النصر* verses (Ahang, 1970: 14). Besides being a public awareness campaign, religious publishing in Afghanistan reflects the people's beliefs. Religion has been a dominant part of Afghanistan's people's identity, a fact that has been reflected in the media coverage. However, research on this topic remained limited.

In addition, the Taliban's return to power in mid-2021 after 20 years of war against foreign forces fundamentally changed the media landscape, content, and coverage in the country (Salaam, 2023: 2). So far, the Taliban policies stemming from religion profoundly diverge from those of other Muslim countries in many ways, from the education and works of women to the type of government, etc. This makes exploring the coverage of Islamic topics on the Taliban's official organ of great significance, given that analyzing their mainstream publications will provide insight into their stance and interpretation of Islamic matters.

The emergence and use of modern media in Islamic countries can be traced to the early 19th century. The first newspaper, *Al-Tanbih*, was published in Egypt in 1800 (Kelidar, 2002: 15), followed by the Iraqi journal in 1816 (Al-Rawi, 2012: 6), and *Kaghaz-i-Akhabar* in Iran in 1837 (Shahidi, 2008: 739). Other Islamic countries, including Afghanistan, gradually adopted these tools, using them not only for information dissemination but also for religious awareness and preaching. Although religious content has been published in Afghanistan since 1873, politically oriented religious articles first appeared in the *Saraj-ul-Akhabar* newspaper, founded in 1911, coinciding with the wave of nationalism and the struggle for independence. Early Afghan nationalists used religion and religious content to mobilize the masses in their struggle against colonial powers (Qiang & Pamirzad, 2023: 5). Articles such as "What is Islam?", "What knowledge should a Muslim learn?", and "Is Islam honestly against science and knowledge?" provided a modern Islamic mindset to a traditionally low-literacy society, serving as both a wake-up call and a means for public mobilization (Raheen, 2008: 45). In *Aman-e-Afghan* publications, pan-Islamism was a dominant theme alongside nationalism and modernity (Gregorian, 1967; Shir, 2012: 36). This era, which ended in 1929, was followed by political instability. However, subsequent rulers emphasized Islamic broadcasting, renaming the government weekly *Aman-e-Afghan* to *Habib-ul-Islam*.

In 1965, a new media law allowed non-governmental and political publications, leading to the establishment of Islamist publications advocating for an Islamic state (Qiang & Pamirzad, 2023). *Gahiz*, the first private Islamic publication, promoted political Islam. From the 1960s onwards, Afghan media became a battleground for political parties, with left and right factions using publications to promote their ideologies. During the Russian presence in Afghanistan, the Mujaheddin published hundreds of Islamic publications, which were often highly ideological and intolerant (Nojumi, 2002: 15).

The media affordance provides the religious *Tabligh* and *Da'wa* in Islam with limitless time, borderless space, and cost-effective outreach. Mass Media, as the potent tool enabling the sender to transmit their message to a massive audience at the same time beyond their physical

presence, is the most precious affordance media can provide for religion. Aligned with this argument, hundreds of religious televisions from different religious groups worldwide have been established to propagate religion (McDonnell, 2023). The print media, radio, and television broadcasting religious content, rituals, and practices are the most critical media affordance concerning religion. Such kinds of broadcasting are prevalent in all religions worldwide. Some countries launch religious broadcasting as part of their national religious identity, and the cost is mainly covered by the government's public budget or advertising. Some other countries run such channels through viewers' monetary contributions and donations (Gaddy, 1984: 289; McDonnell, 2023).

Considering above background, this study tries to fill this gap by (a) briefly reviewing the Islamic coverage of Afghanistan's outlets, (b) contextualizing the Islamic coverage of Afghanistan's media within interpretable theoretical frameworks, and (c) analyzing the Shariat Newspapers' Islamic coverage -the Taliban official organ- with regards to the provided contextual framework. This article provides helpful information about Islamic coverage of Afghanistan's outlets that contribute to Islamic communication studies. In the coming sections, a comprehensive review of the coverage of Islamic issues in Afghanistan's media as literature of study will be provided, and the research's conceptual framework and methodology will be discussed. The last section will share the research results, discussion, conclusion, limitations, and future research directions. Within this context, this study wants to find answers to the following questions: How do the Taliban use media affordance to disseminate religious teachings?; What are the dominant religious themes which are covered in the Shariat Newspaper?; What messages does the Taliban religious content convey, and what differentiated narrative is pursued?; Who are the potential recipients of the Taliban religious broadcasting?

Methodology

Case selection

This study used a quantitative and qualitative mixed method to explore the coverage of Islamic issues in the Taliban's Shariat Newspaper. This Newspaper was established in 1996 when the Taliban took power in Afghanistan for the first time. It is the official Taliban newspaper, promoting its ideology and policies. This newspaper prints news and articles on a wide range of topics, from politics, religion, and the military to social, health, and sports. This newspaper was selected for this study because it is the closest outlet to the Taliban government, which can provide first-hand content coming out of this group's religious propagation apparatus. Eighty issues of this newspaper - available online in PDF format- were randomly chosen between 2021 and 2023 for this study (Sputnik, 2021).

Coding scheme

An open coding approach was adopted using a spreadsheet, and a coding book including two separate pages was designed. On the first page, the general information of the issue, including the date, number of articles in Persian and Pashtu languages, the number of Islamic and non-Islamic articles in an issue, the non-religious article categorization and the countries mentioned in the articles, and the tone of the articles toward the mentioned parties and countries were included. In the second sheet, the Islamic topics coverage was comprehensively coded to be studied. The title of the article, the author of the article, whether authoritative or not, the number of columns and pages the article took, the article message, and an epilogue of the article for qualitative content analysis were included in the second sheet. Based on thematic categorizations, the religious articles and issues in terms of their themes were categorized into Sharia Law, historical, social, general religious information, cultural, women's rights, and neither category. Similarly, the non-religious topics were categorized into political, economic, and mixed categories.

Findings

Descriptive statistics

To answer the first question, how did the Taliban use media affordance to disseminate religious information in Shariat newspaper? It was found that specific affordances were obtained. First, in terms of temporal and spatial affordance, this publication disseminated religious information regularly and distributed it across the country through hard copy, surpassing time and space limitations. Second, this newspaper effectively used the technological affordance of media convergence to increase its messages' reach, view, and effectiveness. They made online social media accounts for the publication to get their message even further, and also, by making the PDF version of the newspaper available in the online archive, they extensively used technological affordance. Third, socio-lingual affordance, this publication used two national languages, Persian and Pashtu, to disseminate their messages simultaneously, which enabled them to enhance the number of their readers and contribute to the reach of their message and spread of their narrative.

Coming to the second question, which religious themes were dominant in the coverage of this newspaper? As Figure 1 shows, Sharia Law, including the Ahkam and Farayez, and historical information and articles about religion were the two most dominant Islamic themes in the coverage of this publication. As the name of the publication suggests, Sharia law and its application are the two main aspects expected to be covered in this newspaper. Likewise, the Taliban's central governance objective is the implementation of the Sharia Law. Hence, it is unsurprising that content related to Sharia Law stands first in terms of the frequency of the topics. Similarly, to apply Sharia, expectedly, there is an urgent need to make connections between the current era and the early age of Islam in terms of how Islamic law must be applied. Therefore, the second category of religious Islamic content, historical religious content, also matches with the Taliban religious propagation policy.

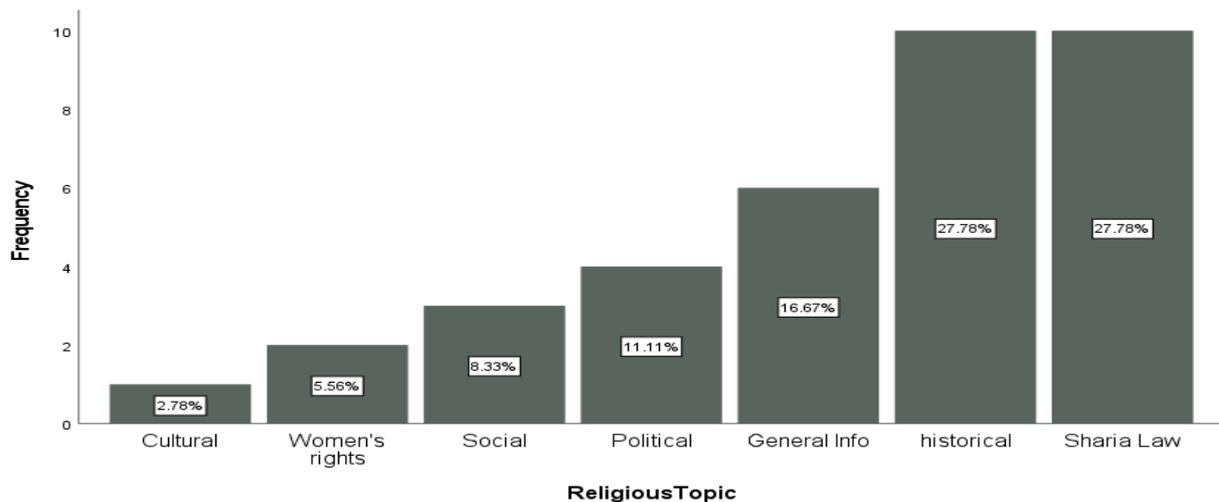


Figure 1 Religious Topics in Shariat Newspaper

Figure 1 shows that general religious information and political and social categories are also prevalent, except for Sharia law and historical information. Women's rights and cultural issues within religion have not been paid much attention to and were the two least religious content categories. Regarding the non-religious content, the majority (60.78%) of the topics were mixed, including social, political, and cultural issues; 23.53% were related to economics, and 15.69% were related to politics.

From the language perspective, the majority of the articles covered in this newspaper are in the Pashtu language, 77%, while only 23% of the articles and content of this newspaper are in the Persian language. This imbalance is due to the fact that this newspaper is the official newspaper of the Taliban, who are a predominantly Pashtun ethnic group. The language imbalance of the Taliban press is evident; even studies show that their content on Twitter has been mainly in the Pashtu language and less in Persian and English languages.

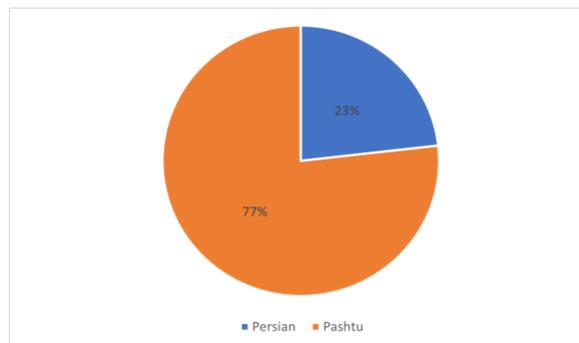


Figure 2 The distribution of the publication coverage based on the languages

Thematic qualitative analysis of controversial themes in Shariat Newspaper

To answer the second part of question 2 and the last question, which differentiated narratives are being pursued and who the recipients of the Taliban's broadcasting are, a qualitative thematic analysis approach was followed. Among the themes covered in this publication, shown in Figure 1, the historical and most of the issues regarding the Ahkam and Farayez are commonly understood and agreed upon among Muslims. However, a series of Islamic Ahkams have been printed among the covered topics in this newspaper, which makes the Taliban's narrative quite distinctive from the conventional interpretation of Islam and the majority of Islamic countries. These topics have been a hotbed of debates and controversial interpretations among Islamic scholars and within Afghanistan, particularly concerning the Taliban's interpretation of Islam. Therefore, these issues were selected to be thematically discussed to highlight the conflictual religious point in this publication.

Hijab and Women's Rights

Women's issues are one of the topics covered in this newspaper, which have all been written by men, and no women have been found among the authors. The titles that discuss the issues related to women are as follows: "*The Men and Women Differences from the Quran Perspective*," "*A Reflection on the Women and Men Socializing*," and "*Why Polyandry is Illegal in Islam*." The first article explains that women are inferior to men because of emotionality. Women's emotionality cannot bear equal testimony with men, inheritance, family management, and head of state. "*Women are not economically worthy men, and the death of a man in the family is more harmful than that of a woman*." This article tried to argue one-sidedly in favor of men. However, it seems that the positive side of the story about women concerning their position in the holy Quran has been wholly ignored. The second article argues that the excessive socializing (Mixing in society) of men and women and their continual communication will harm society. This article touches upon one of the sensitive policies of the Taliban concerning women's education and work. Although this article addresses the importance of women's presence in today's world, in conclusion, he anecdotally cites some religious scholars to defy the logic to benefit his argument. This article brings anecdotal arguments based on specific persons and argues that some majors that society needs, such as medical majors, are necessary. In contrast, others, as the article argues, are "*not important*" to society. In doing so, the author justifies

his argument and concludes that women's education in Afghanistan is not desirable in the current situation. However, given the women's needs for service provision in all offices and aspects of life, one cannot ignore that women's presence in the schools as the teachers, doctors in the hospitals, police in the security and inspection, consular in the court, bankers in the banks, officers in the offices and journalists in the media are all equally important for a society to survive and pursue a prosperous future. The third article, copied directly from a website, is not considered further for discussion.

Another controversial topic related to women that has been controversially covered in this publication is related to the women's Hijab. Although the importance of the hijab as an Islamic value has been a matter of consideration for all sects within Islam, the scope and range of it has been a matter of debate among Islamic scholars. In general, the hijab is clothing that keeps women safe in society. As Rahama et al. (2014) explained, the hijab has two main functions: personal and social. The Hijab not only helps women to be safe, have a sound, familiar relationship, and enjoy individual dignity and chastity but also contributes to the social well-being of society. Based on the scholar who has discussed the issue of the Hijab, it is a self-reflection of Muslim women as part of their identity, which is a self-deserved choice rather than a forceful implementation of a coercive obligation. The mainstream body of knowledge about the Hijab considers the Hijab to be an internal desire of Muslim women based on faithful satisfaction (Ibrahimi & Nabawi, 2015: 47-78; Rahnama, 2014: 38-53). Nonetheless, the article about the Hijab in this publication is not discussed professionally or at least based on grounded reasons and aligned with the conventional worldwide understanding of this value. The articles regarding this issue in this publication emphasized the importance of the Hijab while not providing any scope or range. Defining the Hijab has been one of the challenges among the different sects of Islam and Muslim scholars, and the articles of this publication also, by far and large, failed to define the Hijab as a specific type of clothing that women should observe. Different interpretations have emerged from the holy text and the Hadiths, which range from keeping women at the house and prohibiting them from social activities beyond the home to the interpretation that women can wear Hijabs and work and be present in society (Ibrahimi & Nabawi, 2015: 56). These anecdotal or mere narrations of the Islamic Ahakam without appropriate interpretation and contextualization are not understandable to the common people and open the way to misleading justifications or misusing religious Ahakam (Ibrahimi & Nabawi, 2015: 48-52).

Another aspect of discussing the Hijab in the articles in the sample of this study is prone to gender bias. In Islam, the Hijab is the responsibility of both men and women to make society civil and fair, and its implication goes beyond wearing close to the person's behaviors and etiquette. (Pervez, 2015). With regards to the men's responsibility, the Surah-Nur verse 30, "*Say to the believing men that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts; that is purer for them; surely Allah is Aware of what they do.*" (Holy Quran, 24: 30). However, in the articles of this newspaper, all responsibility has been inflicted on women while rarely or non-attention was given to men's responsibility in this regard. The articles in this publication argue that women should wear hijab to decrease men's attention. In this perspective, men are portrayed as human beings who have no control over themselves, and women should protect themselves from them. The article "*Hijab's Ukum in Islamic Sharia*" cites the verse of the holy Quran but only cites them to materialize his understanding of the Hijab; it does not provide any valid religious source to interpret the verse associated with the issue of Hijab in Islamic Sharia. From observing these articles, two conclusions can emerge: first, the authors of this publication, particularly concerning women's issues, do not have enough religious knowledge and qualifications, and second, the authors have used a selective and anecdotal approach to justify their ideological preferences rather than providing reasoned and well-written convincing piece to the audience.

Political-oriented Islamic Topics

The value of the King in Islam, human rights in Islam, and tolerance and intolerance in Islam are other topics included in the sample of this study. The first title, which touches upon the political system in Islam, is entitled the article “*The Value of King in Islam.*” In the content of this article, Islamic alternatives such as Amir, Amir-al-Muminin (The commander of the faithful), and the Caliph have been extensively used instead of the King. This article clearly shows that the author does not understand the names and the differences between these political systems. The second article discusses the issue of human rights in Islam. The author differentiates between the definition of human rights from the religious and non-religious perspectives. The author pinpoints that the basis of human rights in Islam is Sharia law, which emphasizes the peaceful coexistence of all humans regardless of their religion, race, and language. From a Western perspective, human rights are based on conventional human-made laws. The article argues that justice is the core principle of Islamic human rights, which is that everything and everyone should be placed in the place that best matches their qualification and characteristics, whereas, in conventional human rights, equality is the pivotal principle. Based on this article, there is a substantial difference between human rights from the perspective of Islam and Western human rights. Similarly, the third article discusses the concept of tolerance in Islam. The article argues that Islam is a moderate religion and excesses are prohibited. Doubtless, plenty of verses and hadith accumulated with the historical evidence endorse such an argument. However, the author's reasoning does not serve the argument being made; instead, it provides a series of selective evidence and anecdotes that defy the argument for the benefit of ideological preferences and envisages a more intolerant face of Islam.

ISIS and the Khawarij

Another theme that attracts attention on the pages of this publication is related to Daesh. Daesh, who is the remaining of Al-Qaeda Iraq, emerged in 2013 in Iraq and subsequently joined in fighting against President Bashar al-Assad and renamed itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham. (BBC, 2019). Islamic State of Khurasan Province (ISKP), as an offshoot of ISIS, started its operation around 2014 in the eastern part of Afghanistan to establish the Islamic Khilafa in Khurasan. Since this group's emergence, the Taliban had been fighting with them, and as the Taliban took power in August 2021, ISKP was one of the potential threats to their governance. The Taliban compared this group to the Khawarij, an opposing group inside Islam that emerged and rebelled against the fourth Muslim caliphs (Kadivar, 2020: 1-27). Since this group's emergence, the Taliban branded this group as the modern Khawarij and defied their narrative for establishing an Islamic state in Afghanistan.

Aligned with the Taliban's narrative about this group, a series of articles in this newspaper discusses the Daesh. For instance, one article titled “The Early Age of Islam Khawarij and the Modern-day Daesh,” since ISKP seeks religious legitimacy, the article also discusses the issue of Daesh and the Khawarij based on a comparative approach by enumerating the similarities between the two groups. Based on this article, “*The ISKP as an extremist group that does not accept others than themselves, having intolerable policies in the application of the Sharia law, and an extensive judgmental approach with regards to the Kufr and Islam, are similar to the Khawariji of early Islam.*”

Based on the thematic analysis of the content of this newspaper, it can be concluded that the newspaper pursues the official interpretation of the Taliban. As mentioned, their position with regards to women, human rights, and also their narrative against their rivals such as Daesh has been covered in this newspaper. Although a variety of topics have been included in the publication, ultimately, the focus and the angle of the data dissemination are directed to the core interests and the policies of the Taliban. Based on the newspaper's language distribution, the publication's recipients are, to a more significant extent, the Pashtu-speaking people. At the same time, limited like-minded Persian-speaking people may also read this newspaper. Meanwhile, the image projection of the optimal way of life, which is being shared in this publication, may be directed to

the ranks and foot soldiers of the Taliban themselves. As such, some articles invite the Taliban to avoid involvement in corruption and misuse of their powers.

Discussion and conclusion

This study used a mixed method to study the Shariat newspaper coverage of Islamic issues. This newspaper is the official publication of the Taliban, founded during their first rule in 1996. Employing the media affordance concept, this study argued that one of the dominant relationships between religion and media could be associated with the facilities that media provides for religious propagation. As such, this research found that the Taliban used this publication affordance in three main ways: temporal and spatial affordance, technological affordance and media convergence, and socio-lingual affordance of media. This finding partly matches previous studies, which showed that the technological influence of the media has been the driving force behind the use of media in the religious context. With the convergence of social media, the relationship between religion and media, particularly the new form of media, is deeply intertwined. Previous studies based on the use and gratification theory found that the media afford special gratification for people seeking faith-based media utilization (Ratcliff et al., 2017: 17; Brubaker & Haigh, 2017: 2-5). Similarly, this study also found that this publication's largest religious content category relates to Sharia law and Islamic historical issues. This finding matches the reality and the mission that the Taliban fought for; the main objective of the Taliban governance, as they claim themselves, is to apply the Sharia law. The broadcasting of the issues related to Sharia law shows that this group is trying to increase the people's awareness and expand its ideological proclamation. Nonetheless, it was noted that the quality of the content in this publication is not high enough to engage literate citizens and convince the opposing interpretation. Given the technicality of the topic related to Sharia law, qualified religious scholars with strong reasoning must write about these topics. Besides, it was found that this publication used a series of historical events as examples to connect the application of Sharia with the past Islamic society. However, owing to the Islamic civilization's diverse and rich historical background, such examples are neither representative nor enough. The authors in this publication have tried to find narratives that confirm their predefined supposition while often ignoring the diversity of the thoughts and interpretations, which is one of the most vital points of Islamic civilization.

Regarding dominant controversial themes, women's rights, Hijab, and human rights were among the topics that were extensively covered in this newspaper. Due to the closure of girls' education for more than two years and the public resentment about this issue, this publication seems to systematically try to provide people with content to control public opinion as part of a more extensive public opinion monitoring system. However, the observation of the articles in this newspaper shows that the authors did not convincingly cover and deeply investigate this issue. The shallowness of the arguments and poor reasoning of this set of articles is recognizable, even to a low-literate audience. Concerning this issue, the authors selectively chose the events and narrative to defend their ideological standpoints, ignoring the fact that the average educated population who read publications might find such content futile.

Research contributions, limitations, and future directions

This study applied the concept of media affordance to the study of media-religion relationship. Findings show that religion can benefit from the spatiotemporal affordances of these tools and enjoy the media's technical affordances and features. For instance, it was found that except for the timeless and borderless outreach, the Taliban used online depository affordance of the internet to upload the PDF of their official organ. Similarly, by designing a more interactive forum-like website, Islamic media outlets can expand their outreach and use this technology in broader ways. In addition, the meaningful usage of social media affordance enables Islamic outlets to enlarge their networks, thereby facilitating publishing and broadcasting effectiveness. Future research can use media affordance as a framework to study religious coverage in media in different countries.

Furthermore, this study found that the Taliban official organ's Islamic coverage matches with their policies on the ground; conflictual and debated topics about women's rights, their education, the type of Islamic state, legitimacy, and also terrorism have been discussed. However, the articles in this publication superficially and one-sidedly addressed these issues, which lack rigorous, convincing reasoning. This might be due to the fact that the majority of the Taliban media workers lack professional journalism studies and also practical experiences.

Besides its strengths, this article has some shortcomings that must be acknowledged. First, the sample of this study might be too small to make a conclusive result concerning Taliban religious broadcasting and narrative as a whole. Future research can expand their samples to explore the other publications and media programs of the Taliban to provide a broader picture of the Taliban religious broadcasting. Second, the Islamic coverage of the media in Afghanistan is a huge independent topic that needs extensive literature review and observation. This study chose some salient examples, but publications were only marginally mentioned. Future research can conduct a critical literature review based on the Persian language, which can bring about insightful contributions to religious broadcasting and Islamic media coverage in the country.

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