The Bazaar, the State, and the Struggle for Public Opinion in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan

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Abstract

Public opinion is formed by the information that the public consumes. The state, whether democratic or authoritarian, employs various media of communication to influence people's opinions and behaviours. In the nineteenth century, Afghan rulers would traditionally use force and religion to gain popular support and strengthen their authority. In the second half of the century, they started to use print technology to build their relationships with the public. The state's print, however, had to compete with the institution of the bazaar that had long served as the central place where information circulated in public. This article, drawing mostly on unexamined Afghan sources, offers an account of how the bazaar operated as a source of information and how the Afghan state tried to suppress it. The history of this information conflict uncovers new aspects in the troublesome relationship between the government and the governed in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Print technology, state control in 19th Century Afghanistan, *taghallub*

Introduction

In the nineteenth century, religion and force remained the key instruments of governance for the rulers of Kabul. This political culture was partly based on the idea of *taghallub* (domination), a theory that Muslim jurists traditionally considered to be a source of political legitimacy.[1] The theory derived from the classical principle of the "rule belongs to he who conquers" (*al-hukm li-man ghalab*).[2] On the other hand, Sunni jurists had a pragmatic interpretation of the Quranic verse wherein God instructs the faithful to obey their rulers.[3] According to this popular belief, showing obedience to the ruler was a religious duty,

[1]Ahmad ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalani, Fath al-Bari bi-Sharh Sahih al-Bukhari (ed.), *ʿAbd al Rahman al-Barrak and Nazar Muhammad al-Faryabi* (Riyadh, 2005), xvi, p. 438.

[2]Another version of this dictum is the "kingdom belongs to he who conquers" (*al-mulk li-man ghalab*.) Both, however, refer to the same principle: for the pursuit of power, the use of violence is legitimate. In 64/684, ʿAbd Allah ibn Khazim, a Zubayrid military commoner, right before launching an attack on the Umayyad-controlled city of Herat in Khurasan, used this phrase to motivate his soldiers. Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Tarikh al-Tabari*, (ed.) Sidqi Jamil al-ʿAttar (Beirut, 2017), iv, p. 33.

[3]Quran, 4:59.

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and no matter the character of the ruler, or how he ascended to the throne, one had to obey him.[4] This understanding incentivised the use of force and religiosity in politics. As a result, Afghan rulers mainly relied on two elite groups to practice governance: tribal chiefs for the supply of soldiers, and clergy for religious sanction.[5] Ordinary people, the public, on the other hand, were of little concern to the ruler, and their wishes or wants could easily be ignored.

Amir Shir ʿAli Khan, during his second reign (1868–79), tried to change this. Tired of the endless wars with his many rivals, he decided to take a new approach towards governance. He imported print machines from India to carry out a number of reforms that were primarily aimed at strengthening the relationship between ordinary people and the state. He used the new technology to modernise government paperwork, print postal stamps, and publish educational books and pamphlets. The most prominent of his reform programmes was the establishment of *Shams al-Nahar* (the morning sun), Afghanistan's first newspaper. The Amir wanted to talk to people and win over their hearts and minds. His goal was to portray himself to the public as a righteous Muslim ruler, to whom showing obedience, according to the rules of the religion, was not optional. His newspaper, in addition to religious rhetoric, would also use rational reasoning to buy public loyalty for the Amir.

"In England, they have put a woman, just in name, on the throne and still people obey her": so read an article in the 22 November 1873 issue of *Shams al-Nahar* which informed its readers about the relationship between the public and the state in the most powerful and prosperous country in the world. Indeed, "In Punjab, which is ten thousand miles away from the borders of England, a government employee works with so much sincerity as if he is working in front of her".[6] The author told his countrymen that the secret to England's prosperity lay in the loyalty of its public to the crown, and if Afghans wished their country to prosper, then they too had to obey their king and stop spreading anti-government sentiments. Knowing that invoking neighbourly envy alone might not encourage Afghans to obey the Amir of Kabul, the author deployed another tactic: if they did not obey their ruler, in this world, they would be miserable and humiliated and, in the other world, "tortured in hell".[7] He did not stop there. Citing the Quran and the Prophet he then declared that obeying the king was the order of God and "whoever uses bad words against His Majesty the King of the country, his wife would become divorced from him and he would become an infidel".[8]

The majority of original articles in *Shams al-Nahar* dealt with the same theme: obey the king and stop spreading anti-government ideas. Or, in other words, the newspaper was published for the direct purpose of shaping public opinion, in an effort to extend the authority of the state over a country that was, and continues to be, divided by tribal enmities and tall mountains. In a predominantly illiterate population, however, public opinion was primarily shaped by stories that circulated in the bazaar and other places where members of the public

[4]Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalani, *Fath al-Bari*, xvi, p. 438.
[5]Christine Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan: The Reign of Amir Dost Muhammad Khan, 1826-1863* (London, 1997), pp. 1–59
[6]*Shams al-Nahar* (*SN*, hereafter), 1 Shawwal 1290/22 November 1873, p. 25.
[7]*Ibid.*,
[8]*Ibid.*, p. 27.

could communicate face-to-face. The state, as this article proposes, recognised the bazaar's communication culture and its effectiveness. The news that circulated in bazaars mobilised people in almost every decisive moment in Afghanistan's modern history, from the overthrow of kingdoms to the defeat of invading armies. All rulers, as a result, were wary of the information that the public consumed, and all knew that "the power of the people is the power of God", as one of them famously proclaimed.[9] A favourable public opinion meant political legitimacy that, in turn, would translate into more recruits for the army and more obedient public servants, two pillars of a long-lasting reign. It seems, however, that they rarely managed to achieve such a goal: most Afghan rulers in the modern era were either forcefully ousted from power or murdered, including the man who quipped the abovementioned quote.

This article thus explores how Afghan rulers used information to build authority, earn legitimacy, and gain public support. Every Afghan government, it could be argued, has dealt with some sort of insurgency fuelled, at least in part, by bazaar news.[10] And in order to contain bazaar news, the state has traditionally relied on print. The contestation, therefore, between the bazaar (a public medium) and print (a state medium) has been a defining feature of information order in Afghanistan. Drawing on a wide range of sources, particularly Afghan state periodicals and untapped materials from the National Archives of Afghanistan in Kabul, this article shows how the bazaar influenced people's opinions and how rulers attempted to control what the public talked about. This article also highlights the importance of the bazaar—as opposed to the mosque—as a social infrastructure that facilitated the circulation of news, knowledge and ideas. The period under investigation covers events from 1873 to 1901, including Amir Shir ʿAli Khan's rule, the two years of British occupation (1878–80), and the formative reign of Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman. Looking at this neglected aspect of Afghan history from this perspective, this article argues, allows us to uncover new aspects of the country's troublesome relationship between the government and the governed.

From Sword to Pen: The Transformation of Political Domination

In Afghanistan, throughout its modern history, coercive power was the key instrument used by the rulers to assert, and expand, their authority over the territory and the population—and it rarely worked, as evident from the repeated insurgencies and civil wars that took place. Christine Noelle, in her study of the first Barakzai ruler, Amir Dust Muhammad Khan (r. 1826–63), explains the mechanics of how the Amir ruled. His government was not strong enough to wage war on all his rivals, so the Amir, being a master of forging alliances, had to use 'carrot and stick' tactics to control his domains, especially the volatile areas where Pashtun tribes lived.[11] Afghan rulers, to earn loyalty, had to offer lands or regional

[9]The quote is attributed to President Nur Muhammad Taraki (1978-9). See M. Hassan Kakar, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Invasion and the Afghan Response, 1979-1982* (Berkeley, 1995), p. 21.

[10]Even the power of the current Taliban insurgency, which has brought the Kabul government almost to its knees, comes from the group's information war. See Thomas H. Johnson, *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghanistan Conflict* (London, 2017), pp. 16-17.

[11]Noelle, *State and Tribe in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan*, pp. 1–59.

governorships to powerful tribal chiefs.[12] They also offered them "opportunities for plunder", as Benjamin Hopkins shows. In this respect, the Afghan method of governance followed a "plundering polity model", where the authority of political leaders was based on their ability to "collect and distribute wealth gained through booty raids of neighbouring territories".[13] Hopkins, echoing Thomas Barfield, suggests that governance by violence and conquest was mainly a feature of Central Asian polities.[14] The phenomenon, however, as mentioned earlier, is better understood in the context of *taghallub* (domination), which defined the nature of pre-modern political power in the Islamic world. The theory of legitimacy through domination was not a fabrication of later Muslim dynasties trying to justify their violent conquests, but an idea that dates back to the early days of Islam.[15] Violent subjugation, if carried out by a Muslim ruler, was understood as a legitimate use of power.

Amir Shir ʿAli Khan's adoption of print technology in the second half of the nineteenth century demonstrated his intention to depart from traditional ways of exercising governmental power. He employed print to build a new information order, where the state controlled the news and shaped public opinion. But print was a visual medium that required mass literacy to communicate the ideas of the state to the general public; and in nineteenth-century Afghanistan, few could read as education remained available only to a small group of elites and the clergy.[16] Historians of the Afghan media have cited this very reason for the failure of print to tame the country's main method of communication: oral bazaar news.[17] Instead of pursuing literacy to popularise print, the Amir, and especially his successor, tried unsuccessfully to control oral information circulation by force. Or in other words, despite knowing the local expression, "you can close the gates of the city, but not the mouths of the people", Afghanistan's rulers tried to close the mouths of the people. In India, the country that inspired Amir Shir ʿAli Khan to invest in print, the construction of a reading public was a more successful process thanks to the presence of an independent press. The formation of voluntary associations, which could be considered the cause or consequence of a reading public, was also something that Afghanistan did not experience, but they grew in India mostly due to the public's better access to reliable information there.[18]

[12]Giving land to tribal chiefs was one of the main instruments of buying loyalty for the Durrani kings. Yuri Kankufski, 'Maliyat va sistim-i maliyati dar ʿasr-i shahan-i Durrani', (translation) Hafiz Allah Qurayshi, *Ariyana* 45, 2 (1366/1987), pp. 50–51.

[13]B. D. Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan* (New York, 2008), pp. 85–91.

[14]Thomas J. Barfield, 'Problems in Establishing Legitimacy in Afghanistan', *Iranian Studies* 37, 2 (2004), p. 264; Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, p. 91.

[15]The son of the second caliph, ʿAbd Allah ibn ʿUmar, for example, advised Muslims to obey whoever won the war. See Abu Yaʿla Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn al-Farra, *Al-Ahkam al-Sultaniyya*, (ed.) Muhammad Hamid al-Fiqi (Beirut, 2000), p. 23.

[16]May Schinasi, *Afghanistan at the beginning of the twentieth century: nationalism and journalism in Afghanistan: a study of Seraj ul-akhbar, 1911-1918* (Naples, 1979), p. 29.

[17]Mohammad Kazem Ahang, 'The Background and Beginning of the Afghan Press System', *Afghanistan: Historical and Cultural Quarterly* 21, 1 (1968), pp. 71–72; Nushin Arbabzadah, 'The Afghan Mediascape', in *Under the Drones: Modern Lives in the Afghanistan-Pakistan Borderlands*, (eds.) Shahzad Bashir and Robert D. Crews (Cambridge, 2012), pp. 215–235.

[18]C. Ryan Perkins, 'A New Pablik: Abdul Halim Sharar, Volunteerism, and the Anjuman-e Dar-Us-Salam in Late Nineteenth-Century India', *Modern Asian Studies* 49, 4 (2015), pp. 1049–1090. For more on many forms of publics in South Asia see, J. Barton Scott and Brannon D. Ingram, 'What is a public? Notes from South Asia', *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38, 3 (2015), pp. 357-370.

The news that circulated in the Kabul bazaar were rumours. Rumours are orally transmitted information characterised by their anonymous source and fluid nature. They emerge when the demand for information is high but access to information is limited.[19] A rumour, therefore, is the collective effort of a group of people trying to make sense of an ambiguous situation. It usually contains some factual matter, but it is different from news because of the absence of evidence. That is why it is also referred to as "improvised news".[20] Christopher Bayly, in his pioneering work on information order in colonial India, placed equal weight on both formal and informal channels of communication. He employed the concept of 'information order' to refer to a wide range of knowledge transmission modes that included not only sources such the press and government intelligence reports, but also religious texts, women's gossip, mercantile economic information and bazaar rumours.[21] In colonial India, the British administration was "peculiarly vulnerable to rumours" because of how relatively easy it was to spread them.[22] At the time, the public imagination was characterised by a distrust of India's foreign rulers, which encouraged people to believe all sorts of anti-government stories.[23] India's colonial authorities had to rely on these informal information channels to obtain a sense of public opinion, and to respond accordingly.[24] The decentralised nature of informal communication, however, meant that those who relied on it as a source of news could easily be manipulated by misinformation.

In order to understand how the circulation of misinformation operated before the age of social media and how public opinion was manipulated, we first need to understand public opinion itself. Habermas defined it as the "critical reflections of a public competent to form its own judgments".[25] In democratic societies, public opinion is generated as a result of voluntary and free political conversation among members of the public. In deliberative democracies, public opinion formation, according to social scientists, is part of a four-stage communication process: news media use—political conversation—opinion formation—and political participation.[26] Face-to-face conversation is a key step in opinion formation, and this is the reason what the public talks about matters greatly to anyone who is in power or in pursuit of power. As a result, influencing political conversation is a crucial first step towards manipulating public opinion. This requires crafting messages that could circulate widely—or go viral, to use a modern term. A message can go viral only if it provokes the public's emotional response. In a recent study on viral political posts on Twitter, researchers found that messages triggering moral judgment tended to get wider attention.[27]

[19]Tamotsu Shibutani, *Improvised News: A Sociological Study of Rumour* (Indianapolis, 1966), p. 57.

[20]*Ibid.*

[21]C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 3-6.

[22]*Ibid.*, p. 162.

[23]Anand A. Yang, 'A Conversation of Rumours: The Language of Popular 'Mentalitès' in Late Nineteenth-Century Colonial India', *Journal of Social History* 20, 3 (1987), p. 490.

[24]Bayly, *Empire and Information*, p. 325.

[25]Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 90.

[26]Joohan Kim, Robert O. Wyatt and Elihu Katz, 'News, Talk, Opinion, Participation: The Part Played by Conversation in Deliberative Democracy', *Political Communication* 16, 4 (1999), p. 361.

[27]William J. Brady *et al.*, 'Emotion Shapes the Diffusion of Moralized Content in Social Networks', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 114, 28 (2017), pp. 7313–7318. The role of rumour in triggering moral judgement was demonstrated in a tragic incident in 2015 in Kabul when a street mob beat a woman, Farkhundah Malikzadah,

As we will see in this article, the anti-government stories circulating in the Afghan bazaar were often about issues that triggered people's moral judgements, issues such as religion, sex or money.

The Mosque and the State

There is a long-held belief in Afghanistan that the mosque is an effective site of opinion formation. Even the current Afghan government believes in the mosque's potential as an instrument for influencing public opinion. The Ministry of Hajj and Endowments in Kabul sends out talking points to all imams in the country via SMS (or text messages), dictating what they should say in Friday sermons.[28] In other Muslim countries too, some consider the mosque to be the primary space of the public sphere in the city.[29] The power of the mosque as a site of opinion formation may be exaggerated but is understandable. Every Friday worshippers congregate in the mosque for prayers at the end of which the imam delivers a sermon that usually contains religious preaching together with opinions on political and public affairs. In addition, in Friday sermons, the preacher, according to a tradition found all over the Muslim world, has to say a prayer for the recognised ruler as a sign of allegiance. In times of turmoil, to hide their loyalty, some imams might recite the prayer "in the name of the Islamic king", without naming anyone.[30] Such state affiliation, along with its exclusion of non-Muslims, non-males, and non-Shia (or non-Sunni), arguably makes the mosque anything but a public sphere in which, by definition, "access is guaranteed to all citizens".[31] As a result, the mosque has served as a space where the public could passively receive official information but it has been far from an open space of conversation and debate. Rather it represents a closed space that has served the powerful.

But while not exactly a space of the public sphere, the mosque nonetheless was an ideal place to deliver information to a captive audience. That was why in much of Afghan history, the mosque was where the state disseminated misinformation and official propaganda. The Afghan state also kept imams on payroll and instructed them what to say in Friday sermons. In 1893, for instance, in the early days of the state's genocidal campaign against the Hazaras (a Shia minority), Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan (r. 1880–1901) printed propaganda booklets and sent them out to mosques around the country. The preachers, during Friday sermons,

to death. A *mulla* had falsely accused her of burning the Quran. On her tragic death, see Jennifer L. Fluri and Rachel Lehr, '"We Are Farkhunda": Geographies of Violence, Protest, and Performance', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45, 1 (2019), pp. 149–173; Niamatullah Ibrahimi, 'Rumor and Collective Action Frames: An Assessment of How Competing Conceptions of Gender, Culture, and Rule of Law Shaped Responses to Rumor and Violence in Afghanistan', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2019), pp. 1–23.

[28]'Wazir-i Hajj-i Afghanistan: Imaman Mavzuʿ-i Khutbah-hay-i Namaz-i Jumʿah ra ba SMS Daryaft Mikunand', *BBC Persian*, 26 May 2015, https://bbc.in/37lQIFK (accessed 12 November 2019). The state also keeps imams on payroll. It was recently revealed that for years the government paid at least 11 "ghost" imams in the province of Samangan. "Ghost" is a euphemism in Afghanistan for payroll corruption, when officials make up names to steal from public funds. '11 Imaginary Imams Paid for Years in Samangan', *Pajhwok Afghan News*, 5 January 2020, https://bit.ly/2QvDm4f (accessed 6 January 2020).

[29]Nasser Rabbat, 'The Arab Revolution Takes Back the Public Space', *Critical Inquiry* 39, 1 (2012), pp. 198–199. In Afghanistan, too, one historian suggests, mosques served as sites of exchanging news. Ahang, 'The Background and Beginning of the Afghan Press System', p. 71.

[30]Ludwig W. Adamec, *Historical Dictionary of Afghanistan* (Lanham, 2012), p. 255.

[31]Jürgen Habermas, 'The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964)', (trans.) Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, *New German Critique*, 3 (1974), p. 49.

had to read out the booklet to the congregation, sharing its pro-government ideas about the "protection of the nation and the country", which were supported by verses from the Quran and sayings from the Prophet.[32] The Amir was particularly sensitive with respect to the control of mosques, their imams and the content of sermons. In 1892, a local clergyman opposed the delivery of Friday and ʿId sermons in a certain mosque in Khust, but the Amir ordered his officials there to make sure that these were delivered despite the local opposition.[33] In another decree, Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan instructed his governors to appoint imams in all the country's mosques and have them deliver Friday sermons in support of his authority. In Herat, he sent orders to his governor to prepare a detailed list of all the mosques in the region, whether they were urban, rural, small or big.[34] He did not have a newspaper, but the Amir used the mosque as an infrastructure of state propaganda. As a result, the bazaar, not the mosque, was arguably a truly open space that allowed the public to assemble, exchange information and form opinions that—throughout Afghan history—were significant in challenging the ruling power. The mosque, as mentioned earlier, was a closed space.

The Bazaar and the Public

In countries with an independent press, when the state hides critical information there are usually whistleblowers who leak the information to the media. In nineteenth-century Kabul, with no independent media, insiders would leak such information in the bazaar. This explains the old expression in Kabul "news from the Chawk", which is still in use today in the local media, everyday language and Afghan politics.[35] It referred to the news that originated from the Chawk, or town square, the centre of the bazaar in Kabul (Fig. 1). Word-of-mouth stories emanating from the bazaar were considered real and more credible than what was published in newspapers by the government: bazaar news was a key source of information as few would trust official news. In 1951, during a short period of time when the Afghan state allowed independent media, one newspaper ran a rumour column entitled "News from the Chawk", publishing unflattering information about top officials. The column was later renamed "Official News from Unofficial Sources", which was a clever way of defining bazaar news: the information was official but unofficially obtained because most bazaar news was leaked by insiders with access to credible government

[32]Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 7 Rabiʿ al-Awwal 1311/18 September 1893, National Archives of Afghanistan, Kabul, Afghanistan (NAA, hereafter), Farman, No. 4635/66. Also see Amir Habib Allah Khan to Governor Ghulam Muhammad Khan and Judge Mulla Muhammad Aʿzam Khan of Ghurband, Muharram 1322/March-April 1904, NAA, Farman, No. 1869.

[33]Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Sardar Shirindil Khan and the rest of officials in Khust, 12 Shawwal 1309/10 May 1892, NAA, Doc. No. 2394, Farman, No. 237.

[34]Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, Shawwal 1310/April-May 1893, NAA, Farman, No. 4627/80.

[35]Faraydun Azhand, 'Inja Ruznamah ast Khabar-hay-i sar-i Chawk', *Hasht-i Subh*, 9 Jaddi 1989/30 December 2010, http://bit.ly/2cxNiXf (accessed 20 December 2019). The expression in Persian: "*khabar-hāy-i sar-i chawk*". The word Chawk is Urdu for the town square. There is even a made-for-TV Afghan film called *News from the Chawk* (dir. Bahram Baryal), where the protagonist is a gossip-monger with the catchphrase "I'm not saying it, news from the Chawk is saying it", using the Chawk as a stamp of credibility. The film, starring Nabi Tanha, was produced sometime after 2002 by Afghan state television.

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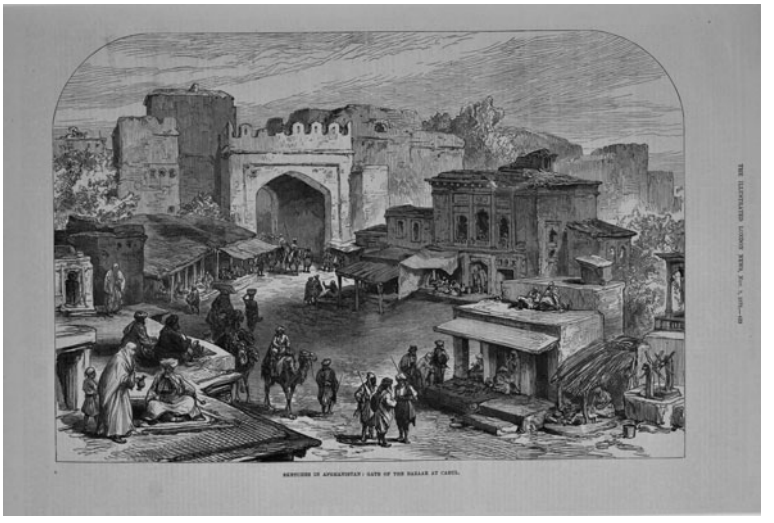

Fig. 1 In the nineteenth century, the bazaar of Kabul was an open social space of assembly that served as the primary source of political news for the residents. This image shows the Chawk, the city's main public square, and the entrance to its famed arcade bazaar. Source: *Illustrated London News*, 9 November 1878, p. 433.

information.[36] Today, however, now that Afghanistan enjoys a greater degree of freedom of the press, the "news from the square" expression has gained a negative connotation. Politicians today use it to dismiss leaked news, whether real or fabricated, and some media outlets will use it to refer to rumours. The expression, nonetheless, carries the colourful history of an urban public space that played a significant role in the culture of the city. The news from the square, in other words, used to be an instrument of public resistance against state propaganda.

Bazaar news, as previously mentioned, did not comprise just false stories. It, of course, contained falsehoods but, generally, the essence of stories was based on facts. The reason for this was government secrecy: when the state closely guarded information and only allowed sugar-coated propaganda to be published (mostly in print), the facts could only be ascertained through unofficial channels—and that meant face-to-face communication in physical places such as the bazaar. As a result, on many occasions, stories circulating there contained reliable information, and this was why some foreign embassies in Kabul used them in their own intelligence gathering. The bazaar, therefore, to borrow from Nancy Fraser, was a "counterpublic"—as opposed to the state's desired, but not realised, "reading public". In her critique of the Habermasian public sphere, Fraser redefined the communicative aspects of deliberative democracy by showing how subordinated social groups in Europe built counterpublics, which challenged the bourgeois public spheres that were not as accessible, inclusive or egalitarian as had been thought.[37] In Afghanistan,

[36]*Ingar*, 11 Hamal 1330/1 April 1951, p. 4; *Ingar*, 14 Hamal 1330/4 April 1951, p. 4.

[37]Nancy Fraser, 'Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy', *Social Text* 25/26 (1990), pp. 56–80.

the bazaar—a popular site of communication—led to the creation of a counterpublic that contested the narratives produced in official newspapers—the organ of the elite reading public. The bazaar, as a social infrastructure, thus remained a counterpublic space, even at times when government-imposed surveillance and control made it difficult to function as an open space of assembly.

Assessing the accuracy of bazaar information was a delicate task. After all, bazaar stories were orally-transmitted information with no written evidence to substantiate them.[38] In Kabul, the locals as well as experienced foreigners were generally able to tell between reliable and baseless bazaar news.[39] British intelligence officers in Kabul, who relied on bazaar news for gathering information, had a system of ranking such information based on its apparent reliability. They would place three alphabetical marks, A, B, and C, on the margins of their reports, next to a piece of significant information, in order to indicate its trustworthiness. Their ranking system shows that bazaar rumours were not simply rumours, but often stories that carried credible information.[40] This was why anyone interested in learning about new rumours circulating in town had to go to the bazaar and chat with traders.

Such talk was as essential for bazaar traders as the goods that they were selling. Shopkeepers would invite patrons to sit with them and just talk as if, according to one observer, they were "not at all worried about selling their merchandise".[41] Bazaar news, in addition to affecting the political landscape, could also move markets. Stories could easily cause fluctuations in the price of basic commodities, something that could create economic and political chaos.[42] This was why governors from all major towns in the county were required to dispatch regular reports on price information in their bazaars to Kabul.[43] In 1883, two soldiers who had deserted returned from Kabul to Qandahar, their hometown, where they told the bazaar about the Amir's defeat in one of his campaigns against insurgents. Their news "caused a good deal of excitement, and a rise in the price of grain took place". The governor ordered his police chief to kill the rumour, which was adding momentum to anti-government groups. The police chief did what he thought was a sure way to stop the rumour: he arrested a man for repeating the news in the bazaar and "had his mouth sewn up".[44]

[38]Rumour is defined as "a specific (or topical) proposition for belief, passed along from person to person, usually by word of mouth, without secure standards of evidence being present". See Gordon Willard Allport and Léo Joseph Postman, *The Psychology of Rumour* (New York, 1947), p. ix.

[39]Syed Mujtaba Ali, *In a land far from home: a Bengali in Afghanistan*, (translated) Nazes Afroz (New Delhi, 2015), p. 118.

[40]For some examples, see A. L. P. Burdett (ed.), *Afghanistan Strategic Intelligence: British Records, 1919-1970* (London, 2002), iii, pp. 765–786. The ranking system is called The Admiralty Code.

[41]Ali, *In a Land far from Home*, p. 118. For recent anthropological studies on the Afghan bazaar, see Noah Coburn, *Bazaar Politics: Power and Pottery in an Afghan Market Town* (Stanford, 2011), and Magnus Marsden, *Trading Worlds: Afghan Merchants across Modern Frontiers* (Oxford, 2016).

[42]A Nobel laureate economist has recently (2019) published a book on the role of stories and how they shape market events, such as recessions, even in a data-obsessed capitalist society such as the US. See Robert J. Shiller, *Narrative Economics: How Stories Go Viral and Drive Major Economic Events* (Princeton, 2019), pp. 111–113.

[43]Sardar Nasr Allah Khan to Ghulam Muhammad Khan, Governor, District of Ghurband, 26 Ramazan 1320/27 December 1902, NAA, Farman, No. 303; Sardar Nasr Allah Khan to Ghulam Muhammad Khan, Governor, District of Ghurband, 1323/1905-1906, NAA, Farman, No. 305.

[44]*Kandahar Newsletters for the Year 1883* (Quetta, 1990), i, p. 51.

The Arrival of Print, 1871–8

In 1871, print technology arrived in a country where few could read. Print was the Afghan state's most ambitious attempt to counter the influence of bazaar stories. In 1873, Amir Shir ʿAli Khan published *Shams al-Nahar*, using a lithographic printing press imported from India. He published other print materials, too, such as books, educational pamphlets and postal stamps, to bring about the transition of the government—and the nation—from orality to print, and ultimately to contain the bothersome dominance of oral networks of dissemination of information.[45] As a consequence, a cultural confrontation broke out that pitted two institutions of communication against one another: the public's bazaar and the state's print. The public resisted the state's attempt to monopolise the circulation of information. This resistance, with varying degrees of success, was played out in urban public spaces where stories about the Amir and his government were disseminated.

The Afghan government at the time was run mostly on the basis of oral information. A good example of this would be the petition: people would deliver their petitions verbally to the ruler during his town hall meetings (*darbar*s.) Amir Shir ʿAli Khan, however, ended this practice by requiring petitioners to present their complaints to him in written form alone. The Amir also bureaucratised tax collection by requiring officials to issue receipts to prevent them from extorting money from people.[46] Publishing *Shams al-Nahar*, which was edited by a certain Mirza ʿAbd al-ʿAli, therefore, formed part of this larger programme of state-building. An editorial announcement in the very first issue of the newspaper made it clear why it had been established: "We will gather information from around the country from government offices and we will do our best not to publish bazaar news".[47] The announcement was considered sufficiently important to be printed on the second page of every subsequent issue of the newspaper (Fig. 2). In addition to the newspaper and some books, Amir Shir ʿAli Khan also introduced one other important paper medium, the postage stamp, with the aim of modernising Afghanistan's postal communication. Within government, his reforms included forming a cabinet of ministers and remodelling the Afghan army.[48]

Reading *Shams al-Nahar*, one can see how the paper struggled to contain the anti-government sentiments that were spreading in public. In addition to news from Afghanistan and around the world, it regularly published lengthy opinion pieces by government officials on the advantages of work, education, peace and progress—values associated with modernity. One of the dominant themes in these pieces was encouraging people to obey the ruler if they wanted to be a good Muslim and their country to progress. "Look at the people of Russia who pray for their king after each time they eat", argued one of the articles: "We, as Muslims and followers of the Prophet Muhammad, too, should pray for our king after

[45]On print culture in Afghanistan see, Nile Green and Nushin Arbabzadah (eds.), *Afghanistan in Ink: Literature between Diaspora and Nation* (New York, 2013); Nile Green (ed.), *Afghan History through Afghan Eyes* (London, 2015); Nile Green, 'The Trans-Border Traffic of Afghan Modernism: Afghanistan and the Indian "Urdusphere"', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53, 3 (2011), pp. 479–508.

[46]Sayyid Ab ul-Qasim Qandahari, *Guzarish-i Sifarat-i Kabul: Safarnamah-i Sayyid Ab ul-Qasim Qandahari dar 1286 va Asnad-i Marbuta bah an*, (ed.) Asif Fikrat (Tehran, 1368/1989), pp. 38–42.

[47]*SN*, 15 Ramazan 1290/6 November 1873, p. 2.

[48]Qandahari, *Guzarish-i Sifarat-i Kabul*, pp. 38–42.

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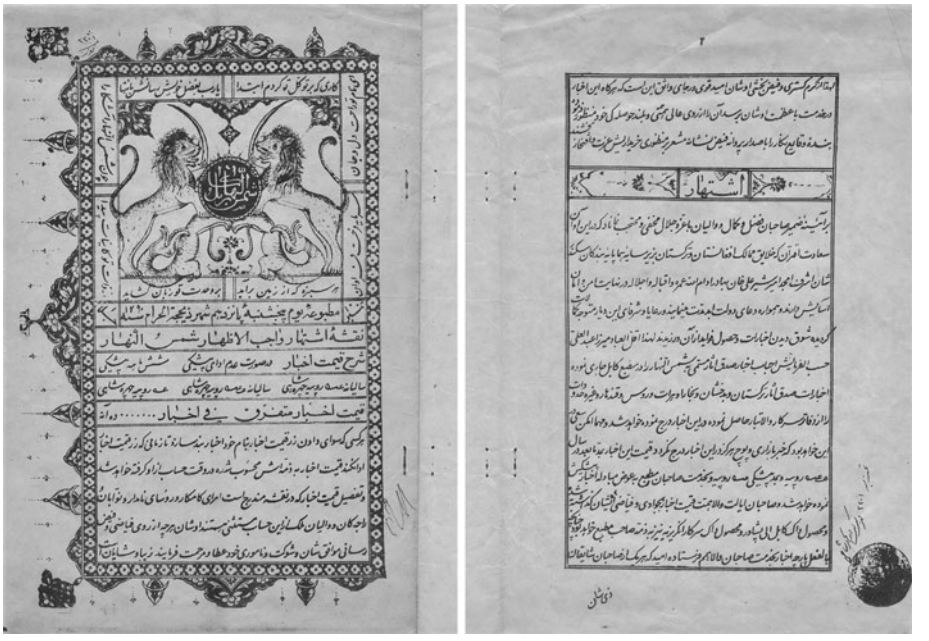

Fig. 2 Amir Shir ʿAli Khan published *Shams al-Nahar*, Afghanistan's first newspaper, to combat the dominance of the bazaar as the sole source of political information. In an advertisement (right) that appeared in its every issue, the paper promised to publish only credible information and refrain from "bazaar news". Source: *Shams al-Nahar,* 15 Zi al-Hajja 1290/3 February 1873, pp. 1–2.

we eat because that is a Sharia order".[49] Amir Shir ʿAli Khan also published *Shahab-i Saqib* (1871), a pamphlet against Wahhabism—even though there were no Wahhabis, or a serious threat of Wahhabism, in the country at the time. Rather the pamphlet served as an instrument of warning to "potential troublemakers", while, at the same time, propagating the Amir's position as a righteous Muslim ruler.[50]

A good public image abroad was an important priority for the Afghan king. At least 25 different newspapers from India would be sent to Kabul, and the editors of *Shams al-Nahar* were irritated by how the Indian press used bazaar news in their coverage of the Afghan Amir, in their view damaging the reputation of the country.[51] An editorial blasted the news from the square that found its way into print in Indian newspapers. It refuted two examples of such bazaar stories. One concerned the Amir's rocky relationship with his son, Muhammad Yaʿqub Khan, governor of Herat. According to the story, when the son got a disease that "withered one of his hands", he asked his father for a physician. His father responded: "Physician will not be sent. I hope you die soon". *Shams al-Nahar* instead strongly rejected the existence of any rift between the Amir and his son. The other piece of bazaar

[49] *SN,* 15 Ramazan 1290/6 November 1873, p. 14.

[50] Christine Noelle, 'The Anti-Wahhab? Reaction in Nineteenth-Century Afghanistan', *The Muslim World* 85, 1–2 (1995), pp. 25, 48. Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman, too, published a book, *Taqvim al-Din* (1888), with a chapter on refuting Wahhabism, for the same reason. See Noelle, 'The Anti-Wahhab?', pp. 25, 48.

[51] *SN,* 15 Ramazan 1290/6 November 1873, p. 16.

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news was related to an alleged undercover writer in Kabul who despatched news of the kingdom to Lahore. According to an Indian newspaper, he had been arrested and then deported by the Afghan government. This news was also "wrong through and through", because, as *Shams al-Nahar* argued, "Kabul is no longer like the old times. Kabul today, under the just rule of his majesty Amir Shir ʿAli Khan, is like Europe and nobody cares about these illusions". The editor then offered words of advice on how to run a good newspaper: "publishers should tell their correspondents that if in a certain week they [are] not able to find fresh news, they should instead write a reasonable piece on a scientific topic, which would be one hundred times more beneficial than these types of news that damage the credibility of a newspaper".[52]

In a letter to the editor from the governor of Kunar, ʿAli Muhammad Khan, that appeared in the same issue of *Shams al-Nahar*, its author similarly lashed out at Indian newspapers for publishing false news stories. However, citing the expression, "if there wasn't a thing, people wouldn't say things" (*gar nabashad chizaki, mardum naguyand chiz-ha*), he argued that, while some of the news might contain an element of fact, those who provided information to Indian newspapers usually exaggerated or misinterpreted developments and had a tendency to "make mountain out of a straw and a straw out of a mountain".[53] Indian newspapers relied on traders who frequented Kabul for their Afghan coverage. Journalists such as Rudyard Kipling were always on the hunt to find traders or adventurers with personal knowledge of Afghanistan for their journalistic and literary writings.[54] *Shams al-Nahar* knew how critical the information carried by traders in and out of Kabul was for the political and economic stability of the country. Asking for loyalty to the throne, it frequently warned that treachery and disunity would not only earn the country a bad name but also lead to the loss of people's lives, on the one hand, and the loss of property on the part of traders, on the other.[55]

While *Shams al-Nahar* insisted that it would not publish news from the square, and that to do so would damage its own credibility, now and again its editors could not resist printing sensational bazaar news, such as the story that a shepherd told the newspaper about a dragon the size of an elephant that appeared in Bajaur and ate 500 of his sheep in one bite. (To be fair, the dragon story ended with the following disclaimer: "Although reason does not believe this tale, because in the workshop of The Creator everything is possible, it was published").[56] In another issue, it printed the story of a tornado in Ghurband, Baghlan province, sent in by its correspondent. The tornado, according to the story, carried the wall of an old fortress, along with several trees, from one side of a river to the other, "as if someone had transplanted them there". The newspaper commented that the story seemed unbelievable but "because seven-eight [*sic*] credible individuals have confirmed it, we publish it here".[57]

Partly because of the authoritarian nature of a state that did not allow real news to be printed but mainly because the newspaper could not find enough readers in a country

[52] *SN*, 1 Shawwal 1290/22 November 1873, pp. 9–10.
[53] *Ibid*., p. 18.
[54] His famous story, 'The Man who would be King', is partly based on an American who visited Afghanistan in the 1830s. See Ben Macintyre, *The Man Who Would Be King: The First American in Afghanistan* (New York, 2004), pp. 5–6.
[55] *SN*, 1 Shawwal 1290/22 November 1873, p. 25.
[56] *Ibid*., p. 8.
[57] *SN*, 15 Muharram 1291/5 March 1874, p. 16.

with almost total illiteracy, *Shams al-Nahar*'s influence in shaping public opinion inside Afghanistan was limited. However, outside the country, its slight anti-British undertone and its relentless refutation of allegations made in the Indian press against Kabul—such as false reports about the Afghan Amir's military preparations for a possible attack on India—made the British authorities increasingly uncomfortable.[58] The British finally persuaded themselves that the Afghan Amir was getting too close to the Russian Empire, their feared adversary. In November 1878, they invaded Afghanistan for a second time, forcing Amir Shir ʿAli Khan out of power and installing his biggest rival on the throne, his son, Muhammad Yaʿqub Khan.[59]

"Silence is Golden": The British Occupation, 1878–80

After Shir ʿAli Khan, although Afghanistan had an Amir, it was the British officials in Kabul who more or less ruled the country during two years of occupation (1878–80). While there were no newspapers, the new rulers used many other strategies to get their message across. The occupation itself had two phases: the first before the assassination of the British ambassador, and the second thereafter. In the first phase, the British installed Muhammad Yaʿqub Khan as the Amir and made him sign a treaty that was shamelessly in their favour. A few months later, an uprising broke out in Kabul during which the British ambassador and his staff were killed. This triggered the second phase of the war, which involved the invasion of new troops from India under the command of General Sir Frederick Roberts. General Roberts was now the de facto ruler of the country and the installed Amir, Muhammad Yaʿqub Khan, found himself under house arrest. As a result, Roberts had to manage two different publics and control the information communicated to them: the Afghan public who had to obey him, and the British public back in England who were not entirely supportive of the war.[60]

The British army installed a telegraph line between Kabul and Peshawar and, recognising that it was vulnerable to sabotage, they also built heliograph posts to ensure that there was no communication failure between Afghanistan and India.[61] In addition, they censored the reports dispatched by locally-embedded journalists.[62] They took these measures to control the message that reached Britain. General Roberts, however, in dealing with the Afghan public, relied primarily on violence as a control mechanism. The theatrical punishments that he instructed to be carried out, such as public executions, had enormous communication impact. As a Liberal Member of Parliament in London put it, being "thousands of miles away from public opinion" and fighting "a savage and uneducated enemy", the general and his men resorted to excessive violence so as to subjugate the population.[63] While they had paid spies among *sardar*s (princes) and their servants, the British considered "rumours from

[58] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[59] Kally P. Dey, *The Life and Career of Major Sir Louis Cavagnari, With a Brief Outline of the Second Afghan War* (Calcutta, 1881), pp. 54–56.

[60] Frederic Harrison, 'Martial Law in Kabul', *The Fortnightly Review* 159 (1880), pp. 435–459.

[61] Intelligence Branch, Army Headquarters, India, *The Second Afghan War, 1878-80: Abridged Official Account* (London, 1908), p. 42; Howard Hensman, *The Afghan War of 1879-80* (London, 1881), pp. 119, 188, 241.

[62] Great Britain Parliament, *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates* (London, 1881), cclx, p. 1863.

[63] *Ibid.*, pp. 1863–1864.

the city" a better source of "trustworthy news" because their salaried spies could not be relied upon: "an Afghan is a greater adept at fabrication than any other Asiatic. We cannot *trust* them".[64] In Kabul, the bazaar was perceived as a source of anti-British mobilisation, and so the occupiers invested great efforts in controlling it. In particular, the city's town square, the Chawk, which one British journalist described as a place where "all Cabul circulates when any excitement arouses the people", was under close watch: one hundred Sikh and Gurkha soldiers were stationed there "ready to turn out at a moment's notice if an alarm of 'ghazis' were raised".[65] Showing this level of sensitivity to the bazaar suggests that the British had learned the hard lesson from their previous military adventure in Kabul (1839–42) when the bazaar had served as one of the key sources and sites of the rebellion against the invaders.

Indeed, in the first Anglo-Afghan war, bazaar stories played a major role in triggering the war. Sensational accounts, particularly about the occupiers' immoral behaviour, swirled in the city. Some of the stories about drunken British parties and their involvement with Afghan women, it turned out, contained an element of credibility. In 1840, according to an Afghan source, prostitution boomed in Kabul thanks to the high demand from foreign forces. Local pimps would take prostitutes on horses to the British military station in Shirpur, north of the city, causing a number of Kabulis to complain about the issue to Shah Shujaʿ, the puppet king. The Shah raised the matter with the top British official, Sir William Macnaghten, who, in response, said: "If we prohibit soldiers from having sex with women, they will get several diseases".[66] High-level British officials such as Alexander Burnes, were also very much involved with local women, something that bothered the conservative Afghans.[67]

Dissidents inside the court supplied the bazaar with dramatic information. Men like Mulla ʿAbd al-Shukur Khan, governor of Kabul and a Barakzai rival of the king, would go to the bazaar and tell people there that Shah Shujaʿ was ruler only in name and the British owned everything, even "your wives don't belong to you".[68] In order to mock Shujaʿ's status as a British puppet, the public created a satirical poem to parody the verse on coins minted in his name. The official poem on the coins read: *Shah Shujaʿ al-Mulk the King, the light of the eyes of the Pearl of the Pearls / the brighter than the sun and the moon, put his stamp on silver and gold*. Kabulis, however, distorted the poem to read as follows: *Shah Shujaʿ the Christian, the light of the eyes of the Lord and Burnes / the dust of the foot of the Company, put his stamp on silver and gold*.[69] Anti-British and anti-Shah stories circulated in the Kabul bazaar, in the process agitating the public. Matters escalated on 23 December 1841 when rebels killed the British envoy, Sir William Macnaghten, dragged his body around town, and finally hung it from a butcher's hook in the city's main square.[70]

[64]Hensman, *The Afghan War*, p. 226. See also, pp. 294–295.
[65]*Ibid*., p. 272.
[66]Fayz Muhammad Katib Hazara, *Siraj al-Tawarikh* (*ST*, hereafter) (Tehran, 1391/2012), i and ii, pp. 414–415. A similar instance is reported in Sultan Muhammad Khan Durrani, *Tarikh-i Sultani* (Bombay, 1298/1881), pp. 258–259.
[67]William Dalrymple, *Return of a King: The Battle for Afghanistan, 1839-42* (London, 2013), pp. 224, 500.
[68]*ST*, i and ii, p. 415.
[69]The original poem in Persian: "*Sikkah zad bar sim va zar, ravshan-tar az khurshid va mah / nur-i chashm-i durr-i durran, Shah Shujaʿ al-Mulk Shah*". The parody in Persian: "*Sikkah bar sim va tala zad Shah Shujaʿ-i Armani / Nur-i chashm-i Lard va Birnis, khak-i pay-i Kampani*". See Durrani, *Tarikh-i Sultani*, p. 273.
[70]On Macnaghten's death, see Dalrymple, *Return of a King*, pp. 351–354.

Consequently, it was no surprise that during their second occupation of Kabul, the British guarded the bazaar in the attempt to prevent public protest. Very early on, they realised that anti-British ideas were already circulating in public.[71] On the western plains of the city, they received reports that a group of gunmen were shouting obscenities at the British envoy in Kabul, Sir Louis Cavagnari. The envoy, upon hearing the news, downplayed the power of such provocations, saying: "Dogs that bark don't bite!"[72] Later, he along with the rest of the British Embassy staff in Kabul were massacred by a mob of Afghan gunmen—while the Amir and other top officials, who had been appointed by the British, did little to protect them. In October 1879, when the reinforcement army led by General Roberts in search of retribution and the "vindication of national honour" arrived in Kabul, a reign of terror took over the city.[73] The British generals started to arrest all the notables of the court and the city, including the Amir himself, on the charge of taking part in the uprising. When people noticed the Amir's disappearance, one of the leaders of the insurgency, Muhammad Jan Khan Vardak, minted a coin with a verse about the missing king.[74] The coin was a medium that could circulate in the bazaar and so became an effective tool for spreading the message that the nation was kingless.

General Roberts, much like an Afghan Amir, deployed the disciplinary power of fear to govern the Afghan capital. He issued a proclamation on 12 October 1879, declaring Kabul and the ten miles surrounding it to be a space governed by martial law where harsh punishments awaited anyone violating the rules.[75] The rules were restrictive: someone caught carrying a weapon, even a knife, on the streets would be punished by death. To disarm the population, Roberts offered monetary rewards for anyone submitting their weapons (e.g. 3 rupees for a rifle). To collect information on *ghazi*s, he paid people to report those who participated in the rebellion. According to the proclamation, informants would be paid 50 to 120 rupees per person reported, depending on that person's importance and rank.[76] Gathering information through a reward system turned everyone in the city into a potential spy, according to an Afghan oral account.[77] Soon after Roberts' announcement, arbitrary arrests began. The British converted Sarai Shir ʿAli Khan, a caravanserai in the bazaar, into a detention centre guarded by Gurkha soldiers. The monetary reward for reporting *ghazi*s incentivised economic rivals in the bazaar to denounce one another, mostly wrongfully, to the British as rebels. The detainees would be interrogated, tortured, jailed or killed.[78] People were afraid now, not only of the government agents and the British, but also of each other.

A three-member Military Commission set up by General Roberts to investigate the detainees and issue sentences, according to critics in London, disregarded due process.[79] The

[71]Dey, *The Life and Career of Major Sir Louis Cavagnari*, p. 98.
[72]'The Massacre at Cabul', *Times*, 28 October 1879, p. 4.
[73]Dey, *The Life and Career of Major Sir Louis Cavagnari*, p. 126.
[74]The poem in the original Persian: "*Mikunam divanagi ta bar saram ghawgha shavad / Sikkah bar zar mizanam ta sahibash payda shavad*". See ʿAli Ahmad Kuhzad, *Maskukat-i Afghanistan dar ʿAsr-i Islam* (Kabul, 1316/1937), p. 20.
[75]For the full text of the proclamation, see Intelligence Branch, *The Second Afghan War*, pp. 656–657.
[76]*Ibid.*,
[77]Ghulam Sakhi Rahmani, *Chahar Chattah-i sar-i Chawk-i Kabul* (Peshawar, 1382/2003), pp. 5–10.
[78]*Ibid.*,
[79]Great Britain Parliament, *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates* (London, 1881), cclx, pp. 1863–1864.

Commission used public execution as a method for dominating the population by fear. After hanging five people in one morning, for instance, the *Daily News* journalist on the scene, who later wrote a book about the war, noticed that the news of the executions "had a healthy effect upon the city". The public executions, in his view, were intended to make it "clear to the populace that our old, absurd mode of dealing with assassins as if they were saints, has no longer a place in our policy". The journalist found the sight of three British officers handing out death sentences in great quantity unusual, to say the least, but he nonetheless justified their actions: "our army is but taking the place of the executioner by pressure of circumstances", writing "however distasteful the office of hangman may be, it has to be filled".[80] The British had built gallows in Bala Hisar fortress for executions (Fig. 3), in one case hanging 49 men in three days.[81] By 27 January 1880, according to a telegraph sent by Roberts, the Commission had hanged 87 people.[82] Among them was the Kotwal (police chief) of Kabul, Aslam Khan, whose execution made it to the front pages of the international press, thanks to a drawing from the scene.[83] In addition to theatrical punishments in the city, the British army also shot prisoners and, on one occasion, burned the bodies of dead Afghans, as revealed in a letter written by Roberts in response to questions raised by Members of Parliament in London regarding the excessive use of violence in Afghanistan.[84]

At the height of the terror, a *Times* correspondent went out on the streets of the city to find out what Kabulis thought of the British rulers. The residents of the city, according to the reporter, were "mutually distrustful and suspicious of each other" and would not speak out. "Silence is golden", he observed. When asked about the latest news, everyone in the city said the same thing: "There is no news".[85] Although the British agents and journalists in Kabul failed to get hold of the news that was circulating around town, Kabul's bazaar News had already reached Istanbul. Among Istanbul's Afghan community. News circulated that explained why the Afghans revolted against the British mission in Kabul. The story, according to a *Times* correspondent in Istanbul, was "one of those thousand and one rumours which have no value except as harmless amusements for the loungers in the cafes and bazaars". The people of Kabul, the story reported, noticed that big boxes were transported to the British mission. A person examined what was in the boxes and found out, to his horror, that they contained "Bibles and Korans, printed by infidels on infidels' papers". It was revealed that the sacred text of Islam had been tampered with and, along with the Bible, was used for Christian propaganda. The man told the people of Kabul

[80]Hensman, *The Afghan War*, p. 86.
[81]*Ibid*., p. 136.
[82]Great Britain Parliament, *Précis of Official Papers: Session 1880-1881* (London, 1880), p. 304.
[83]*L'Univers illustré*, 21 February 1880, cover.
[84]Great Britain Parliament, *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates* (London, 1880), ccl, pp. 579–580. In his letter to Parliament, General Roberts confirmed the burning of dead bodies but assured lawmakers that reports of the shooting of prisoners, with few exceptions, were not true. A journalist in Kabul, however, revealed that the practice was far more common. In one instance, he reported that the army caught five prisoners who were "shot without further parley". The author then offered more details on the practice: "It is only by such severity, and by taking no prisoners in action, than any impression can be made upon the Afghan mind. Such prisoners as are brought in are tried by a military commission, and the great majority are shot. There is just a fear that too much leniency may be shown, as the work is rather distasteful to British officers; but as we are an 'avenging army', scruples must be cast aside." See Hensman, *The Afghan War*, p. 49. See also, Great Britain Parliament, *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, cclx, pp. 1863–1864.
[85]'The Occupation of Afghanistan', *Times*, 15 December 1879, p. 10.

Fig. 3 During the Second Anglo-Afghan War, the British generals used public punishment as a disciplinary tool to communicate their power to the Kabul populace. This photograph, taken in 1879 in war-torn Bala Hisar, shows the hanging gallows on which they executed Afghan rebels. Source: National Army Museum, London, UK. NAM. 1965-10-212-23.

what he had seen, and this sparked the deadly uprising.[86] This report, right or wrong, illustrated the power of bazaar news in shaping public opinion among Afghans.

By the summer of 1880, order had somehow been restored in Kabul's bazaar, and merchants were busy as usual trading goods and stories. A British officer, T. H. Holdich one day left the military cantonment in Shirpur for a visit to the city. He was sitting in a shop when a man asked him: "Have you heard the news from Kandahar?" Having replied in the negative, the man then informed him, "Well, you British have been well beaten down … Ayub Khan is now besieging Kandahar". Holdich confidently refuted the story and told the man that he should not "circulate such untruths, because it might have a disturbing effect in Kabul". The man, however, like any other Afghan, did not trust information coming from the government. He was "in no way disturbed by our incredulity", Holdich recounted in his memoir, "In fact, he didn't believe in it". It was then that Holdich suddenly remembered that lately there had been no letters arriving from Qandahar. "*Could* it be that this old man knew more than we knew?" he wondered. He later learned that the old man was, indeed, right, and had been talking about the, now famous, Battle of Mayvand, where the British army lost close to a thousand men in one day.[87] The bazaar, despite the control mechanisms put in place by the military, was surprisingly fast in disseminating bad news to faraway lands. In fact, during

[86]The report is reprinted in Dey, *The Life and Career of Major Sir Louis Cavagnari*, pp. 166–167. Although the British were not very interested in converting Afghans into Christians, they had translated the Bible into Pashto and some copies had reached Afghanistan. It would be safe, therefore, to assume the bazaar news about the "boxes of bible" was a rumour inspired by a fact. For Pashto Bibles see Vartan Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization, 1880-1946* (Stanford, 1969), pp. 68–69.

[87]Sir T. H. Holdich. *The Indian Borderland, 1880-1900* (London, 1901), pp. 44–45.

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the first Anglo-Afghan war, when the British army was defeated outside Kabul and its communication system fell apart, it had been the runners working for Indian traders who first delivered the bad tidings to Delhi—despite British efforts to keep the news secret.[88]

ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan: the "Iron Amir" (1880–1901)

In 1880, the British officials in Kabul were desperate to find someone "to take the government of the country off our hands".[89] They finally trusted Sardar ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan, an exiled prince in Tashkent and grandson of Amir Dust Muhammad Khan, with ruling Afghanistan while they prepared to withdraw. The new Amir would receive an annual subsidy and in return would stay away from the Russians and give up his independence on foreign relations. ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan was a master of information. While he did not publish a newspaper, he used print technology to expand state bureaucracy and disseminate propaganda in the form of books, pamphlets and posters. Following the Amirs before him, he wanted to persuade the public that he was a righteous Muslim ruler, an *uli al-amr*, whose obedience, according to the Quran, was the duty of every Muslim.[90] In order to solidify his power, in addition to religious rhetoric and print propaganda, he also employed extreme forms of violence such as public punishment, forced displacement, enslavement and a genocidal war against tribes who resisted his harsh rule.

During his 21 years on the throne, the Amir managed to suppress insurgency, contain dissent and bring the entire country under his rule by using violence and fear. In the capital, he placed "sentries all over the town to prevent people talking politics". He even issued orders that "respectable people [were] not to hold private intercourse with each other, but only to talk in public".[91] What would happen if two men of "respectable" stature met in private? The Amir would know, and he would go to any length to find out the purpose of the meeting. In 1888, a man named Ismaʿil Khan, a former governor of Charikar, invited a *mirza* (scribe) for dinner to his home in Kabul to seek expert help on some accounting issue. The Amir somehow learned about the dinner and asked his son, Prince Habib Allah Khan, to investigate the matter and if any wrongdoing was found on the part of Ismaʿil Khan, the latter should be "strapped to the muzzle of a cannon and blown away".[92] He was not found guilty.

One of ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan's favourite policing techniques was spreading disinformation: he would leak the news of his travels on the Chawk and then, instead of travelling on the announced date, he would try to monitor the public's reaction in order to identify anti-government elements. On 7 February 1883, for instance, the British agent in Qandahar reported that "rumours are prevalent that after Nowroz, the Amir will come to Kandahar to rectify the affairs of the country". Knowing how the Amir's manipulation of public opinion worked, he added: "but I don't believe this rumour has any foundation".[93] In another

[88]Bayly, *Empire and Information*, pp. 139–140.
[89]Hensman, *The Afghan War*, p. 425.
[90]In the following two books, published under the name of the Amir himself, the author encouraged people to obey the Amir and support him in his many holy wars: Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan, *Kalimat-i amir al-Bilad fi al-Targhib ila al-Jihad* (Kabul, 1304/1887); Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan, *Nasayih Namchah* (Kabul, 1303/1886).
[91]*Kandahar Newsletters*, i, p. 2.
[92]*ST* (Tehran, 1391/2012), iii (part one), pp. 627–628.
[93]*Kandahar Newsletters*, i, p. 6.

report, the news writer seemed to have grown tired of the Amir's tactic: "His Highness was constantly declaring his intention to leave for Herat *via* Kandahar […] but it is difficult to imagine how his Highness can leave Kabul, while the whole of [its] inhabitants are ripe for disturbance".[94]

The Amir's main propaganda medium was the use of poster announcements (*ishtihar*). In 1888, during the rebellion of Ishaq Khan in northern Afghanistan, knowing that the only way for bazaar news to go viral was through a catchy satire in verse, he commissioned his poet laureate to write a satirical propaganda poem against Ishaq Khan, which would then be printed on large posters and hung in city centres.[95] Considering that most Afghans were illiterate, written propaganda was not the only tool that he used. He also brought the heads of some of the rebels, without their bodies, and hung them in Kabul's Chawk as a message to the public.[96] The Amir used posters for other matters, too, such as to introduce new rules to bazaar merchants.[97] In another instance, he published posters preemptively to contain bazaar rumours: in a royal decree, he asked his governor in Herat to publish an *ishtihar* informing people that the increased presence of Russian military on the border was to prevent a plague epidemic and had nothing to do with them.[98] In 1895, the Amir likewise used posters to share the travel reports of his son, Nasr Allah Khan, sent during his visit to Europe. The posters were written in large print by Fayz Muhammad, a court scribe who later became a historian, and were posted in town squares for the public to read.[99]

In 1888, many soldiers deserted the war in Ghazni and told the bazaar about the "death of thousands" on the government side. The Amir published posters with the names of 129 soldiers killed in the war and installed them in crowded spots in the bazaar in order to refute the rumours that he had lost such large quantities of men.[100] When rumours were personally about himself, the Amir would not use papers, with opposing evidence printed on them, to challenge such stories. Instead, he would use a more violent method. In 1900, for example, during a cholera epidemic, the Amir moved to Paghman, a valley on the western side of the capital. A story spread in the Kabul bazaar that he had died. Soon the Amir caught the man who had started the rumour. He ordered his men to cut him into pieces and display the mutilated body in the bazaar as a warning to others. In another case, he caught an old man who was also spreading rumours against him. The punishment was equally brutal. The Amir ordered his soldiers to throw the man from the top of Asmayi, the mountain overlooking the city. When the soldiers threw the man off the cliff, his clothes caught on a rock,

[94]*Ibid.*, i, p. 100. On ʿAbd al-Rahman's manipulation of bazaar news, also see Muhammad Asif Ahang, *Yad-dasht-ha va Bardasht-hay-i az Kabul-i Qadim* (Peshawar, 1383/2004), p. 214.

[95]For the full text of that *ishtihar*, see Asad Allah Shuʿur, *Mufahimah-i Shafahi va sayr-i Tarikhiy-i an dar Afghanistan* (Kabul, 1367/1988), pp. 29–31.

[96]Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Sardar Shirdil Khan, Sayyid Asghar Khan, and Muhammad Nasir Khan, 26 Zi al-Hijjah 1305/3 September 1888, NAA, Farman, No. 2394/66.

[97]Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 26 Zi al-Qaʿda 1314/28 April 1897, NAA, Farman, No. 4631/146.

[98]Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Governor Saʿd al-Din Khan of Herat, 23 Zi al-Qaʿda 1314/25 April 1897, NAA, Farman, No. 4631/133.

[99]*ST* (Tehran, 1391/2012), iii (part two), p. 589.

[100]Amir ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan to Sardar Habib Allah Khan, 24 Safar 1306/30 October 1888, NAA, Farman, No: 2393/16-17.

suspending him in the air. They had to carefully release him from the rock and take him back to the top of the mountain where they threw him off again, "this time successfully".[101]

Conclusion

In 1901, ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan died and his son Amir Habib Allah Khan (r. 1901–19) took his place. ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan is rightly considered to be the builder of a central state in Afghanistan, and someone who successfully managed to subjugate all its major tribes and fix the country's borders. In Afghan historiography, his reign is relatively well-studied, thanks to the abundance of colonial and local sources. However, there are still many things that remain unknown about his rule, and, in particular, the logistics of his intelligence work are yet to be thoroughly examined. This article, therefore, has sought to initiate a wider conversation on how information control and how it contributed to ʿAbd al-Rahman Khan's success in expanding his power and how it can be used as a prism to look at his predecessors' struggles in building state authority and earning the public's loyalty.

More broadly, this article has also drawn attention to two points in relation to the history of information order in Afghanistan. First, the advent of print technology in the nineteenth century introduced Afghan rulers, like other rulers around the world, to a new instrument for extending their authority within their territory and exercising power over its population. Continuous interruptions, however, prevented them from constructing a reading public that could be reached and manipulated easily by the written word, and hence they had to resort to violence to control public opinion. Second, the bazaar as a social space of assembly was a critical site of opinion formation—it was a counterpublic. We generally assume the mosque to be a place that influences the public's thinking but as the evidence presented in this article has highlighted, the bazaar and the stories that circulated there could have a greater role in shaping public opinion and mobilising people at critical moments. Thanks to their religious authority, the clergy certainly maintained great influence, but the mosque was a closed space usually used by the state to disseminate propaganda. The bazaar, therefore, was the closest thing to a public sphere where the members of the public could freely access and communicate with each other in person.

The established assumption has been that all bazaar news was just false rumours. This article has accordingly also offered a refined account of what constituted bazaar news. It has argued that in a country like Afghanistan, which suffered from widespread illiteracy and suffocating police control, bazaar news was the only non-state form of information communication. As a result, bazaar news, in addition to containing many falsehoods, also carried credible information and allowed the public to make sense of their lives in a low-information environment. When it comes to assessing information more broadly, there is a deep-seated bias against the oral medium even in places with low literacy rate. The common expression, "hearing is not the same as seeing" (*shinidan kay buvad manand-i didan*), which is a hadith and also a popular Persian poem, points to the epistemic distinction between visual and oral information: the written word is a visual medium while bazaar news is an oral medium. We place greater trust in the written word because it is fixed, as opposed to oral information

[101]Frank A. Martin, *Under the Absolute Amir* (London, 1907), pp. 162–163.

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which is fluid and ephemeral. All the same, the oral media's relative lack of authority does not change the fact that the majority of the population in Afghanistan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, like a great many more people around the world, could not read, and so the information they heard in face-to-face communications shaped their opinions and informed their political actions. Studying oral genres of information communication is difficult but necessary in order to better understand Afghanistan's social history and political culture.

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