THE TALIBAN'S MEDIA STRATEGY IN CHANGING GLOBAL PUBLIC PERCEPTION AFTER THE OCCUPATION OF AFGHANISTAN IN 2021

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Abstract: This study discusses the Taliban's media strategy in shaping global public perception after the takeover of Afghanistan in 2021. Unlike previous leadership, the Taliban now uses social media, international media, and narrative content production as instruments of soft power to gain legitimacy for their government. The Taliban targets both domestic and international audiences to present a more moderate image of the government, emphasizing security and stability. This study uses a descriptive qualitative methodology based on a literature review. It finds that the Taliban utilizes media as a counter-narrative tool against the negative framing of Western media, through public diplomacy, control of local media, exclusive coverage, engagement of foreign journalists and influencers, and dissemination of narratives through social media. The results of the analysis show that this strategy has succeeded in expanding the reach of the Taliban's narrative. Still, its effectiveness is limited by contradictions in domestic policy, particularly regarding women's rights and media restrictions.

Keywords: *Afghanistan, Media, Propaganda, Taliban.*

INTRODUCTION

In situations of war or conflict, there is a concept of justification regarding propaganda as a weapon of war in supporting a strategy for victory. Propaganda is usually used to win hearts and minds, particularly in mobilizing and directing public opinion. Therefore, winning the hearts and minds of a confused crowd can be an important strategy in war; the battle for public opinion is as important as the involvement of soldiers on the front lines[1]. The use of propaganda strategies tends to be effective when employed in situations of hegemony. Giovanni Arrighi (1990) views hegemony as additional power obtained by the dominant group based on its capacity to raise all issues that trigger conflict universally[2].

As the current significant power holder in Afghanistan, the Taliban wants to use its dominance to change the global community's perception to gain legitimacy in governing Afghanistan and improve its negative image. Referring to the history of the Taliban, we need to know the history of the Afghan guerrilla group called the Mujahideen, which fought against the Soviets from 1980 to 1989. After the Soviets withdrew in 1989, Afghanistan descended into chaos, and in 1992, a civil war broke out, causing tribal leaders to fight each other for power. Some Mujahideen and criminal groups began terrorizing the population, causing a group of residents to become fed up and seek help from Mullah Mohammed Omar (a veteran of the Soviet war), so the Mullah began gathering his students, who later became known as the Taliban. At that time, the Taliban quickly gained military advantage, winning control of Kandahar (the second largest city after Kabul) and promising to make other cities safe. After years of war, the people welcomed the Taliban[3]. In 1996, the Taliban captured the capital and executed the country's last communist president, Najibullah

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[1] Bahar, "Social media and disinformation in war propaganda: how Afghan government and the Taliban use Twitter", *Media Asia*, no. 47 (2020): 34-47, http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2020.1822634.

[2] Arrighi, "The Three Hegemonies of Historical Capitalism", *Research Foundation of State University of New York for and on behalf of the Fernand Braudel Center*, no. 13(1990): 365-408, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40241160.

[3] Jazeera, "The history of the Taliban", Al Jazeera News: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/18/the-history-of-the-taliban.

Ahmadzai. By 1998, the Taliban controlled nearly 90% of Afghanistan, and the group was considered successful in restoring normalcy. The Taliban initially promised to restore peace and security and to enforce Sharia or Islamic law based on their own interpretation. Their initial popularity was welcomed by the people at that time because the Taliban succeeded in eradicating corruption, curbing lawlessness, and making the roads and areas under their control safe[4].

Under the Taliban's interpretation of the law, women are the most disadvantaged. They are not allowed to go out without a male relative, are not allowed to continue their higher education, and are not allowed to work. Due to the extreme Islamic law enforced by the Taliban, most countries in the Middle East do not recognize the Taliban as a legitimate government[5]. In addition, the Taliban also bans photography, television, music, and all forms of entertainment. In 2001, they banned the internet and stated that, "we want to build a system in Afghanistan where we can control everything wrong, obscene, immoral, and contrary to Islam."[6]

Due to widespread opposition to their ideology, which was considered too extreme, the Taliban struggled to find other allies, forcing them to join forces with the world's most wanted terrorist group, Al-Qaeda[7]. As a result, in 2001, the United States attacked Afghanistan to hunt down Osama bin Laden and overthrow the Taliban, causing the Taliban leaders to flee to Pakistan and most of the fighters to hide in rural Afghanistan. The United States and the United Nations worked together to form a new government, inviting Mujahideen leaders to take charge of running the government. The United States also provided billions of dollars in aid to the new government to build roads, bridges, hospitals, and utilities in cities and rural areas.

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[4] BBC, "Who are the Taliban?", BBC News: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11451718.

[5] Vox, "The Taliban, explained", Vox Channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qIDkZAOjx9w

[6] Weeda Mehran, "The Evolution in the Taliban's Media Strategy", *Nexus Articles: The Program on Extremism at George Washington University,* 18 August 2022.

[7] Maizland, "The Taliban in Afghanistan", Council on Foreign Relations: https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/taliban-afghanistan.

However, this did not go smoothly due to the highly corrupt Afghan government and the presence of the Mujahideen, who began terrorizing the people[8]. So in 2001, the United States attacked Afghanistan to hunt down Osama bin Laden and overthrow the Taliban, causing the Taliban leaders to flee to Pakistan and most of the fighters to hide in rural Afghanistan. The United States and the United Nations worked together to form a new government, inviting Mujahideen leaders to take charge of running the government. The United States also provided billions of dollars in aid to the new government to build roads, bridges, hospitals, and utilities in cities and rural areas. However, this did not go smoothly due to the highly corrupt Afghan government and the presence of the Mujahideen, who began terrorizing the people[9].

Looking at the Taliban before the American invasion in 2001, they were known for their reluctance to use technology. However, what is interesting is that today, the Taliban has made technology part of their strategy to tame the opposition, build power, and convey their message to the world. They have realized that the media can be the most efficient and effective propaganda tool for controlling the narrative[10]. After officially returning to power for the second time, the Taliban sought to offer guarantees and commitments for a peaceful transition of power, granting amnesty to government officials and respecting women's rights. The Taliban wants to convey the narrative and message to the Afghan people that they will take an accommodative approach[11]. The Taliban appears to have undergone a slight change in mentality, as seen in how it criticizes foreign media and the opposition for always portraying Afghanistan in a negative light under Taliban rule. The Taliban expects the media and foreign parties to present a positive image of the country they govern to the world, indicating that the

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[8] Vox, Op. cit.
[9] BBC, Op. cit.
[10] Narasi, "Taliban 2.0: Kuasai Afghanistan, Dibantu Media Sosial", Narasi Newsroom Channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NHB1Xx2bII4.
[11] Al Jazeera, Op. cit.

Taliban is gradually realizing the importance of world public opinion[12]. This is interesting, considering how the Taliban, which adheres to an extreme Islamist ideology despite not having the support of several other Middle Eastern countries, is now beginning to care about global public opinion and hopes for legitimacy from the world community.

Wani emphasized that after 2021, the Taliban began to utilize social media as a tactic to promote their return to power in Afghanistan. Taliban 2.0 began to develop itself into a much more democratic and responsive political institution. They used social media to understand public narratives and shape public narratives that would benefit them[13]. This is also reinforced by the findings of Wahyuni and Aswar, who stated that the return of the Taliban in 2021 began to increase their soft power strategy by conducting public diplomacy through digital media to improve their negative image. Through the use of digital media such as YouTube, Twitter, and websites, the Taliban sought to convey their narrative and promote their policies in an effort to build a positive image[14]. Meanwhile, Akram et al. state that the Taliban 2.0 utilizes media to manipulate public narratives to portray themselves as the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan and regain control of society. The Taliban has adapted to the use of social media and built public narratives that benefit them, and through social media, they have also begun to build legitimacy and spread propaganda[15].

Since the return of Taliban power in Afghanistan in 2021, there have been significant changes in their approach. The use of social media tactics is

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[12] Mehran, "Why Media Chooses to Depict Afghanistan in a Negative Light", Hasht e Subh Daily: https://8am.media/eng/why-media-chooses-to-depict-afghanistan-in-a-negative-light/.

[13] Wani, "Decoding Social Media's Role in the Resurgence of the Taliban: A Literature Review", *Munich Personal RePEc Archive*, (2023): 1-22, https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/121874/.

[14] Wahyuni dan Aswar, "Shaping Perceptions: The Taliban's Use of Digital Media for Public Diplomacy and Image Building After Seizing Power in Afghanistan", *Journal of Islamic and Politics,* no. 7 (2023): 129-139, http://dx.doi.org/10.18196/jiwp.v7i2.54.

[15] Akram et al., "Decoding Social Media's Role in Taliban 2.0 and its Implications for Afghan Youth", *the East-West Center,* no. 168 (2024): 1-8, https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep61776.

clearly evident in the transformation of the new Taliban 2.0 regime's strategy. The international community must understand the changes in the character of the Taliban regime in controlling its new power in Afghanistan. Despite rebranding itself as Taliban 2.0 and utilizing social media as a strategy to build a more moderate international image, the Taliban still interprets Islamic law conservatively, especially regarding women's rights[16]. This is interesting, considering how the Taliban adheres to an extreme Islamist ideology, but at the same time, they have begun to care about and consider the importance of global public opinion and hope for legitimacy from the world community.

METHOD

This study aims to determine how the Taliban's media strategy has changed the global public perception after the reoccupation of Afghanistan in 2021, using a qualitative descriptive research method with a case study approach. This method was chosen because the research will focus on analyzing the Taliban's media strategy in shaping global public image and opinion based on secondary sources. As stated by Creswell, qualitative descriptive research is used to describe and analyze social phenomena with an emphasis on the meaning constructed by actors[17].

Research data was collected from secondary sources, such as books, journals, scientific articles, news reports, including press releases and video coverage. The data obtained will then be analyzed so that the results of this analysis can prove and answer the research questions. In this research data analysis technique, the Miles and Huberman analysis model is used, namely data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions[18].

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[16] Jensen dan Hoshino, "Is Taliban 2.0 Closing the Gates to Ijtihad Again?", *Stanford Journal of International law,* no. 2 (2023): 75-90.
[17] Creswell, J.W., & Poth, C. N., Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches, 4th Edition (California: SAGE Publications, 2018).
[18] Miles dan Huberman, Qualitative Data Analysis, (California: SAGE Publications, 1994).

In discussing the above issue, the author uses J.M. Waller's concept, which defines political warfare as the art and practice of sacrificing and winning conflicts through non-military means. According to Waller, the target in this war is the mind. If the goal of war is truly to subdue the will of the enemy or make the opponent obey our will, then we must consider the enemy not only as a system but as an organism with a will. Thus, our messaging strategy must be designed to divide the enemy as much as possible, and to develop messages during wartime, we must know what we want to achieve and how we want to achieve it. Waller's theory of ideological warfare emphasizes that narratives are used as strategic tools in conflict, particularly in the context of counterinsurgency and counterterrorism. This theory also emphasizes the importance of winning hearts and minds by shaping perceptions and beliefs, rather than relying solely on military force[19].

The core of Waller's theory is the concept of narrative warfare, where control over the narrative can determine the success or failure of a campaign. Narratives are created to influence perceptions, motivate supporters, and weaken opponents, so the use of effective messaging and propaganda is crucial. Part of the war of ideas involves efforts to deradicalize individuals influenced by extremist ideologies, so developing and promoting counter-narratives that challenge the core principles of extremist ideologies is essential. These counter-narratives must offer attractive and positive alternatives[20]. In the implementation of ideological warfare, the media plays an important role in controlling the narrative and utilizing media platforms to reach audiences. The rise of social media has changed the landscape of conflict, and these platforms can become a new battlefield in modern warfare.

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[19] Waller, Fighting the War of Ideas Like a Real War, (Washington, D. C: The Institute of World Politics Press, 2007), 19-37.
[20] Ibid.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Narrative Warfare And Counter-Narratives

The depiction of the concept of war of ideas can be seen through the conflicting narratives between the Taliban and Western media, both of which use the media as an arena to shape global public perception. In their media propaganda, the Taliban portray themselves as a legitimate government, the bringers of order and stability, and symbols of jihad victory. Meanwhile, Western media propaganda presents a contrasting narrative. Western media plays a role in shaping global perceptions of the Taliban through framing, agenda setting, and emotional narratives that effectively highlight the negative aspects of the Taliban government[21].

Western media understands that the media does not have a mission to produce content to please the Taliban. Based on the code of ethics of journalism, what is written in the media is a reflection of the facts. In practice, the extent to which Western media reflects the facts in Afghanistan is the result of the Taliban's work and efforts, meaning that they only provide a picture of the Taliban government's performance, which still maintains marginality, especially for women and children. If the Taliban really wants to change its image to a more positive one, the only way is to change their behavior and performance[22].

Western media outlets such as The Washington Post, The New York Times, The Times, The Guardian, and several British media outlets often publish narratives that portray the Taliban as an unstoppable force in taking power, creating an atmosphere of tension and chaos in the government system, as well as a threat to democracy. In addition, Western media often focus their concerns on issues of women's rights and minority freedoms. The framing they construct utilizes narratives that are nuanced with threats, oppression of women, and visualizations of chaos on the ground[23]. Thus, the framing

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[21] Aslam et al., "The War Narrative: A Comparative Critical Discourse Analysis of US and UK Print Media Framed the Taliban Takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021", Kurdish Studies 12, no. 1 (2024): 5067-5078, https://doi.org/10.53555/ks.v12i1.3195.

[22] Mehran, Op. cit.

[23] Aslam et al., Op. cit.

constructed by Western media encourages global audiences to view the
Taliban through the lens of human rights violations and reinforces the
narrative that the Taliban government is illegitimate and could endanger
global stability.

Meanwhile, the Taliban themselves criticized foreign parties and
opposition media for always trying to portray a negative image of the
Taliban government. Referring to Waller's war of ideas framework, the
Taliban began to control the narrative on security, amnesty, and moderation
to mark a new phase of their government. The Taliban wanted to show that
they were no longer the group that the world remembered from the last time
they were in power nationally. Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid
stated that: "No one will be harmed in Afghanistan, there is a big difference
between us now and 20 years ago"[24]. The fact that the Taliban expects the
media and foreign parties to present a positive image of the country they
govern to the world indicates a slight change in the Taliban's mentality.
They are beginning to pay attention to global opinion and the legitimacy of
the world community to recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government
of Afghanistan[25].

In an official Taliban article published on the Islamic Emirate of
Afghanistan website, they accuse Western media of propaganda,
perpetuating stereotypes and misconceptions about Islam and Afghan
culture, and viewing the Taliban as an obstacle to development. The
continuous spread of negative narratives has an impact on international
perceptions and relations with Afghanistan, causing many countries to
hesitate to engage in diplomatic plans or provide international aid. In
addition, this contributes to economic instability by hindering foreign
investment, disrupting trade relations, and creating uncertainty in financial
markets[26]. As a result, the Taliban began to build a counter-narrative to the

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[24] Westfall, "Taliban leaders are promising peace, order and amnesty in
Afghanistan. They promised that last time, too", The Washington Post:
https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/08/22/taliban-historical-rhetoric/.
[25] Mehran, Op. cit.
[26] Memri News, "Article On Afghan Taliban's Official Website Alleges Western
Propaganda Against Them: 'Western Media Often Paint A Picture Of A Brutal
Regime'; 'False Propaganda Often Perpetuates Stereotypes And Misconceptions

negative narrative constructed by Western media. Through a press conference on August 17, 2021, spokesperson Zaibullah Mujahid conveyed a message of reconciliation, amnesty, media freedom, and a promise to respect women's rights. The Taliban also wants peaceful relations with other countries and does not want any internal or external enemies. The Taliban declared amnesty throughout Afghanistan and allowed women to join their government[27]. This narrative then became a form of counter-propaganda against the Western portrayal of the Taliban as a repressive regime. In Waller's framework, this action is a reflection of the Taliban's strategy to influence global public perception and weaken its ideological opponents through narrative control.

Media as a Battlefield

The second indicator in Waller's concept emphasizes the importance of using communication strategies to spread messages that are in line with political interests[28]. Massive messaging aims to build a positive image while delegitimizing opponents. The Taliban understands that political legitimacy in the digital age is determined not only by military strength, but also by the ability to control the flow of information. Conflict no longer takes place only on the battlefield, but also in the accuracy of content production, the effectiveness of framing, and the ability to influence global perspectives. After returning to power, the Taliban has made the media a strategic battleground to build a positive image that is different from its leadership 20 years ago. The Taliban uses media strategies to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan and global communities so that their perceptions of the Taliban will gradually begin to change. Compared to the Taliban of the past, which relied more on military force, the current Taliban focuses

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About Islam And Afghan Culture", Memri News: https://www.memri.org/jttm/article-afghan-talibans-official-website-alleges-western-propaganda-against-them-western-media.

[27] Rasheed, "Taliban offers amnesty, promises women's rights and media freedom", Al Jazeera News: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/evacuation-flights-resume-as-biden-defends-afghanistan-pullout.

[28] Waller, Op. cit.

on soft power strategies to carry out its mission of creating a more positive image in the eyes of the world.

Control over digital narratives is just as important as territorial control, and the Taliban understands this dynamic by beginning to utilize international media as a tool in building a counter-narrative to the negative framing constructed by Western media. The Taliban uses a managed access approach by opening press conferences, inviting international journalists, and providing exclusive, filtered coverage to showcase the stability of the Taliban government[29]. In the Taliban's first press conference since they took control of Afghanistan, the Taliban invited local and international journalists to sit together to listen to the message they wanted to convey, namely that the Taliban 2.0 government would be a softer and more globally acceptable government, and that the Taliban would present a new, more friendly[30]. This is also reinforced by Al Jazeera's analysis, which shows that the Taliban is currently actively mobilizing journalists to specific locations and agendas to highlight their successes in improving security, granting amnesty, and realizing their commitment to a more moderate understanding of Sharia law[31]. Observers were quick to pick up on signs of compromise and a shift away from the hardline stance that had long been associated with the Taliban's image.

The Taliban also utilizes its relationship with international media as a form of legitimacy through third parties. Based on an ICTJ report, the Taliban seeks to project a professional image through interviews with major media outlets to emphasize that it is a stable government, open to diplomacy, and ready to cooperate with international organizations. This strategy is also reinforced by a selective evidence approach, highlighting small successes such as the opening of schools, allowing women to return to work in hospitals, the return of female journalists to television, or humanitarian aid

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[29] Wani, Op. cit.

[30] PBS NewsHour, "Taliban leaders promise softer rule. Their action send a different message", PBS NewsHour Channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ni3QuF_2EDE.

[31] Al Jazeera, "Taliban marks two years since return to power in Afghanistan", Al Jazeera News: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/15/taliban-marks-two-years-since-return-to-power-in-afghanistan.

operations. They do this in the hope of reversing the negative international framing[32].

In the context of media strategy, the narrative presented by the Taliban is not merely information, but rather a way of packaging reality so that the audience sees the Taliban's new framing from their desired perspective. This can be seen from their communication strategy, which is mostly reactive, whereby the Taliban responds to certain issues after they have been widely discussed in the international media or when they are in the global spotlight. The Taliban will use social media to present counter-narratives to refute the accusations made against them[33]. This strategy shows that the Taliban is trying hard not to let negative narratives develop without resistance, and their efforts are to fight back through digital media.

The narratives created by the Taliban are quite important in their war of ideas strategy, especially statements related to counterterrorism issues, which can be specific messages intended for the international community and the United States that the Taliban will not deal with Al-Qaeda again. Press conferences can be an important moment for the Taliban to change their image from a militant rebel group to a governing authority, and this can be part of a broader media and public relations strategy aimed at gaining domestic and international legitimacy. In their narrative, the Taliban emphasized that Afghanistan would not host international groups or fighters who could launch attacks against other countries. This refers to the counterterrorism actions that the Taliban and Afghanistan want to carry out, given that they were indirectly involved in the Al Qaeda incident that took place in Afghanistan and led to American intervention in their country[34].

The Taliban often emphasizes themes of reconciliation, peace, and the desire to establish positive relations with the international community. They emphasize efforts to fulfill human rights, ensure security, and address

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[32] International Center for Transitional Justice, "Afghan Media Under The Taliban", *Afghanistan Human Rights And Democracy Organization*, (2022), https://www.ictj.org/sites/default/files/2023-01/AHRDO_Report_Afghan-Media-Under-Taliban.
[33] Wahyuni and Aswar, Op. cit.
[34] PBS News, Op. cit.

humanitarian needs and economic challenges to convince the global community that the Taliban has changed. Thus, the Taliban uses the media to highlight its diplomatic engagement with foreign governments and international organizations to present itself as a legitimate and capable partner in international affairs. One of the partnership efforts established by the Taliban is to allow international organizations to continue operating and carrying out humanitarian missions in Afghanistan[35].

The Taliban's Use of Social Media as a Counter-Narrative Strategy

The use of social media has now become an arena for the battle for legitimacy, with the Taliban 2.0 government massively utilizing social media such as Twitter, YouTube, and its official website (Al-Emarah) as the main tools for spreading political messages. Referring to Waller's indicators, control of digital media can be a form of narrative control in modern ideological warfare, and the Taliban utilizes social media as an arena for shaping domestic and global perceptions. Unlike the previous era of leadership, the Taliban now has a more systematic and coordinated digital strategy that adapts to its target audience. In its use of social media, the Taliban often positions itself as the legitimate leadership authority in Afghanistan, tailoring its public narrative to suit its interests. In several findings, the Taliban appears to tailor the messages they want to convey based on their target audience. For example, in narrating the economic crisis, they explicitly blame the previous government. Meanwhile, on the issue of women, there are differences between the Arabic and English narratives. This reinforces that the Taliban differentiates audience segmentation in their media strategy, namely by delivering messages that are most suitable for each target group[36].

The Taliban widely conducts social media campaigns to encourage support from the Afghan people, utilizing Twitter as their main communication

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[35] Apnews, "UNICEF concerned by Taliban move to bar international groups from Afghan education sector", AP News: https://apnews.com/article/afghanistan-taliban-ngo-education-463c9255dc7d0765206aebee5be5b766.

[36] Knopp et al., Comparing Taliban social media usage by language: Who's speaking and what's being said, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2023).

medium. They plan to deliver consistent messages in branding themselves as a legitimate government, promoting military victories, and highlighting political stability under the new Taliban leadership. They promote themselves as "the future of the Taliban" by presenting narratives of the previous regime's failures, exploring narratives of the damage caused by the United States and the previous government, and highlighting narratives of Afghanistan's military successes and momentum. This can be seen through propaganda videos glorifying Taliban fighters and their battles against foreign and national forces, which are spread across YouTube and Al-Emarah. They also present narratives about the Taliban's openness to relations with foreign governments and the international community[37].

In their efforts to gain international legitimacy, Taliban leaders not only appear in the media but also promote themselves extensively on social media, which is very different from 20 years ago when the identities of Taliban leaders were highly secretive. The Taliban seems to have understood that technology can help them in their efforts to shape opinion on the global stage, that social media can be a powerful tool for changing public perception, and that the Taliban wants to change perceptions about them[38]. The Taliban's seriousness in its plan to open up to foreign parties can be seen through several approaches they have taken in media innovation to attract global sympathy through a perspective that is closer to the Taliban. One of these is promoting Afghanistan from a closer and gentler perspective through vlogs by several influencers, so that access to information dissemination is more widespread and easily accepted. Through a video uploaded by Joe Hattab on his YouTube channel, he provides a deeper insight into Afghanistan and the Taliban government. In the video, several Taliban representatives mention that they want to open up to foreign countries. The video also shows the Afghan people going about their daily lives as usual, and even the curfew is not as strict as it was a few years ago. Joe explains that there used to be many divided political parties, but now

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[37] Courchesne et al., "Powered by Twitter? The Taliban's Takeover of Afghanistan", *Empirical Studies of Conflict*, no. 30 (2022): 1-45.

[38] Atiq, "The Taliban embrace social media: 'We too want to change perceptions", BBC News: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-58466939.

the Taliban is the sole ruler, promising to provide security control in every part of Afghanistan[39].

The Taliban also conducted interviews with several foreign media outlets to show a closer look at the Taliban, one of which was Al Jazeera, which was invited and given exclusive access to conduct interviews at the Taliban headquarters. The interviews showed how the Taliban is working to improve various issues in Afghanistan, such as economic instability, environmental issues, women's rights, and public criticism of the Taliban[40]. Through coverage with foreign journalists and influencers, the Taliban can use media as a strategy to improve their image to be more positive and humane, as well as to counter the propaganda often used by Western media in shaping the image of the Taliban. Referring to Waller's theory, the Taliban is currently trying to win the war of narratives and messages by slowly winning the hearts and minds of the world community in order to change their perception of the Taliban's new image.

The Taliban's desire to open Afghanistan to the global community is not only to counter Western media narratives, but also to attract foreign tourists to visit their country and see Afghanistan up close. Taliban officials are ambitious to make Afghanistan a tourism hub by convincing the world that they have brought peace and order to areas that can be visited by tourists. According to data from The Week News, the number of foreign tourists visiting Afghanistan rose by 120% in 2023, with the number of visitors reaching nearly 5,200[41]. In comparison, in 2021, the number of foreign tourists visiting Afghanistan only reached 691, and in 2022, this number increased to 2,300. According to the head of the Kabul Tourism Authority, Mohammed Saeed, most foreign visitors come from China, driven by

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[39] Joe HaTTab, "Afghanistan: Inside the Taliban Government 2024", Hoe Hattab Channel: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyV-b0YL1C4&t=29s.

[40] Al Jazeera, "Taliban marks two years since return to power in Afghanistan", Al Jazeera News: https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/15/taliban-marks-two-years-since-return-to-power-in-afghanistan.

[41] Burden, "Taliban's quest for tourists to see the wonders of Afghanistan", The Week: https://theweek.com/culture-life/travel/talibans-quest-for-tourists-to-see-the-wonders-of-afghanistan.

geographical proximity and large population size. Additionally, some tourists consider traveling to Afghanistan to be an exciting extreme adventure[42].

The Taliban's Use of Media as an Effort of Deradicalization

Waller's theory explains that ideological warfare is not only about spreading influence, but also about deradicalization, an actor's attempt to change the views of certain groups that previously rejected an ideology. In this context, the media has become the Taliban's main instrument in shaping new perceptions of their political and social identity. The Taliban tends to convey messages focused on issues of security stability, government function, and economic development. These messages are significantly different from past narratives that were more inclined towards militaristic discussions. In addition, the Taliban seeks to moderate its image and attract groups that are considered vulnerable or potentially opposed to its ideology, thereby targeting two types of audiences at once: the Afghan people and the global community.

To construct an effective narrative, the Taliban consistently employs a multilayered narrative strategy, dividing its target audience into several categories. For international audiences, they focus on narratives that build political legitimacy as the legitimate government of Afghanistan, presenting an image of stability, moderation, and professionalism, particularly on diplomatic and economic issues. The English-language content they upload usually consists of documentation of diplomatic meetings, press conferences, or videos showing officials working like a modern bureaucracy. This strategy aims to gain political legitimacy and international recognition[43].

Meanwhile, for local audiences, including civil society, tribal groups, bureaucrats, and youth groups, especially those who are educated and active on social media, the Taliban tends to produce messages that are close to

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[42] Amru, "The Taliban are trying to encourage tourists to visit Afghanistan", Babel News: https://babel.ua/en/news/106642-the-taliban-are-trying-to-encourage-tourists-to-visit-afghanistan.
[43] Akram et al., Op. cit.

everyday life and showcase their ability to run the government, maintain security, and create a perception of stability to prevent the emergence of domestic opposition. This can be seen in the use of Arabic and Pashto narratives that tend to emphasize strong religious legitimacy and emphasize that the Taliban government is a legitimate representation of Sharia law, thereby strengthening ideological acceptance at the grassroots level[44].

The Taliban's deradicalization efforts actually target certain categories of individuals who are most influential to stability. First, former officials and officials of the Republic of Afghanistan who have worked with the United States or NATO. Through narratives of amnesty and integration conveyed through press conferences, the Taliban sought to change their position from a militant group to the legitimate government of Afghanistan[45]. Second, educated youth who understand modern and democratic values; this group is considered the most critical and most likely to reject the Taliban's legitimacy. Thus, the Taliban used a religious-based visual campaign approach to shape their perceptions[46].

The use of third parties such as influencers highlights the Taliban's efforts to utilize media to frame their identity in the eyes of the world. Through Joe Hattab's video posts, as an influencer, they target a global audience to believe that Afghanistan is running as usual and show that the Taliban has opened up to foreign countries[47]. The content highlights people at work, children in school, and stable public activities as evidence that the Taliban government is no longer as repressive as it used to be. Through the official Al-Emarah website, the Taliban also frequently releases videos showing women working in certain sectors to demonstrate inclusivity.

In line with Waller's theory, the Taliban is trying to win the war of ideas by creating a new narrative space that presents their government as more moderate and acceptable. Although this narrative often contradicts repressive policies on the ground, this strategy shows how the media plays

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[44] Akram et al., Op. cit.
[45] U.S. Department of State, *Afghanistan 2022 Human Rights Report*, March 2023.
[46] International Center for Transitional Justice, Op. cit.
[47] Joe HaTTab, Op. cit.

a central role in the Taliban's efforts to reshape their identity in the eyes of the Afghan people and the world. The Taliban's use of the media is not merely a tool to inform the public of their policies; it is a form of counter-radical messaging, which is an attempt to change the perspectives of certain groups, eliminate resistance, and expand their political legitimacy.

Global Skepticism Towards the Taliban Narrative

There is a global debate, particularly among academics, regarding the recognition of the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Many still view the Taliban as a militant group rather than a legitimate state entity. This skepticism creates a dilemma for the Taliban, which rules *de facto* but is difficult to accept *de jure*. Many countries and global institutions still doubt the realization of their promises, especially regarding women's rights, education, and civil liberties[48].

The Taliban's deliberate use of messaging and media is a tool of legitimacy to project an image of stability built on narratives of diplomatic visits, international cooperation, and normal civil society activities. This gives the impression that the Taliban's rule has shown positive change. However, assessing the credibility of the Taliban's positive image change will certainly lead to debate and skepticism among both the international community and the Afghan people themselves. Sometimes it is difficult to realize actions based on words, especially in the context of the promises made by the Taliban in the second phase of the current administration. It is not easy to eliminate skepticism about the Taliban. The international community knows the Taliban as an extremist group, so it will take a lot of effort for the Taliban to convince the world that they are not just providing narratives or propaganda, but need to prove the reality.

After two years back in power since 2021, through the Al Jazeera website, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid stated that currently, Afghanistan's overall security is guaranteed under one leadership, the Islamic system is enforced, and everything is explained from the perspective of Sharia law.

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[48] Halimi dan Jawad, "Taliban Government and Its Efforts for Global Recognition", J*ournal of Asian Development Studies* 12, no. 2 (2023): 29-38, https://doi.org/10.62345/.

Currently, Afghanistan is enjoying peace that has not been seen for decades. However, this statement has become a subject of debate because the UN has reported dozens of attacks on civilians, the dismissal of most female Afghan staff working in aid agencies, the closure of beauty salons, and restrictions on women's travel without a male guardian. It is the Taliban's own actions that are hindering hopes for official recognition of their government. However, this was later refuted by several Taliban leaders who said that the Taliban supports education for women, that Islam gives women the right to education and employment, and that restrictions on access to education are only temporary[49].

Similar to Yusuf Kalla's visit, he said that the Taliban's efforts to improve Afghanistan appear to be very serious and that they are beginning to adapt to modernity. However, when it comes to women's rights, the Taliban tends to be very strict and adhere to Islamic teachings[50]. Nowadays, few countries have officially recognized the Taliban as the government of Afghanistan. The UN has also said that such recognition is impossible as long as bans on education, restrictions on civil activities, and violations of women's rights remain in place in Afghanistan[51].

This contradiction between promises and practices undermines the credibility of the Taliban's narrative. Although these counter-narrative efforts have been quite successful in presenting an alternative image of the Taliban, their effectiveness is limited due to contradictions in domestic policy, particularly regarding restrictions on local media and women's rights, which have been widely reported by the international community. This is clarified by an article written by an Afghan female journalist who voices her concerns about the Taliban's continued control and restrictions on media such as television, radio, and local print media. In 2024, the Taliban Ministry of Justice imposed a ban on the media publishing images

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[49] Al Jazeera, Op. cit.

[50] TV One, "Afghanistan Bangkit dari Perang", TV One News: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9b2XFpW7C0.

[51] The Seattle Times, "The Taliban confirm they will attend a UN-led meeting in Qatar on Afghanistan", The Seattle Times: https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/the-taliban-confirm-they-will-attend-a-un-led-meeting-in-qatar-on-afghanistan/.

of "living beings," which was interpreted as severely limiting the representation of women[52]. A Human Rights Watch report confirmed the degradation of the media landscape in Afghanistan after August 2021, noting strict surveillance, censorship, and harsh treatment of media workers. Through interviews with Afghan journalists, their testimonies revealed that journalists would be considered guilty if they wrote news that did not conform to the official narrative issued by the Taliban. In addition, there was discrimination against female journalists, such as a ban on broadcasting women's voices or faces, the obligation for female journalists to wear the hijab, and the separation of workspaces based on gender[53].

The latest reports indicate that after the return of the Taliban in 2021, within a few months, around 540 local media outlets closed down, causing thousands of journalists to lose their jobs, and around 80% of female journalists to stop working. The media outlets that survived were those that submitted to strict regulations and censorship. Journalists who questioned Taliban policies were subjected to intimidation, violence, and even detention. In one case, a reporter was sentenced to one year in prison on charges of spreading "anti-regime propaganda" after criticizing Taliban policies on social media. In addition, it is reported that there is an organized network of pro-Taliban influencers and accounts that regularly publish propaganda videos featuring Taliban soldiers, development projects in Afghanistan, or religious events. This is solely aimed at portraying the regime as stable, legitimate, and modern[54].

This reality shows that the Taliban's media narrative is not only about propaganda on behalf of the regime, but also about controlling and silencing critical and independent voices. As a result, their official narrative is able

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[52] Haidary, "Behind the Burka: Journalism and Survival Under taliban Rule", Al Jazeera Media Institute: https://institute.aljazeera.net/en/ajr/article/2959.

[53] Human Rights Watch, "Afghanistan: Taliban Trample Media Freedom," *Human Rights Watch*: https://www.hrw.org/news/2025/10/23/afghanistan-taliban-trample-media-freedom.

[54] Ruttig, T. "Afghanistan's Media Under the Taliban: From Free Press to Propaganda Control," *The Diplomat*: https://thediplomat.com/2025/11/afghanistans-media-under-the-taliban-from-free-press-to-propaganda-control/.

to dominate the media without any domestic opposition. The media, which should be free and pluralistic, has become a centralized propaganda tool and an arena for the Taliban's narrative to dominate. From the perspective of the war of ideas, the Taliban's failure to balance its propaganda promises with the reality on the ground has backfired and strengthened the Western media's counter-narrative that the Taliban's change is merely empty rhetoric. This debate shows that winning the war of ideas does not only depend on the ability to control the media, but also on the consistency between the narrative presented and the actions actually taken.

CONCLUSION

In the analysis described above, it can be concluded that the Taliban's media strategy after returning to power in 2021 has played a major role in reshaping their image in the public eye. The Taliban no longer relies solely on military force to maintain power. They are aware that in the digital age, political battles can also take the form of a battle for narratives, perceptions, and trust. Therefore, the media has become an important tool for introducing the new face of the Taliban, to change their image, which is often considered an extreme rebel group, to that of the governing authority in Afghanistan.

Twenty years ago, the Taliban never cared about the world's view of them, but today they need to work hard to change the world's perception of their existence as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. Through social media, the Taliban spreads narratives that proudly proclaim their success and glory in bringing peace and security. The Taliban has also begun to open up to the international press and journalists, taking the time to sit down and convey their promises and desires to serve and provide the rights of the Afghan people well and in accordance with Islamic principles. In addition, the Taliban has also begun to open up to international diplomacy, so that through these activities, the media will cover all cooperation and activities involving the Taliban, thereby helping to give a new perception of the Taliban as increasingly moderate.

In the war of ideas analysis, the Taliban is currently fighting against Western media narratives that always give a negative image. To win this ideological battle, the Taliban needs to work hard to win the hearts of both local and global communities. Therefore, the Taliban actively utilizes social media as a new space in the narrative war. Platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Telegram have become the main tools for spreading messages quickly and widely. Social media provides a space for the Taliban to construct a more modern, organized, and professional image.

The results of the study show that the Taliban are using a more structured approach than in the past. They are crafting narratives that are deliberately tailored to specific audiences. For the international community, the Taliban frames itself as a stable government, capable of cooperation, and more moderate than in previous eras. This can be seen in English-language content, press conferences, and the limited space they give to international media. The goal of this strategy is to gain political recognition and minimize global pressure. Meanwhile, for local audiences, the Taliban emphasizes narratives that are closer to everyday life, showing that the country is in a stable condition. This strategy is an attempt by the Taliban to influence the way of thinking of the public, especially certain groups.

Many of the Taliban's messages portray moderation and openness, but some of their policies, particularly regarding women's education and restrictions on local media, reveal inconsistencies. Global media still reports on many repressive actions carried out by the Taliban, which leads to the Taliban's narrative being considered mere propaganda. Overall, this study concludes that the Taliban has entered a new phase in utilizing the media as an arena for legitimacy and ammunition to neutralize negative framing in the international arena. However, winning the narrative war does not only depend on the ability to produce interesting content, but also on the courage to show real change. Without real-world implementation, the Taliban's narrative will continue to be seen as a fragile attempt at image-building, incapable of erasing the old image that clings to them.

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