

How the Taliban Turned Social Media Into a Tool for Control

In the 1990s, they banned the internet. Now they use it to threaten and cajole the Afghan people, in a sign of how they might use technology to build power.

By Paul Mozur and Zia ur-Rehman

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In one video, a Taliban official reassured female health workers that they could keep their jobs. In another, militants told Sikhs, a minority religious group, that they were free and protected. Still others suggested a new lawfulness in Kabul, with Talib fighters holding looters and thieves at gunpoint.

The Taliban, who banned the internet the first time they controlled Afghanistan, have turned social media into a powerful tool to tame opposition and broadcast their messages. Now firmly in control of the country, they are using thousands of Twitter accounts — some official and others anonymous — to placate Afghanistan's terrified but increasingly tech-savvy urban base.

The images of peace and stability projected by the Taliban contrast sharply with the scenes broadcast around the world of the chaotic American evacuation from the Kabul airport or footage of protesters being beaten and shot at. They demonstrate the digital powers the militants have honed over years of insurgency, offering a glimpse of how the Taliban could use those tools to rule Afghanistan, even as they cling to their fundamentalist religious tenets and violent proclivities.

Afghan social media may be a poor indicator of public sentiment. Many of the Taliban's critics and supporters of the U.S.-backed government have gone underground. But already, with a social media campaign in recent weeks that may have helped encourage Afghan security forces to put down their weapons, the Taliban have shown that they can effectively sell their message.

"They recognized that to win the war, it had to be done through narratives and stories," said Thomas Johnson, a professor at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif. "In urban areas all Afghans have smartphones, and I think it's going to be very useful. They're going to use social media to tell the Afghan people what they need to do."



The Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid, center, at the group's first news conference after taking control of Kabul. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times

Online, the Taliban will now be targeted by some of the same tactics they used to cement their power, just as movements like the Arab Spring and others used social media to organize and rally. Afghanistan's new communications tethers with the rest of the world will help the Taliban's opponents expose any atrocities and drum up support for the resistance. Already, hashtags like #DonotChangeNationalFlag are spreading, with some combination of internal and external support.

The Taliban have responded to such calls — and to reports of crackdowns and reprisal killings by the victorious militants — with messages stressing a desire for peace and unity. The Taliban portray Americans and other foreigners as the primary cause of years of conflict — an idea that they have emphasized by using the startling images this week from the Kabul airport.

As shots of desperate refugees clinging to planes circulated, one of the best-known pro-Taliban influencers, Qari Saeed Khosty, struck a tone of doleful sympathy.

“I cried hard to see your situation. You, the friends of the occupation, we have similarly cried for you for 20 years. We told you that Tommy Ghani will never be loyal to you,” he wrote in a Twitter post, using slang for a person who adopts Western styles and customs to refer to Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan president who fled this week. “We have forgiven you, I swear to Allah. We are not for this situation. Please come back to your homes.”

Still, the Taliban — a group known during its 1996-2001 rule for public executions, sometimes by stoning — have largely kept their messages upbeat. Taliban citizen journalists ply the streets of newly captured cities with blue-capped microphones, offering videos of bland endorsement from residents.

“The Taliban don’t need to post content to remind the population they are brutal,” said Benjamin Jensen, a fellow at the Atlantic Council. “The population knows that. What they needed were images that showed they could govern and integrate the country.”

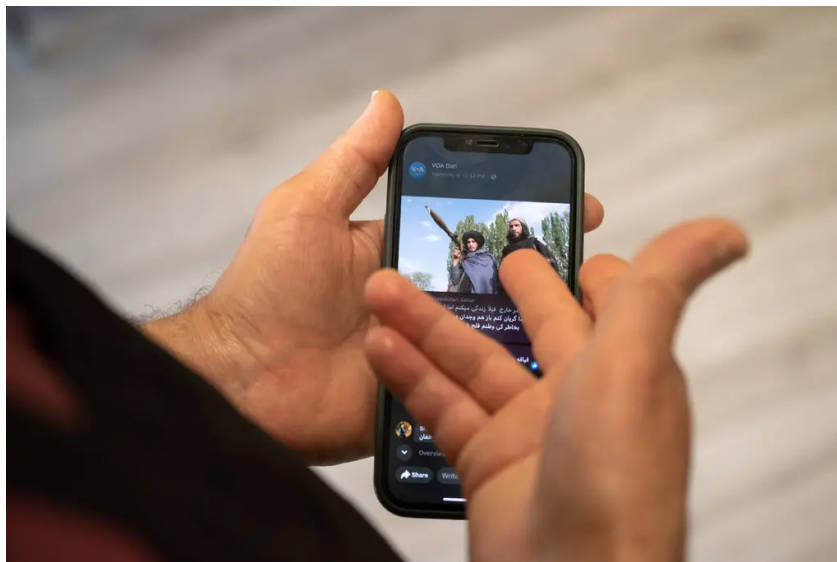
The Taliban have been able to post much of what they want online. Even as blocks on major social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube persist, dozens of new accounts have sprung up. The militants’ efforts have focused on Twitter, where the Taliban are not directly barred.

Some Taliban opponents have issued rallying cries. By contrast, others have fallen silent and scrubbed their accounts of material that could put them in danger. A female soccer player this week warned her former teammates to take photos down. Facebook and Twitter have said they would take steps to shield accounts.

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A teacher at Nangarhar University in Jalalabad who requested anonymity said a large number of his students who had taken part in anti-Taliban campaigns had deactivated their social media accounts. The generation born after the Taliban’s first regime toppled had a lifetime of digital evidence to conceal, he said.

The Afghanistan of today is a far cry from the place where the internet was banned in 2001. Under the U.S.-backed government, cell towers went up across the country. Mobile phone users jumped to more than 22 million in 2019 from just one million in 2005, according to Statista, a market research firm. Experts estimate that 70 percent of the population has access to a mobile phone.



Tens of millions of Afghans now have mobile phones, connecting them with the outside world in ways that were impossible when the Taliban last ruled. Mike Kai Chen for The New York Times

Today, the Taliban would struggle to block messages from the outside, as China and Russia do, without time and outside help. In place of deletions and bans, they have flooded social media with their own messages.

The Taliban were quick to view the internet as a new tool of propaganda, an extension of written messages and guerrilla radio stations. They grew accustomed to restoring websites after hosting services dropped them, and they often experimented, using techniques like text-message blasts. One report showed how they used trending hashtags to intimidate voters during a 2019 election.

To gain foreign acceptance in recent weeks, Taliban leaders put out messages in English and livestreamed press events. Their official website, Al-Emarah, publishes in English, Pashto, Dari, Urdu and Arabic.

The Taliban are building on lessons learned during the summer offensive that swept the group into power, said one member of the Taliban social media committee, who asked for anonymity because he was not authorized to speak.

Understand the Taliban Takeover in Afghanistan

Who are the Taliban? The Taliban arose in 1994 amid the turmoil that came after the withdrawal of Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989. They used brutal public punishments, including floggings, amputations and mass executions, to enforce their rules. Here's more on their origin story and their record as rulers.

Fast and clever messaging was a key part of the offensive, he said, pointing out that the Taliban trained and equipped soldiers with microphones and smartphones to report from the front lines as their forces swept into new territory. The messaging, a mix of amnesty offers and intimidation that was designed to create the sense of an inevitable victory, may have helped hasten a process of coercion and persuasion that led to many of the best-defended cities falling without fighting.

“Smartphones have been a very successful Taliban weapon,” said Abdul Sayed, an independent researcher who focuses on the group’s social media tactics. “They all have a special love for smartphones now.”



At the Kabul airport on Monday. “We have forgiven you, I swear to Allah,” a pro-Taliban influencer said online to Afghans trying to leave. Wakil Kohsar/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

On Friday last week, when Taliban forces took the key city of Herat, they distributed images and videos of militia leaders posing with Ismail Khan, a well-known local commander and Taliban opponent, showing him unrestrained and appearing at ease.

The message was clear, Mr. Sayed said: “If we can treat Ismail Khan, a top enemy, with such respect, there will not be danger for anyone.”

In Kabul, many Taliban-trained journalists have been busy on the streets, often holding a microphone with the logo of the group's propaganda site. In one video posted to the Twitter account of the Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid, a reporter interviews residents in Kabul's Shahr-e Naw area. When he asks a young boy about the takeover of the capital, the boy responds, "We are happy and have been living in peace."

While some have responded positively to the messaging, the digital transfer of power has sent a shock across Afghanistan's best-connected cities. Many of the voices that would once argue back against Taliban posts have gone silent for fear of retribution. Digital rights groups have said many people with ties to the former government or the United States have closed social media profiles, left chat groups and deleted old messages.

When Mr. Mujahid announced a news conference in a widely used WhatsApp journalist group this week, some members dropped out of the chat. One, who worked for foreign media and who asked for anonymity, fearing retaliation, said journalists who had written critically about the Taliban were worried about a backlash.

Even so, social media carried some signs of resistance. On Tuesday, a video of a small group of women protesting in Kabul in the presence of Taliban fighters was shared widely. The next day, videos of an incident in Jalalabad, in which the Taliban opened fire on a group of youths who had removed the militants' flag and replaced it with that of the fallen Afghan government, went viral.

The Nangarhar University teacher said he didn't believe the new generation that grew up in Kabul under the ousted government would easily accept the Taliban's rule, and he expected new waves of online resistance before long.

"I fear that the Taliban will restrict social media soon because of it," he said.



Young men talking to a Taliban commander in Kabul on Thursday. Jim Huylebroek for The New York Times