

Strengthening Afghan Diaspora Knowledge Networks Worldwide: Insights from Digital, Physical, and Psychological Spaces

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Abstract

In this research paper I analyze an integrated view on where and how Afghan scholars engage in scholarly work to preserve their voices and share their intellectual contributions with the world and amongst each other. Systematic research regarding the Afghan knowledge networks and where and how they are connecting are lacking. This paper fills this gap by doing a comparison between the management of the knowledge network of the corporate world globally and Afghanistan diaspora knowledge networks (DKNs). This comparison is conducted through a literature review about the knowledge networks of corporations and media analysis about the Afghan diaspora knowledge network. In this paper, I first outline the current knowledge network and situation among Afghans and the importance of a knowledge network for Afghans. Then, I give an overview of how and where corporations and other institutions manage their knowledge network. This will cover two spaces where knowledge networks happen, digital and physical spaces, with a major focus on digital spaces. Later, I will integrate the concept of psychological spaces in these two spaces for facilitating knowledge networks. This paper will also address what types of knowledge, tacit and explicit, are transmitted through digital and physical spaces. Subsequently, inspired by the existing strategies and methodologies of the corporation and the business sector, I engage in a preliminary comparison of how Afghans manage their knowledge network worldwide through digital media and news articles' analysis. This will be followed by a discussion of some implications for the Afghan diaspora knowledge network and the trade-offs that should be considered when comparing a low resourced community's management of knowledge network to corporations. Finally, I provide policy recommendations for universities, organizations, and policy makers worldwide on how to best help the Afghan scholars and students who have fled war and oppression in Afghanistan, thus strengthening Afghan diaspora knowledge networks and preserving their intellectual contributions globally.

Keywords

Afghanistan, Knowledge Network, Physical spaces, Digital Spaces, Psychological spaces, Afghan scholars, Corporates, Accessibility

Background: The Current Crises In Afghanistan and the Need For Scholarly Knowledge Networks

Afghanistan has become the world's "largest humanitarian crisis" since the Taliban took over the country on August 15, 2021 (Ferguson 2022, *New Yorker*). One of the most notable and important crises in Afghanistan is the attack on the education system, scholars, and students. For instance, a bomb attack that targeted schoolgirls in Sayed Al-Shuhada school Kabul on May 9th, 2021, killed 85 people and injured another 147 people (Deaton and McKenzie 2021, CNN). On November 2, 2020, gunmen stormed into the largest university of Afghanistan, Kabul University, killing at least 22 people according to the official report by the Interior Ministry (Shalizi 2020, Reuters). Most of those were students and around 50 more people were injured, some of them breaking limbs while jumping from windows to escape the outbreak during classes in the morning (ibid). This was the Islamic State's second attack in just over a week (ibid). The Global Coalition to Protect Education has recorded over 1000 attacks on students, teachers, and educational institutions from 2015 to 2019 in Afghanistan, making it one of the worst impacted nations in the world (Bar 2022, HRW). Afghanistan's educational system, students, and scholars are bleeding.

It's not only the deadly attacks that threaten the Afghan knowledge system, students, and scholars, but the ideology and politics of the Taliban as well. Since the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban, they have shattered hopes of many children by banning girls from continuing education starting secondary school, limiting women and girls' access to higher education, and replacing secular courses with religious ones (Bar 2022, HRW). Due to this, the fall of Afghanistan into the hands of the Taliban forced university and school students to flee the country (Frotan 2022, *Toronto Star*). The Taliban's history suggests that their negative impact will continue, crippling the education system, threatening scholars and students, and women and ethnic minorities are the most vulnerable ones under their regime. The Taliban's policy and with Afghan scholars and students having to flee to different countries, has made it very difficult for Afghan scholars and students to engage in teaching and the transfer of knowledge amongst and across generations, have a knowledge network where they can engage in scholarly work, and share their intellectual contributions with the world.

Literature Review: Knowledge Flows and Networks In Corporations

"Knowledge networks" are a group of people or teams across institutional, spatial, and disciplinary boundaries who connect with each other to invent and share knowledge (Pugh & Prusak 2013, 79). Knowledge networks aim to develop, distribute, and apply knowledge to create value (Seufer, Krogh & Bach 1999, 183). I have conducted a literature review on corporations and profit networks to analyze how knowledge networks are created and managed in resourceful environments that lead to successful results and compare it with knowledge networks among the diaspora who lack the same resources to have as successful outcomes. Knowledge is increasingly acknowledged by prevailing institutions as their most crucial source to sustain competitive advantage (von Krogh and Venzin, 1996 in Seufer, Krogh & Bach 1999, 183). However, obtaining long-term competitive advantage does not stem from the management of present knowledge, but in the ability to constantly produce new knowledge, and to progress to the latest products and services (ibid, 183).

There are two fundamental knowledge types, codified and tacit as identified by studies of regional knowledge bases brought forward by Asheim and colleagues (Asheim & Coenen, 2005; Asheim & Gertler, 2005; Asheim et al., 2007 in Xue 2018, 141). The technology of the internet has become the greatest facilitator of exchanging knowledge within and across companies (Warkentin, Sugumaran & Bapna 2001, 153). Top successful corporations have found that the digital space is the easy part of enhancing knowledge making and distribution (Allee 2000, 3). Its worldwide adoption has established the opportunity for corporations and other institutions to develop collective networks of partners, with whom there is a potential of exchanging strategic knowledge to accomplish mutually beneficial results (Warkentin, Sugumaran & Bapna 2001, 153). This digital commerce knowledge can be labelled as “e-knowledge” (ibid, 153). It is undeniable that the potential of advanced technologies can master and disseminate explicit knowledge, which is the kind of knowledge that is shared orally in writing or digital format and can therefore be communicated and disseminated (Seufer, Krogh & Bach 1999, 183).

On the other hand, tacit knowledge is deeply rooted in an individual's experiences, subjective understandings, values, and feelings (Seufer, Krogh & Bach 1999, 183). Therefore, it can be hard to completely communicate and share it (ibid, 183). Tacit knowledge can be abstracted as having a technical and an intellectual dimension (ibid, 183). Its technical dimension possesses informal, subjective skills and talents, often termed as “know-how” (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995 in Seufer, Krogh & Bach 1999, 183). Its cognitive dimension contains our mental model induced by our opinions, morals, and principles (ibid, 183). For this reason, to make a successful use of knowledge, a network must be built up in a way in which the workforces’ knowledge and skills are available (Krogh & Bach 1999, 183). The most important thing is that creation and sharing practices are encouraged, not just the data accumulation in a data-warehouse (Seufert, 1997 in Seufer, Krogh & Bach 1999, 183). Socialization facilitates the exchange of tacit knowledge between individuals as it can transfer the knowledge and experiences of individuals (Seufert, Krogh & Bach 1999, 185). The outcome of a common experience is new shared implicit knowledge, for example common values or mechanical skills (ibid, 185). In practice, this is obtaining intuitive and personal knowledge through physical proximity in a physical space and making direct interaction with customers or a supplier (ibid, 185).

Importantly, for both codified and tacit forms of knowledge, it is important to note that knowledge cannot be separated from the communities that create it, practice it, and develop it (Allee 2000, 5). In nature, knowledge and learning are social (ibid, 4). Regardless of the type of knowledge, even where digital spaces are incredibly crucial, people need to have conversations, experimentation, and shared practices with other people who engage in the same work as they do (Ibid, 5). Especially as people go past routine practices into more complicated challenges, they strongly rely on their *community of practice* as their key resource of knowledge (ibid, 5).

Additionally, and related to the above, psychological spaces are as important as physical and digital spaces when it comes to knowledge networks and transfer of knowledge (Högberg & Edvinsson 1998, 84). In

order for a business to survive in the future, it must be creative and innovative (ibid, 84). They require innovative and creative people working for them (ibid, 84). However, only having these individuals in an organization is not enough (ibid, 84). It is also essential for companies to have creative and supportive spaces that facilitate, encourage, inspire, acknowledge, incentivize, and adopt knowledge creation and distribution, a space that functions as an incentive for individuals' innovation (ibid, 84). Employees' work may not become efficient, or they may leave if there are not such supportive spaces (ibid, 84).

The key to survive in the future for corporates, is to have a knowledge network that can capture and store all the knowledge, new ideas that are created, and innovations, and disseminate that knowledge to the right people, so it can be used again and create more value (Högberg & Edvinsson 1998, 81). The amount of value gained from the sharing, however, is related to how it is communicated and exchanged (ibid, 82). In the corporate context, a successful exchange of knowledge has taken place if the receiver comprehends all the knowledge that has been disseminated, and is on the same “picture” of the knowledge as is the sender and can use it (ibid, 82). If the receiver can add their knowledge as well, the exchange is even more effective or more valuable as it expands the level of knowledge so that it is much greater than it was to begin with (ibid, 82). By enabling access to sharing knowledge for individuals and corporations, the knowledge of an organization reaches a higher value than the amount of the individuals' knowledge alone (ibid, 82). Therefore, when knowledge is used and transformed into organizational knowledge, it creates more value (ibid, 82).

The design of educational organizations and knowledge networks have to be in such a way that they rapidly disseminate the latest knowledge (Ekstedt, 1988 in Hogberg & Edvinsson 1998, 83). The communication system must operate in a method that supports people to spread new knowledge and enables individuals to apply it to working practices (Hogberg & Edvinsson 1998, 83). There also will be a huge demand for the organization to enhance its capability to develop, disseminate and obtain knowledge (ibid, 83). In sum, knowledge networks are crucial for sustaining a community's intellectual vitality and the development of innovative solutions. Successful corporations have utilized digital spaces to exchange explicit knowledge, while also harnessing physical and psychological spaces significantly for sharing tacit knowledge. As evident in successful corporate settings, the interplay between digital interactions and physical encounters, whether formal or informal, fosters a rich environment for knowledge creation and dissemination.

Media Analysis: Digital Connectivity and Knowledge Exchange Within the Afghan Diaspora - Insights and Limitations

My media analysis suggests that the Afghan diaspora, particularly scholars and students, heavily rely on the digital spaces for networking, mutual connection, and sharing knowledge and experiences. Leveraging diverse platforms including LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, they share their scholarly work and host cultural events and promote events taking place in both digital and physical realms. For instance, the dynamic platform afghanrisingmagazine.com, is complemented by its active presence on Instagram,

Facebook, and LinkedIn. This initiative strives to engage, empower, and unify the Afghan diaspora in Canada. Similarly, the project known as Afghan Women Scholars, which is active on LinkedIn and Twitter, collaborates with universities, institutions, and global organizations to facilitate the safe departure of women from Afghanistan, providing them with formal invitations to continue their research, and pursue post-graduate degrees outside the country. Similarly, the @afghanwomenstrong Instagram page amplifies the voices of Afghan women globally through stories, podcasts, and news updates.

The Afghan diaspora also utilize social media platforms as a vital means of connection. Drawing from my comprehensive media analysis centered on the Afghan diaspora in Canada, mainly British Columbia, I would like to highlight several Instagram pages fostering this connection. For instance, @advosociety stands out as a cultural hub, bringing together the Afghan community in Vancouver through its diverse array of events and fundraisers. Meanwhile, @afghanamericancommunityorg arranges annual conferences in physical spaces in the U.S., selecting and inviting Afghan professionals and artists through an application process to facilitate dialogue on important issues, encourage active participation in civic affairs, and create connections within the 18-39 age group. @vancouverabc serving as a digital hub, spotlights and celebrates Afghan businesses and entrepreneurs across British Columbia, while @afghanbusinesscanada functions similarly, but on a larger scale, catering to the needs of established Afghan Canadian enterprises and customers.

The digital space is a significant important space for Afghans in Afghanistan and worldwide to connect and communicate. However, its efficacy is not universal, as it inherently excludes segments of the population, particularly the elderly and those lacking access to technology and the internet. Consequently, while some individuals skilled in navigating digital spaces can leverage these platforms to share and disseminate their work, a significant portion of the Afghan populace remains marginalized from this exchange of knowledge. Moreover, while virtual spaces offer a cost-effective and expeditious means for Afghans to network, they forfeit the nuanced transmission of tacit knowledge often preferred by corporations, which is typically facilitated through physical interactions. This limitation underscores the disparity in resources between individuals and corporate entities. Similarly, the Afghan diaspora encounters barriers in harnessing the full potential of digital networking compared to corporations. The lack of resources impedes their ability to organize in-person gatherings, encompassing challenges such as travel logistics, inadequate support infrastructure, and limited venue options. These constraints underscore the asymmetry in opportunities for knowledge exchange and community building between grassroots initiatives and corporate entities.

The digital space is the vital space for Afghans, both in Afghanistan and around the world, to stay connected with each other. However, despite its advantages, certain limitations persist within this digital realm. Its accessibility is not universal, as it inherently excludes segments of the population, particularly the elderly and those lacking access to technology and the internet due to financial constraints. Consequently, while some individuals leverage digital spaces to share and disseminate their knowledge

and work, a significant portion of the Afghan population remains marginalized from this exchange of knowledge. Moreover, while virtual spaces offer a cheaper and faster means for Afghans to network, they lose the transmission of tacit knowledge often preferred by corporations, which is typically facilitated through physical interactions. The Afghan diaspora encounters huge barriers in utilizing the full potential of physical spaces and networking compared to corporations. The lack of resources and financial abilities hinder the Afghan diaspora's ability to organize in-person gatherings, encompassing challenges such as travel logistics, funders and venue options.

Conclusion, Policy Recommendations and Further Research

Amid the ongoing crises in Afghanistan because of the Taliban, including physical attacks on educational institutions and scholars, as well as physiological, such as the ban of education for girls above 6th grade, the preservation and dissemination of knowledge among Afghan scholars and students became critical. In this study, I first began by examining the current educational crisis in Afghanistan and the knowledge network dynamics among Afghans. Then, I proceeded with the literature reviews on the strategies and spaces, physical, digital, and physiological, where corporations maintain and develop their knowledge networks for sustaining competitive advantage. Later, I analyzed the different types of knowledge, tacit and explicit, preferred for transmission in both digital and physical domains. Moreover, drawing inspiration from corporate methodologies, I conducted a preliminary media analysis of how Afghans worldwide manage their knowledge networks through digital media. Finally, I delved into discussions into implications of the strong reliance on digital spaces for the Afghan diaspora's knowledge network and the trade-offs inherent in comparing their practices with those of resource-rich corporations.

The Afghan diaspora rely heavily on digital spaces, such as social media platforms, for connecting and sharing intellectual work. These platforms have enabled efficient dissemination of explicit knowledge and facilitated connections among the diaspora. In addition, based on my own personal experiences and observations, there's a deeper layer of knowledge exchange happening beyond the digital realm. For instance, Afghan diaspora members often utilize socialization in physical spaces like Afghan concerts and weddings to disseminate tacit knowledge. Such gatherings facilitate not only networking, but also sharing information, knowledge, and experiences that are vital for knowledge preservation and community cohesion. Further research could delve deeper into exploring the intricate overlap between cultural and social networks and knowledge networks.

Despite the significant benefits of digital spaces, obstacles arise with accessibility and inclusion. Additionally, while virtual spaces excel at transmitting explicit knowledge, they often fall short in capturing the richness of tacit knowledge exchange that is crucial for community cohesion and meaningful interactions. Thus, efforts should be made to establish hybrid communication models that blend virtual interactions with physical gatherings, creating opportunities for both explicit and tacit knowledge exchange.

I propose the following policy recommendations for international universities, organizations, and policy makers to strengthen knowledge networks and preserve Afghan intellectual contributions. One, initiatives should be established dedicated to providing scholarships, fellowships, and academic positions to scholars and students at risk, mainly women and minorities. By doing so, we can not only help protect lives, but also preserve and strengthen their global intellectual contributions. Two, most Afghan scholars were evacuated suddenly, often without personal belongings, and some without even passports. Thus, helping them by providing essential tools such as laptops or iPads is essential, so that they can continue sharing their intellectual contributions or pursue education effectively. Three, enhancing digital literacy within the diaspora, ensuring that individuals of all age groups can effectively utilize online platforms for knowledge sharing and networking. This bridges the technological divide between generations, facilitating the transfer of knowledge from elders to younger individuals and fostering intergenerational learning. Four, establishing and supporting physical community centers can facilitate in-person interactions, workshops, seminars, and cultural events, fostering a rich environment for knowledge sharing and building stronger interpersonal connections. Five, recognizing the significance of psychological spaces, institutions should create environments that encourage creativity, collaboration, and innovation, enabling scholars and community members to flourish intellectually. Six, collaborative partnerships between diaspora organizations, educational institutions, and governmental bodies can provide the necessary resources and platforms for fostering knowledge networks. Finally, initiatives that promote the documentation of traditional knowledge, oral histories, and cultural practices can ensure the preservation of tacit knowledge that may not be easily transferable through digital platforms.

It is important to acknowledge that this research paper has certain limitations stemming from the absence of in-depth interviews with individuals and organizations dedicated to supporting Afghan refugees, evacuees, and scholars in Canada due to time constraints. These interviews would have provided valuable insights into how the Afghan diaspora in Canada is actively fostering connections and sharing knowledge across and within digital, physical, and psychological spaces. In future research, incorporating such interviews could significantly enhance the accuracy and depth of understanding regarding the Afghan diaspora knowledge network. Furthermore, conducting interviews could show specific challenges and unique cultural, social, and institutional factors and opportunities that influence how Afghan scholars and their supporters engage in knowledge-sharing activities, contributing to a richer and more contextually informed analysis.

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