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Coronavirus and journalism in Pakistan

Syed Osama Ali
Master of Science in Journalism

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Coronavirus and journalism in Pakistan

This Research report is submitted to the Faculty of Business Administration as partial fulfillment of Masters of Science in Journalism degree

by

Syed Osama Ali

Supervised by

Kamal Haq Siddiqi

Centre for Excellence in Journalism

Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Karachi

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by

Syed Osama Ali

Committee/Panel:

Shahzeb Hashim

Lecturer

Centre for Excellence in Journalism

Lubna Jerar

Dawn

Kamal Haq Siddiqi

Supervisor

Centre for Excellence in Journalism

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Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Karachi, Pakistan

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this article to those journalists who not only risked their health to fulfil the requirements of journalism but also put their families at risk to convey the truth to the people. Pakistan and almost all the countries of the world have been suffering from economic, social and psychological crises since the outbreak of Coronavirus at the end of 2019. Along with other professions, the role of journalists has also been prominent. All the journalists in the world deserve praise for their contributions.

Acknowledgement

I am proud to say that I have had tremendous support from many people in writing the text and for providing material for its completion. It is difficult to include the names of all the people. But those who know me know how grateful I am for their support. It is especially important to acknowledge the kindness of my supervisor and teacher Kamal Siddiqui without whom this project would not have been possible.

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Abstract

The lockdown caused by the Coronavirus pandemic in 2019 made the reporting process extremely challenging for journalists. In this dire situation, Pakistani journalists like other journalists around the world, ensured the implementation of Coronavirus SOPs while fulfilling their duty as journalists and reporting problems they faced in the process, this is my subject of writing.

Introduction

It is of utmost importance in journalism to be able to meet your source and to visit the site of interest that is being reported on. Journalists remain active and engaged in the field to discover stories that match their beat. The basic duty of any journalist is to search for the facts - to dig out the truth - and to report it to the public. This is not easily done as a remote job from home or the newsroom.

A study of the annual World Press Freedom Index released by Reporters Without Borders, an international organization on press freedom in Pakistan, reveals that Pakistan is among the countries where journalists do not have full freedom of speech and writing. In addition, traditional journalism in Pakistan is undergoing a process of change. Innovation has challenged traditional journalism. People no longer need a traditional newspaper for news. Social media brings the news to the masses before the newspaper. Last year, when Pakistan, like the rest of the world, was gripped by the coronavirus and there were lockdowns across the country, people stayed in their homes trying to save their lives and the lives of their families. However, journalists risked their lives and the lives of their families to find the news and bring forth the truth.

In order to fulfil their professional responsibilities, these journalists had to not only protect themselves and their sources from being infected with the coronavirus but also avoid compromising on the principles of journalism and especially reporting. On the one hand, there were instructions from the government and other agencies that everyone, including journalists, should ensure that standard operating procedures are implemented, however, field reporting itself goes against the SOPs.

How can a journalist know whether the public is following the government's orders regarding lockdown or not if he himself is homebound? To find out whether the general public was following SOPs or not, journalists had to violate the SOPs themselves and go out for fieldwork.

In the following content, we will try to find out what kind of challenges did this difficult and complex task create for journalists and how did they cope with this challenging situation.

The ripples that sent shockwaves

In the Chinese province of Wuhan in December of 2019, a few, seemingly isolated, cases were reported of patients of pneumonia. As the number of cases rose in the next few days, the local authorities speculated that there has been a regional outbreak of a viral infection. But a novel coronavirus was soon identified, and cases were reported first, outside of Wuhan and then outside of China. Almost exactly three months after its outbreak in China, the first covid patient arrived in Pakistan. Two weeks later, WHO characterized COVID-19 as a pandemic.

As of this writing, more than 16 million covid-diagnosis tests have been done in Pakistan, of which just over a million cases were diagnosed as positive; over 23 thousand deaths have been reported due to the virus and just under a million people recovered fully from the deadly disease. More than 29 million Pakistanis have been vaccinated so far.

Reporting remotely

Work from home seems to be the most feasible solution to lessen the rapid spread of coronavirus and ensure everyone's safety. Unfortunately, not all occupations have the convenience to do so as their job requires them to be out in the field, journalism among other occupations is a job that requires extensive fieldwork.

Modern digital technology and easy access to the internet proved to be vital for journalists during the pandemic. Like almost all other professionals, circumstances forced journalists to adapt to the virtual world as well.

To understand whether working remotely was equally effective or not we talked to some senior journalists and here is what they said.

Syed Arfeen, Bureau Chief of Hum tv provided insight into how the company followed SOPs. Hum TV reduced the workforce to 50% by making employees work on alternate days. "Employees were to work on alternate days, and whenever an employee felt sick they were able to quarantine themselves as paid sick leaves were provided," said Arfeen

However, this brought its own set of challenges with it. "It was hard to cover the required beat when the reporter was unavailable. This caused a lot of problems such as delayed news. But what could be done, the safety of reporters, cameramen and other members had to be taken into consideration as well. With the rapid spread of the virus, the fear for employee's safety kept looming over our heads," shared Arfeen.

Reporting remotely did not seem a very practical option to Arfeen, as he stated "if the reporters are not in the field the entire process comes to a halt".

Rafat Saeed, Bureau Chief Karachi at Aaj is of the opinion that due to the innovation in technology and the rise of social media platforms it has become possible for journalists to do remote work as well. If the world was struck by a pandemic like the coronavirus 10 to 15 years ago, journalists would not have been able to work from home at all.

However, Saeed also admitted that remote work wasn't as effective as fieldwork. "Nevertheless, an in-person meeting should always be preferred over a virtual meeting whenever possible. They help to build trust and the source talks more comfortably," said Saeed.

Countering the virus with journalism

There was widespread skepticism among the general public in Pakistan regarding the dangers posed by the coronavirus. In WhatsApp groups and street corners, people could be heard dismissing the whole pandemic as nothing but a hoax.

Sidra Dar has been a journalist for the past 11 years. She was recruited in 2018 by Voice of America, where she works as a multimedia journalist. “To make people realize the importance of following SOPs, sometimes I had to neglect the SOPs myself. Not once, but many, many times,” said Sidra. “As more and more journalists got infected by the deadly virus, the danger for me also kept mounting,” she added.

Sheema, a senior veteran journalist, shared her experiences. Remaining sensitive to the needs of the public, Sheema and her colleagues avoided stories that had little news value and would only spread negativity. “Our population has its sensitivities. The decisions of what to report and how to report it had to be subtle. Stories regarding burials in the first months after the outbreak caused much alarm and panic in the masses. We avoided all such stories that we thought have little value in the way of news and only served to generate a negative hype. There were very depressing stories of people case of a boy who lost his father due to covid and wasn’t able to perform his funeral rites as he himself was quarantined at the time, such stories were only going to add to the despair of the public and so we avoided them,” said Sheema.

“False information regarding the virus added to the chaos. News about how the virus is just another conspiracy made people ignore SOPs consequently increasing the number of cases. While others exaggerated the intensity of it which led to unnecessary panic. As journalists, the duty fell upon us to rid the general public of all this distress and convey only authentic news to them,” Sheema added.

Effect of coronavirus on Journalists and the field of Journalism

The situation created by the pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns essentially forced many journalists to adapt how they wanted to tell a story. Sometimes the available alternatives were very unfortunate and also led to unavoidable compromises.

We spoke to another young journalist, Rabia Bugti. Rabia started work on a documentary about the tragic Baldia factory incident. She is of the opinion that a documentary was the most effective medium that could do justice to the story. The coronavirus outbreak and the ensuing lockdowns forced her to make do with long-form. “A lot of work has already been done on the incident in long-form. Having to abandon the work on the documentary really took a lot away from the story,” recalled Rabia, her disappointment evident. “In the end, all the hard work could not add much new to the existing reporting on the incident,” she added.

Sheema informed how she and her team adapted their work practices to respond to the needs of the pandemic. As a precautionary measure and to minimize the spread of the virus Sheema and her team adapted their reporting to suit the SOPs, for instance, all reporters made a conscious effort to minimize the workforce during fieldwork. “I and my colleagues often filmed through our mobile phones while simultaneously reporting news, this way the cameraman didn’t have to tag along and the number of people being exposed to the virus was minimized as well. Admittedly it did add to the workload but we tried our best to manage” said Sheema.

Risking your life to tell a story

No matter how hard one tries it is not possible to report from the comfort of home. Fieldwork is vital to cover a story and so journalists risk their lives on a daily basis to bring information to the general public.

The pandemic has led to unpredictability regarding everything, even the job security of journalists. This is an added factor as to why journalists overlook the threat of contracting the virus.

According to Sidra, the greatest risk she took was when she went to a graveyard to observe first-hand the process of burying the dead body of a person who had died due to the coronavirus. "I wanted to investigate the authenticity of the various rumours regarding the burials," she said.

Times like these create conditions that breed rumours about any and everything. "People were panicking when they heard that the organs of the people who died due to coronavirus were being removed against the will of the family members and sent to laboratories for research," added Sidra.

"Nevertheless, I compromised on SOPs and took the risk myself so that the right news could reach the public." Explaining the reasons for doing so, Sidra said that initially there were many false rumours circulating about the coronavirus and people were worried about the facts about the coronavirus. "In such a situation, as a journalist, it was my duty to find out the truth and convey the facts to the people," she said. "That's my job as a journalist."

Incidents of fights between relatives of the deceased and hospital staff were being reported. "How can a journalist not feel compelled to go to the bottom of such news and to keep the public informed of how much they are hearing is actually true," she asks.

Mehak Mairaj started her career in journalism amid lockdowns and covid waves. During the first covid lockdown, she worked on a story on the transgender community of Pakistan.

Since the transgender community has a disproportionately large prevalence of AIDS, it means that due to a weak immune system and low resistance to the disease coronavirus could affect these people in a far worse manner. "Despite all this, my sources seldom wore masks or cared about social distancing," said Mehak. Often the transgenders would extend their greetings through a handshake and to avoid awkward situations Mehak

would just shake hands too. As in Mehak's case, journalists often risk themselves to tell a story that needs to be told.

Yusra Saleem is a journalist. Yusra shared her struggles about how in the initial stages of the pandemic no information was given out regarding whether the virus can transmit through dead bodies or not. For this reason, the government had advised the public to maintain distance from the dead bodies of corona patients as well. "In these dire circumstances, I worked around dead bodies, putting my own life at risk," said Yusra.

Coronavirus and the financial, physical and mental condition of journalists

The novel coronavirus has distressed almost everyone in one way or the other and journalists are no exception in this matter. It is a job requirement for journalists to go around searching for a story and gathering necessary information from reliable sources. The stresses of fieldwork, health-related concerns and to top it all off financial concerns due to lack of job security has impacted many journalists in a negative way.

While talking about the challenges of working as a journalist during the pandemic, Sidra recounted that “the years of the Lyari gang war were stressful,” but she “never faced a more psychologically and emotionally draining time than during the months after the coronavirus outbreak.”

While sharing her concerns, she said, “It is scary to think that while I try to actively report from the field, unbeknownst to me, I might be acting as a virus carrier.” “Once my colleagues had to rush me to a hospital because I had fainted due to high blood pressure,” she said. The stresses of being a journalist in such a challenging time had taken a toll on her as she had never had a blood pressure-related problem before in her life. She recounted that her “family wanted [me] to stop reporting from the field. They even pressed for me to quit journalism altogether!” She chuckled, apparently happy that she was able to withstand the pressure.

We spoke to Laiba, who was working as a journalist when she was diagnosed with the coronavirus. She is thankfully past the worst of it but it seems that a full recovery has not happened yet. “I had become very anxious and irritable during the quarantine period. It has been six months since I recovered, but my memory has been negatively impacted and now I tend to forget details of my correspondence with sources,” she said. Even slight exertion still leaves her breathless, she informed. “I am also struggling with insomnia but I am determined to continue my work as a journalist,” she affirmed.

Oonib Azam is a young and passionate journalist at The News. We spoke with Oonib about the ways he ensured the safety of his family, while he exposed himself to much higher levels of risk during his reporting from the field. “I wore double masks all the time and followed SOPs as strictly as possible. But my work essentially meant daily

heightened risks of getting infected and that disturbed me to no end especially when I thought about my parents,” he said.

Oonib is fortunate enough to live in a two-storey house with only his parents. “I moved into the upper floor and minimized contact with my parents at home. I even used separate utensils and disinfected the entire floor frequently,” said Oonib. Thus, to ensure that he can continue telling stories from the field, Oonib essentially quarantined himself when he was at home even though he had not tested positive.

Journalists and Quarantine

Although 14 days of quarantine are deemed necessary by medical professionals it is not something everyone can comply with. Many journalists cannot practice quarantine as they are not granted paid sick leaves. Moreover, due to frequent layoffs, they are always concerned about losing their job as well. Quarantine itself takes a toll on a person's mental health and not everyone has living conditions that allow them to properly isolate themselves. With a job as demanding as journalism these added challenges tend to add on to the frustrations of journalists.

In the first few months of 2020, Sidra followed the practice of quarantining herself for three days after every fieldwork assignment. "It was impossible to quarantine for more than three days as in the unpredictable situation of those days, there were always more and more stories to cover," said Sidra.

When Saeed contracted the virus he suffered mentally as well. "When I tested positive a few months ago, I immediately quarantined myself for two weeks. Thankfully, I did not experience severe symptoms. Still, being infected by the fatal virus can be frightening. I became increasingly paranoid and would wake up in the middle of the night to check my oxygen levels," shared Saeed.

"When I fell sick I was able to rest at home because I got paid sick leave for two weeks," said Sheema.

The experience of other journalists was much different. Laiba says that problems only increased for her and other infected journalists during their quarantine periods. "Did we get any paid sick leaves? None that I know of," she revealed.

Oonib faced challenges of his own, as he shared how he struggled mentally due to the isolation and stress. "My colleagues joked that I had developed several OCDs during this time period, and they were not entirely wrong. To ensure my own and my parent's safety I have become very cautious of all potential sources of infection and consequently, I sanitize quite frequently. The stress of work and my safety coupled up with the lack of interaction with my family, surely did take a toll on my mental health as well". Oonib shared.

Job security

Broadcast media in Pakistan is struggling to compete with the ubiquitous social media platforms. Since digital media has become the main source of news for many people, traditional newsrooms face financial constraints and layoffs have not been infrequent. In such circumstances, the pandemic added to the worries of the journalists regarding their job security.

Many organizations had to change their internal structures and shift their focus from print media to digital media. The financial constraints were obvious in many newsrooms; salary packages were changed and in some cases, organizations had to resort to layoffs. “I would even venture to say that job security was a bigger concern than health,” said Sheema. “It was so sad to hear about veteran journalists having to sell burgers after being laid off. Even magazine editors lost their jobs,” said Sheema.

“We were always told to avoid risking our lives. But when the [broadcast media] industry is already financially weak, who would employ us if we would not continue reporting as usual?” asked Laiba.

In this distressful situation where companies resorted to lay-offs and job security was a matter of utmost concern, Hum TV’s work ethic was very reassuring for its employees. According to Arfeen, there were no lay-offs or changes in salary packages.

“There hasn’t been even a single lay-off in the company, in fact, salaries are still paid regularly on 30th or 31st. Hum TV not only grants paid sick leaves but also sends fruit baskets as a courtesy to the sick employee’s residence,” shared Arfeen.

Arfeen added, “Health insurance was provided to employees. However, since the company has shown vigilance in following SOPs the insurance has been used as no one got seriously sick.”

The role of media houses and media bodies

One might presume that media organizations would play a proactive role in guiding and facilitating the work and lives of journalists. While it is true that media organizations had instructed their journalist employees to observe SOPs while reporting, it should be remembered that the risks journalists faced in the field could not be wished away easily.

When we asked several journalists if their organizations took any supportive measures to provide them with some relief, we received mixed responses. “An email was sent to all employees where I work that frankly admitted the atmosphere of general uncertainty and provided reassurances and tips to tackle it,” said Sidra.

“Journalists were generally encouraged to get tested and were told by their organizations that the cost of the tests would be reimbursed. Disappointingly enough, most media houses failed to walk the talk,” said a frustrated Saeed.

“The media bodies of Pakistan are embroiled in petty politics and internal squabbles. They cannot be expected to take steps of concrete value that go beyond opportunities of a photoshoot,” commented Saeed.

When asked if Voice of America provided her with any kind of medical insurance, Sidra answered in the negative. When seen in this context, the situation for journalists appears even bleaker.

Sheema Siddiqui believed that her organization, GEO tv, adopted supportive policies that prove to be beneficial for their journalist employees.

Sheema informed that inside the offices, wearing a mask was compulsory at all times. The furniture in all the rooms was also frequently sanitized. “However, the first six months of the first covid wave were confusing and I was also a little paranoid. I had told the housekeeping staff that I will clean my desk myself. Thankfully, we understand the nature of the disease better now and have gotten a little used to it,” she said.

Her colleagues at GEO tv also had a measure of mental peace due to the fact that they got medical insurance from the organization. “However, this does not represent the overall situation of journalists in Pakistan. In ARY, for example, there were cases when even people who had tested positive for coronavirus were called to work from the office after only four or five days of quarantine,” she shared her concerns.

Laiba questioned the collective failure of the numerous media organizations working in Pakistan to take any kind of steps to help journalists better cope with the challenges posed by the pandemic. “I think it is important to debate and discuss their failure. So that the dismal truth of the ones who work so hard to bring out the truth can also be known,” she opined.

Arfeen was of the opinion that media bodies did not perform their role with vigilance in this dire situation, “Media bodies should have supported journalists, their efforts were not sufficient as they did not provide substantial financial or health care benefits,” said Arfeen.

“Some media bodies indeed distributed food ration packets to journalists, but it was too little, too late,” added Arfeen

Recently, Karachi Press Club started a vaccination drive but in Arfeen’s opinion, this step was taken too late as well. “Pakistan broadcasters association should have established a fund to accommodate journalists financially,” said Arfeen.

Concern for the family

Concern for one's own health is nothing compared to the concern a person feels for the safety and well-being of their loved ones. Being contaminated by the virus might still be a calamity a person can handle, but the thought that your loved one is suffering because of you is a pain of immeasurable proportion. This is one of the main concerns of journalists as well.

“I was most concerned about transmitting the virus to my mother,” said Sidra. She lives with her mother and her younger sister, and to protect them, she even rented a separate apartment for herself. “From March till May 2020 I had to isolate myself from my family. Those months felt like years,” she said.

Later, in June, Sidra was diagnosed with malaria and her younger sister tested positive for coronavirus. Sidra's maternal grandmother died and she could not attend the funeral.

Laiba's mother and sister are both doctors. “Every fieldwork opportunity led to an argument in the house. My work as a journalist was seen to be exposing the family to higher risks. I am happy I continued to perform my duty as a journalist but at what cost? It is,” said Laiba.

Lockdown and (the lack of) public transport

Normally, Sidra would commute through public transport. However, the lockdown banned all public transports and even ride-hailing services were also unreliable or unavailable. “Just reaching a site could prove to be a challenge. You had to solve all these problems before you could begin to think of the actual journalism-related stuff that you were supposed to do. I often had to pay exorbitant prices to rickshaw drivers,” said Sidra.

When questioned whether despite government orders she has to do fieldwork for reporting, Sidra replied “It is not possible to report without being in the field, one absolutely has to leave the house to find topics to cover”.

It was necessary to have a cameraman with her as Sidra went out in the field to find genuine news to report back. To ensure social distancing, Sidra coordinated with her cameraman. Despite these precautions, both of them kept on getting tested for covid again and again. Sidra got tested for covid ten times in one year and her cameraman got tested four times, all tests were negative.

Sidra would quarantine herself for three days after every fieldwork assignment, it was an established fact by this time that the duration for quarantine needs to be 14 days, to this Sidra said, “I cannot afford to quarantine myself for more than three days as the coronavirus situation was unpredictable and there was always some new report to convey”.

“I was reporting about the destruction caused by the novel coronavirus in the nation, however only I and my family were aware of the dire situation the pandemic had created within our household”- Sidra.

To report regarding the plane crash in Karachi, Sidra again had to get into the field. Despite the dire situation, young journalists tried their best to follow all journalism protocols and for this, they put their own lives at stake.

Journalists as frontline workers

Medical staff and even school teachers were considered to be frontline workers by the government. All because their job exposed them to the risk of contracting the virus. However, journalists who work in the field, interact with dozens of people on a daily basis and those reporting on the covid-19 pandemic are in close proximity to people who are affected by the virus.

Taking this into consideration it was only logical that the government provided vaccination for journalists with frontline workers as well, sadly this was not the case.

“We are also risking ours and our family’s lives to ensure that valid information regarding Coronavirus reaches the masses. Why were we not considered as front-line workers by the government?” enquired Sidra.

Laiba Zaib believes that it is the negligence of Journalism associations that they did not speak up for the rights of journalists in front of the state. “As journalists, we always strive to reveal the truth and stand with the oppressed, yet when it was time to voice our concerns, our own association stayed silent,” said Laiba.

“It was quite stressful when I realized that the government wasn’t able to provide journalists with conveniences such as vaccination with frontline workers or job security,” Laiba added, distressed.

Sidra reveals the problems of the journalism association by highlighting a very serious issue “Camera persons were not considered as journalists by the journalism association until very recently, they are the backbone of journalism, yet it took so long for us to accept them as fellow journalists”.

What's next

The pandemic has hastened the changes in industry trends that would have been gradual otherwise. There is a definite need to focus on training young journalists and developing their skill sets to suit the needs of digital media. “Young people are already familiar with digital platforms and use them on a daily basis. They can be trained quickly. If done smartly, it is not going to cost a fortune,” suggested Saeed.

Broadcast media seems to be in disarray. Television news channels seem to take lead from social media these days. For the sake of ratings, they will play the content that is trending on social media and creating hype. Journalistic standards take second place.

This race to break the news first is self-inflicted damage on newsrooms. To think that news related to a matter as serious as the pandemic will fall victim to this race between newsrooms is deeply concerning. Recently, the ARY news channel announced that the Government of Sindh has decided to not impose a lockdown starting August 1. A few minutes later, a spokesperson of the Sindh government announced a decision to the contrary. “Sometimes our broadcast media reports on events even before they have happened, only to hastily beat a shameful retreat but fulfil Index, they still never learn,” said Saeed.

According to Arfeen, journalists use the same shared details of a story to formulate their own report without making the necessary effort to verify details. “Many journalists of different organizations are part of the same WhatsApp group and the norm is that whenever a journalist shares a story over there everyone follows in his footsteps and reports the same story without double-checking the source or details of it. This has become more common in the pandemic,” said Arfeen.

In Arfeen’s opinion, this is quite a problematic practice as journalists seem to be in a race to report first rather than reporting authentic news. “A topic as serious as the lockdown should be reported on after verification from multiple credible sources to avoid misinformation. This can only happen if journalists focus on digging out stories rather than reporting events,” added Arfeen.

The above has made it obvious that journalists have faced a lot of challenges during the pandemic, be it mental, physical or financial. The government and media bodies, as

well as the journalism association, need to address these issues seriously to avoid further suffering.

With the Delta- variant upon us, it is now more important than ever to provide journalists with health and financial aid as they have to report in these dire circumstances. At the same time, journalists should not compromise on the quality of their news and perform their duty to bring the truth to the public in a manner that is worthy of their profession.

Sources

Rafat Saeed — Bureau Chief, Aaj News, Karachi. Ph: 03332444244

Syed Arfeen — Bureau Chief, HUM News, Karachi, Ph: 03018288055

Sheema Siddiqui — Senior Journalist, Karachi, Ph: 03212410208

Oonib Azam — Journalist, Karachi, Ph: 03052200083

Rabiya Bugti — Freelance Journalist, Karachi, Ph: 03213427909

Sidra Dar — Freelance Journalist, Karachi, Ph: 03452097898

Yusra Saleem — Freelance Journalist, Karachi, Ph: 03333278189

Mehak Mairaj — Freelance Journalist, Karachi, Ph: 03032359501