

Journalism in the Age of COVID-19

Perspectives from Pakistan

Afia Salam



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Acknowledgments

Opinions were sought across the board from all the segments that come together to make Pakistan's media industry. Media house owners, editors, directors news, freelancers, media analysts, media development practitioners, watchdog bodies, media workers, press club officials, journalist associations, office bearers, reporters, bureau chiefs, stringers for foreign media, mainstream media, regional media and trade magazine representatives were approached.

All the quotes carried in the reports by the above mentioned media persons were especially given by them for this report, and they also pointed me to articles written by them or programmes aired by them on the topic to get additional insights.

Similarly, except for the image of the WHO spokesperson, Prime Minister Pakistan, Imran Khan, and Chief Minister Sindh Murad Ali Shah's images which have been taken from publicly available websites, permissions were sought and received for all other images.

I am extremely grateful to all of them for taking time out of their very pressing engagements and responding, especially to those who were afflicted by the Covid-19 or were performing the role of primary care-givers to their family members who were suffering from it.

Acknowledgements are also due to Jochen Hippler, Country Director FES and Sidra Saeed, Programme Manager, for their patience as well as guidance in putting this report together through detailed feedback on the earlier drafts.

List of acronyms

AJK	Azad Jammu & Kashmir
AEMEND	Association of Electronic Media Editors & News Directors
APNS	All Pakistan Newspaper Society
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BUJ	Balochistan Union of Journalists
CDC	Center for Disease Control (USA)
CEJ@IBA	Center of Excellence in Journalism @ IBA
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
Covid-19	Coronavirus Disease discovered in 2019
CPNE	Council of Newspaper Editors
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
DSNG	Digital Satellite News Gathering
DW	Deutsche Welle
FES	Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
FMCG	Fast Moving Consumer Goods
FNP	Freedom Network Pakistan
GB	Gilgit Baltistan
ICUs	Intensive Care Units
IFJ	International Federation of Journalists
KPC	Karachi Press Club
KUJ	Karachi Union of Journalists
KhUJ	Khyber Union of Journalists
LPC	Lahore Press Club
NAB	National Accountability Bureau
NCOC	National Command and Operations Center
NPC	National Press Club Islamabad
PBC	Pakistan Broadcasters Council
PCEJ	Pakistan Coalition for Ethical Journalism

PEMRA	Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority
PFUJ	Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists
PUJ	Punjab Union of Journalists
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
PPC	Peshawar Press Club
RSF	Reporters Without Frontiers
SOPs	Standard Operating Procedures
TRPs	Target Rating Points
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
VOA	Voice of America
WHO	World Health Organization

Author's note

Covid-19 has changed the world, including the world of journalism. In Pakistan, the industry was already experiencing stresses and strains, and now faces a double jeopardy. Many media houses are battling an existential threat to their businesses and many media workers are now staring at an uncertain future due to financial constraints and the new way of practicing journalism, which may render many redundant.

- In the context of these times of Covid-19, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung is attempting to analyse:
- Digital vs Mainstream Media
- If, and how, the pandemic has changed the Pakistani media
- If the pandemic is dominating all reporting at the expense of other important subjects
- Quality of reporting in the age of Digital Media due to the an abundance of fake news
- Issues faced by journalists, including but not limited to their job and health security
- Ways to overcome the issues faced by journalists
- Role of social media in public service broadcasting about Covid-19

Media personnel from across Pakistan, including Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) were approached. About 80 queries were sent out and 70 responses were received. To those who responded but requested anonymity due to organisational compulsions, a special thank you!

We have also sourced analysis done by other organisations, which is duly acknowledged.

Covid-19 is still a 'developing story,' to use a journalistic term. We are conscious of the fact that findings of this report run the risk of becoming dated, and that this report is just an initial assessment.

Afia Salam

Introduction: Answering 5Ws & 1H

When?

Covid-19: Pandemic it is! Says WHO

In December 2019, news started trickling in of an acute respiratory virus striking the residents in Wuhan, China, rapidly escalating and resulting in a large number of infections, and fatalities.

This was the Coronavirus. Early reports identified it as a Zoonotic disease, which came from the animal kingdom and infected humans. Accounts traced it back to the wet markets of the Chinese city of Wuhan, and bats and pangolins were cited as the transmitters.¹

However, it was soon identified as a strain of the Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).² Within a month of the cases coming out of Wuhan, WHO declared the novel Coronavirus as a Global Pandemic and assigned it the nomenclature of Covid-19.³

In the absence of a vaccine, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued guidelines for prevention and management.⁴

The term 'social distancing' gained currency, as did the management attempts through quarantines and 'lockdowns' in order to 'flatten the curve,' and herd immunity. Standard Operating Procedures – or SOPs – became widely understood to mean social distancing, frequent hand washing, wearing of masks, using Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) by those in the medical services as well as other professions who ran the risk of being exposed to an environment or persons with the virus.

Days into the pandemic, its severity made most people familiar with isolation facilities, Intensive Care Units (ICUs), oxygen equipment and ventilators, things that had hitherto touched the lives of a very limited number.

1. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1567134820303245>

2. <https://www.euronews.com/2020/08/14/are-bats-to-blame-for-coronavirus-thai-researchers-are-catching-them-to-find-out>

3. <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/interactive-timeline>

4. <https://Covid19.who.int/>

Who?

Pakistan's Pandemic-Journalism Nexus

Soon, more and more information became available about the virus borne disease, from local, national and international sources. Along with healthcare professionals battling the pandemic, media workers also came to be recognised as the frontline personnel for bringing that information.

Covid-19 has impacted all walks of life. For people confined to their homes, media became the primary source of information. However, with the multiplicity of media platforms available to consumers of news, mainstream media now vies with the digital to gain eyeballs.

In Pakistan, media consumers have an array of 99 Television channels, 143 commercial FM Radio stations, and the State run terrestrial as well as satellite television and radio stations to choose from. Terrestrial and satellite television coverage in Pakistan has an almost 90% footprint.

There are also thousands of print publications in national and multiple regional languages consisting of newspapers, monthly magazines, quarterlies and bi-monthly publications..

With the advent of digital media, that choice has further widened, as it has become a growing resource for people to receive news, views and entertainment. The mode of access is no longer a captive television set. The freedom which cell phones afford has seen Pakistan become a country with very high teledensity. Almost half the population of the country is in possession of cell phones with 3-4G connections, enabling access to multiple platforms.⁵

What?

The medium and the message

Within digital media, there is a further segmentation of the 'formal' digital media that is the property of the mainstream print and electronic media outlets, dedicated online platforms, and social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tik Tok, Snapchat and WhatsApp. Globally, it is the last mentioned 'media' that, by and large, was acting as a free agent, especially in the early days of the pandemic.⁶

The abundance of content about Covid-19 and the rapidity of its dissemination over the social media platforms, especially closed WhatsApp groups, meant that the news and information presented for consumption was not passing through the filters of responsible media, that

5. <https://propakistani.pk/2019/12/31/mobile-phone-users-in-pakistan-reached-164-million-in-november-pta/>

6. <https://wearesocial.com/blog/2020/01/digital-2020-3-8-billion-people-use-social-media>

address the 5Ws and 1H (Who, What, When, Where, Why, & How).

The increase in volume of content and its rapid dissemination also blurred the lines between fact and fiction. There was rapid horizontal as well as vertical spread of fake news, a term promoted by President Trump of the USA, which actually meant misinformation!

Such information or news ranged from something as simple as well intentioned dietary advice, albeit without the backing of scientific substantiation, to serious allegations of population control through eugenics.

Content creators of each interest group churned out material that was rooted in their particular narrative and confirmed it, dismissing the possibility of anything other than what they held to be correct, and this phenomenon could be seen in Pakistani media too.

In the words of Raza Rumi, Editor at Nayadaur.com, *"The curse of misinformation is not limited to Pakistan --in fact its a global pandemic. This is the first pandemic unfolding in the digital age and that's a challenge. Pakistan is no exception."*⁷ Globally, the emergence of the term 'infodemic' was indicative of the worrying impact of news that was not credible.

According to Nighat Dad, Founder Director of Digital Rights Foundation, *"Digital Media allows for instant virality and popularity, which is why people shared and made posts that might have been well intentioned, but were not well researched or verified. Initially, there was little to no check on the part of social media companies. There was rampant sharing of misinformation online."*⁸

The consequences of acting upon this mix of half truths and outright false information led to not adhering to the advised SOPs, resulting globally in an alarming spike in the number of infections. The companies owning these social media platforms had to step in to stem the tide. They put in place safeguards, alongside verification and take-down mechanisms.⁹

For platforms like Facebook and Twitter, which saw a sudden rise in their traffic, the matter went beyond making available reliable information in collaboration with WHO and Center for Disease Control (CDC) of USA. They had to actively remove posts carrying misinformation and reintroduce the blue tick verification process to indicate reliable accounts. Tik Tok hosted live streams in collaboration with WHO to address health concerns, and Snapchat made mental health resources available for the demographics it catered to.

7. Quote received for this report on June 03, 2020

8. Quote received for this report on August 6, 2020

9. <https://www.socialbakers.com/blog/social-media-platforms-during-coronavirus>

Like Tik Tok, YouTube too removed content with compromised veracity, and went a step ahead by demonetizing Covid-19 related videos so there was less incentive for people to post unverified information and conspiracy theories. WhatsApp went to the extent of creating a Covid-19 Information hub, and WHO launched its chatbot on Whatsapp.

Where?

Pandemic in a shrinking, connected world

Despite all these measures, especially in the early days, there was a mix of disbelief and denial that made its way into the mainstream as well as social media. In the early days, since not much information came out of China – especially Wuhan – it was seen as a very localized problem.

Same was the case with the situation in Iran because news did not travel out freely.¹⁰ What originated in the city of Qom in February 2020, rapidly spread to turn Iran into a regional epicenter of the virus.

The news of infections coming out of Italy made the media project it as much more than a localized problem. Realization had dawned upon the media that this health crisis had no parallel in the current century – the last known pandemic being the Spanish flu of 1918.

Proximity to Iran, and return of Pakistani pilgrims being sent back from across the border was the Pakistani media's earliest brush with the pandemic, and matters escalated very rapidly to encompass other factors to evolve into a full blown crisis of health, economy, and response readiness.

The overall crisis situation triggered by the pandemic mirrored the existing crisis within the media in general and media in Pakistan in particular.

How?

Reasons for mixed messages

The jostling for space within the media put forth conflicting narratives, often contrary to WHO information and unreflective of on-ground situation. This included outright denial of the existence of the problem and its gravity, as well as misplaced confidence about being able to overcome it better than others.

Since this narrative came from the top leadership, the media had to cover it and it found ready takers. Prominent among world leaders who pushed this narrative were President Trump

10. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Covid-19_pandemic_in_Iran

of the USA, President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil, Prime Minister Boris Johnson of the United Kingdom (UK) and Prime Minister Imran Khan of Pakistan.

The media also provided plenty of space and coverage to the ensuing finger-pointing and sensational blame game these leaders indulged in. For instance, President Trump outrightly blamed China for 'manufacturing' the virus, and peddled remedies not endorsed by the medical practitioners and researchers.

In Pakistan, the media for most part carried the statements of the Prime Minister, which he made with increasing frequency through televised addresses to the nation. Through these addresses, he tried to allay the fears about Covid-19 being a serious threat without offering any scientific substantiation.¹¹

He was also openly critical of actions taken to deal with the crisis by the government of the province of Sindh, one of the federating units where the opposition party holds political sway. This saw a tug of war between the province and the Federation.

Swift and strict action was taken in Sindh in view of the large number of infected persons streaming into the province. Quarantine centers were set up to isolate the pilgrims and other travellers returning from overseas, hospitals were designated for handling Covid 19 cases, clampdown on road, rail and air traffic were some of the difficult decisions that were taken.¹²

More than anything else, the lockdown pitted the Center against the province because its effects were not restricted to the province. Economy of the entire country is tied inexorably with the biggest city, a port city at that, Karachi, the capital of Sindh. Economic shutdown here sends the entire country's fragile economy into a tailspin.

The measures were deemed harsh and generated a debate about the either/or situation of letting people die of hunger due to the lockdown, or letting them die of the pandemic. The jibes traded between government functionaries on the opposite ends of the spectrum and the one-upmanship whetted the appetite of the partisan elements in the media.

A dispassionate analysis and critique of the opposing narratives and successes and failures of the measures taken took a backseat to the tussle of proving the 'other' wrong, despite the whole country implementing the same measures shortly after Sindh did.

Unfortunately, measures put in place to deal with Covid-19 did not find space corresponding to the ongoing tiff between the Federation and one of its provinces in the mainstream media.

11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UHM507MZuEQ>

12. <http://www.radio.gov.pk/22-03-2020/sindh-govt-imposes15-day-lockdown-across-the-province-from-12-tonight>

These measures included the setting up of the National Command and Operation Center (NCOC), which started disseminating daily updated province-wise data on the cases.¹³

On the technological front, the Covid-19 Dashboard was prepared, Chatbot made functional, and 1166 Health Helpline introduced.

On the administrative front, a massive relief effort to reach the poorest of the poor, especially those outside the pale of any documentation, was initiated through the Ehsas programme.

Rapid upgradation of medical facilities, the procurement of PPE for the frontline workers, making Research and Development grants available for the development and manufacture of ventilators locally, and the relief flight operations to get stranded Pakistanis back home from across the world can be pointed as things that deserved a lot more mention in the media than they got.

On the human, citizen level, the coming together of philanthropists and volunteers for assisting the government relief efforts got more traction on mainstream as well as social media because of the involvement of prominent organizations and individuals.

Because the specifics got deflected by the conflict, coupled with the hardening of positions of the supporters and opposers of the camps, the gap between credibility of the official narrative started to widen. All of this was happening alongside the reality of rising number of people infected.¹⁴

One big reason was this confusion in communication from figures of authority, as it resulted in skepticism. In the early days of the unfolding of the pandemic, most such pronouncements went unchallenged by the 'leaders,' whichever camp they belonged to.

Barring a few exceptions in op-eds, the news followed the usual 'he says-she says' pattern, and the ambivalence discernable in the messages trickling down from the top transmitted by the media ended up swelling the ranks of these skeptics.¹⁵

Another reason for the proliferation of fake news and conspiracy theories was the developing research announced through the daily updates of the WHO bulletin. In these bulletins, many earlier assertions and recommendations about the dangers of the spread of the virus and severity and intensity of the protective measures recommended earlier, were discarded or altered in light of emerging knowledge.

13. <https://ncoc.gov.pk/>

14. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1560353/corona-comes-knocking?fbclid=IwAR1IT4Wych9FpweURWCNEcqVN2xuRaCDDuYDgtbfihM5dXyonCBYMO1JLlk>

15. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/694344-getting-the-message-across>

Constant changes in the instructions from authorities contributed to the skepticism, severely denting the confidence of the consumers of news in the credibility of the messages conveyed through the media. Journalism outlets putting out these updates failed to take an analytical or more nuanced approach.

They did not convey to their consumers that in the face of the unknown nature of the pandemic, the pronouncements they were carrying were not of a definitive nature. There was very little explanation on why the newer official narrative almost contradicted the earlier stance.

To cite a few examples, the extremely strict guidelines about social distancing, isolation, and sanitization came with warnings that the virus lived on surfaces, so even packaging needed to be left out, wiped down and discarded. Not only did this cause great fear, it also caused inconvenience. This was withdrawn later, as research revealed that it was unnecessary to wipe down these surfaces. Lack of nuanced reporting meant that instead of these changes bringing confidence in the ongoing research, they ended up being seen as a part of scaremongering through incorrect information.

Similarly, early warnings about taking precautions in the presence of a Covid-19 patient, or one who showed symptoms, expanded to include risks from seemingly healthy but asymptomatic persons, requiring even more stringent SOPs about interaction or lack thereof. A research study about the number of asymptomatic persons in the city of Karachi threw a question mark on the figures issued about the declining numbers of the infected.¹⁶

Attempts to make sense of it all by the media were few and far between. Challenges to the official figures being put out, or a critical analysis questioning or endorsing the veracity of claims were not seen in earnest. What should have been an integral part of the practise of journalism to get to the truth, or at least present the multiplicity of views also fell prey to the existing polarization.

One of the primary reasons for the gap in the communication and media outputs on the pandemic was not enough outreach with doctors and researchers. They were not consulted nor asked to explain the reasons for the frequently occurring changes in the guidelines and recommendations.

As a result, the almost linear, one-dimensional presentation of content developed an appetite for definitive answers in the consumers of that content, and this created an inability and unwillingness to delve deeper into the reasons for divergence from positions earlier stated. This widened the trust deficit and allowed for alternate facts and false information to make inroads into the news content.

16. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1578577>

The resultant pushback to the truth led to a dangerous skepticism towards the on-ground response to the restrictions being mandated by the authorities, which were flouted because the reasons were not explained, understood, or trusted.

This counter narrative was visible in publications and on small media channels, especially those that function as 'cable' channels, electronic and digital, but more so, very forcefully, on social media. Social media was awash with rebuttals of the reality of the pandemic, and the societal polemics, biases and preferences could clearly be seen at play.

Those who went beyond rejection of the existence of the pandemic or conspiracy theories of it being a Western design against the Muslim world, made their personal platforms available to offers of remedies: herbal, spiritual, and psychological!

This proliferation of alternate (fake) news on these platforms served to be almost a rejection of the narrative mainstream media was carrying, as that was seen as the 'official' version, hence suspect. The existing trust deficit between the government and citizenry – something that is not specific to Pakistan –widened, because the media was seen as the harbinger of unpalatable 'directives.'

This impression deepened during announcements of lockdowns – smart or otherwise. The media was accused of scare-mongering. After all, the dire warnings issued by the various government agencies were being communicated through the media. Journalism lost a lot of ground to the onslaught of misinformation.

The efficacy of misinformation could be judged from the response on-ground. There was a rapid graduation from suspicion, to denial and even outright defiance of the protocols and recommendations. There was also a rush to consume the 'remedies' propagated through social media.

For instance, there were assurances that because of ablutions five times a day before prayers, Muslims didn't run the risk of infection. There was also talk of people being naturally 'hardy,' and if they did get infected, since it was 'just a flu,' they would recover without much discomfort. The notion that it was something that afflicted only the old or those with pre-existing conditions was also quite prevalent.

Next came the flurry of remedies, such as steam inhalation, drinking of lukewarm water with lemon, nigella seeds, and then the panacea for all ills, 'sanna makki' or powdered leaf of Senna, a herb. These were of course in addition to many spiritual remedies.¹⁷

17. <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/pakistan>

In light of the above, reporting in the age of Covid-19 became the first battle ground for the credibility of journalism. When the message became suspect, so did the messenger. Like in other parts of the world, in Pakistan too, the mainstream media, especially print, was already finding it difficult to keep its head above water due to the influence and reach of television.

Many newspapers and news magazines, which had built up a reputation of credibility due to their in-depth investigative stories and reports had gone out of print during or just before the pandemic hit. This also created a vacuum of credibility.

Of the mainstream electronic media, television channels fared better than radio, especially the FMs, which due to the very nature of their licensing had their scope of content limited. With confinement due to the pandemic, the hitherto captive TV audiences also gave attention to the social media platforms as another means to source information.

Facts and figures from the official dashboard, travails of the patients and healthcare workers, the economic woes of those affected by the lockdown, and stories of painful, lonely deaths and burials of those who succumbed to the pandemic were indeed overwhelming.

In the words of Akhtar Shaheen Rind, of the Health Journalists Association, *“rather than just carrying the statistics issued each day, there should have been a lot more content on awareness raising, especially to combat the fake news circulating on social media, though sometimes that news also made its way on mainstream media as well.”*¹⁸

The shift of preference for social over traditional media was also because content of the traditional media consisted of unpalatable facts and figures, but the content on social media allayed fears. Mainstream media carried dire warnings from official sources, but the unchecked, unverified information on social media brought in the element of hope, for it offered ‘remedies’ and even ‘cures.’

It alluded to a ‘special status’ that would prevent Pakistanis from being as hard hit as people in other countries. There were examples of responses from across the world to choose from. Not doing anything, submitting to fate and hoping for the best seemed to be the preferred option after it was realized that there was a particular term assigned to it: herd immunity.

The country of Sweden started to appear more frequently in social media conversations, where it seemed to be business as usual. The apples to oranges comparison did not appear to bother the consumers of these solutions. The mainstream media on its part did very little to explain the difference or higher fatalities in Sweden than its neighbouring European, or even Scandinavian countries.

18. Quote received for this report on 19th June, 2020

Access to social media for content consumption and content creation was not restricted to the conspiracy theorists and those who spread misinformation. As has been mentioned above, other than the social media companies taking action to weed out damaging misinformation, this very medium was just as actively used to put out very important information and inspiring stories of courage and heroism while facing the pandemic.

As Usama Khilji, Director of Bolo Bhi, a digital rights and advocacy organization points out, *"On social media, there has been a lot of amplification of the voices of healthcare workers and doctors, but at the same time, a lot of unreliable and misleading information on herbal and home remedies for virus prevention and cure. This has been countered by doctors to a considerable extent, which shows that social media provides a platform for counter speech which is often times critical."*¹⁹ 2021

As far as Pakistan is concerned, since the bulk of content on social media is in national and regional languages, the checks put in place by social media companies did not really kick in until the misinformation was directly reported to these platforms. However, there does not exist a culture of widespread reporting of content in Pakistan.

Most of the reporting is done by digital rights activists and organizations, who garner support of the larger body of their followers when there are cases of specific threats of rape, murder, physical harm, or in cases of child pornography. Misinformation is rarely flagged or reported and followed through till takedown.

19. <https://www.businessofapps.com/data/tik-tok-statistics/#:~:text=The%20US%2C%20in%20second%2C%20logs,are%20covered%20by%20these%20stats>.

20. <https://propakistani.pk/2020/01/03/heres-how-many-pakistanis-downloaded-tiktok-in-2019/>

21. Quote received for this report on 10th. June, 2020

Fake News: verify or bust!

Pakistan is geographically vast and has a large population of over 220 million persons. As the figures cited in the reports above indicate less than half the population has internet connectivity, and of that half there is a very clear gender gap as far fewer women have access to technology and tools.

While there can be no denying the damage fake news and its virality does, Mariam Ali Baig, editor of Aurora magazine, which focuses on the advertising and brands marketing industry, views it as a fait accompli, but one whose impact is less than what is perceived. According to her, *"In terms of fake news, the pandemic has generated its own very 'respectable' share of this. Unfortunately fake news is here to stay and this kind of crisis leads to all sorts of theories and prescriptives eagerly embraced by what is a small proportion of the public."*

There is, however, a caveat. The low numbers cannot really explain the impact. This is because of the hierarchical structure of the society, especially the family unit. If the head of government, organization, tribe, religious group or family is the consumer of such fake news, by way of the power structure the trickle down effect will kick in. Persons falling within their sphere of influence, generally women, children, elderly, handicapped are rendered without agency of independent decision making. They bear the impact of decisions not taken by them or agreed to by them.

To quote just one example, those women who did not have agency became invisible when making an impact assessment. They themselves may not be the denialists, but the decision-makers in their lives may have been. Flouting of the safety guidelines by the decision-makers may have exposed them to the infection, and through them the women, children or the elderly in their household may have also fallen victim to the pandemic.

Globally, quite early in the pandemic, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), had detailed the gendered effect of Covid-19 and had listed the various ways in which the vulnerabilities were likely to increase for women.²²



COVID-19: A Gender Lens

PROTECTING SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE
HEALTH AND RIGHTS, AND PROMOTING
GENDER EQUALITY
MARCH 2020



22. https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/Covid-19_A_Gender_Lens_Guidance_Note.pdf

COVID-19 has brought deeply entrenched inequalities, including gender inequality to the fore, mediating the pandemic's impact in very significant ways, highlighting more prominently the structural failures of our political and economic systems.

Farthest Field: Women and COVID-19

By Dr. Farzana Bari and Sara Malkani

Besides the many country response reports, their reports focusing on gender impact presented a global picture, and was used by the media to unpack different aspects of the vulnerabilities assessed through the gender lens.²³

Think tanks and research organizations in Pakistan also realized that there was an urgent need to document these vulnerabilities so that disaggregated data could be collected for long term interventions.

The Jinnah Institute produced a report that looked at the particular threats and vulnerabilities women were exposed to, and put out a policy brief to highlight different ways women were being impacted by the pandemic.^{24 25}

How well an understanding of these very issues was reflected in the media, and how the women in media were impacted by Covid-19 required a narrower focus, and this is why there was a call from **Tasneem Ahmer**, Director Uks Research Center to try and ascertain the impact.

23. https://www.businessinsider.com/structural-inequality-gender-equality-coronavirus-pandemic-outbreak-contraceptives-pregnancy-fgm-2020-4?amp;__twitter_impression=true

24. <https://jinnah-institute.org/publication/women-and-Covid/>

25. Permission received from Jinnah Institute for use of image of report cover page

As in the past, the organization has undertaken a detailed analysis of media content with a gender lens to assess the gaps and shortcomings.

The realization of such gender gaps also prompted rights based organizations to come forward and offer courses to report the pandemic with a gender lens. Within the space of gender, they also looked at the plight and the deep vulnerabilities of transgenders which were hidden from view, as was the impact of the infection on them and whether they were able to access medical assistance, or did the societal biases increase their vulnerabilities.

Digital Rights Foundation Pakistan arranged for workshops to

facilitate women journalists to produce gender sensitive content in the context of Covid-19 and to sift through misinformation and fake news.

This was important because the media coverage was often limited to the coverage of the research reports being published, barring a few instances where a detailed analysis was undertaken.²⁶

Focus on gender specific problems saw that some of the issues did get highlighted, like access to healthcare, especially prenatal health, which was a pressing problem for a large number of women.²⁷

However, there was not any extensive coverage or analysis across mainstream media of the spike in cases of gender based violence due to proximity during confinement, or of violence against children. Plight of the aged and disabled, whose vulnerabilities are always exacerbated during disasters, also did not find the space they deserved.

Neither was there enough highlighting of the innate biases, based on religious and sectarian affiliation, as well as social class, which found many of the vulnerable communities belonging to religious minorities outside the pale of assistance offered during lockdowns.

Disproportionate impact on mental health and wellbeing of women was flagged internationally and found space in the mainstream and digital media in Pakistan.²⁸

One example of media responsiveness to this was the initiation of a segment dedicated to health issues, including mental health during Covid-19 under the title of SamaaHealth, where a medical practitioner answered queries or offered counsel.

26. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/684793-obstacles-to-family-planning>

27. https://www.dawnnews.tvnews/1130315/?fbclid=IwAR3G9GKD_32EqdRIHbfVsiNvydMxHSojJlqxW1A4QoWegLOVni4xCP74yzl

28. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2214105/6-impact-Covid-19-women-girls/>

Women journalists' organization like Coalition for Women in Journalism, an international organization, took to its social media platforms internationally, including in Pakistan, to keep the conversation going to highlight issues that impact not just women journalists but women in general during the ongoing pandemic. Specific examples of the potential for harm during Covid-19 were flagged in a series of talks to which journalists were invited.

The organization also generated information about women journalists covering the pandemic through mapping their presence in a map that is regularly added to and updated. The presence of women journalists from Pakistan can also be seen on this map.

This presence also generated an unexpected, and unprecedented backlash and a brave pushback. While the abuse that women journalists have to face in online spaces is usually because of the opinions they express or content they put out about politics and current affairs, Covid-19 coverage was also thrown into the mix.

When several Pakistani women journalists took their petition against harassment to the National Assembly Standing Committee on Human Rights, they received a sympathetic hearing. However, online they came under further attack with people posting 'proof' of their 'misdemeanours' as reasons for the trolling and abuse.

Benazir Shah, an anchor at GEO news was shown screenshots of her coverage of the pandemic as it was handled by the Federal Government, and was accused of partisanship for being critical in her analysis. As a backlash she was subjected to online abuse, which included harassment and dire threats.

These accusations stemmed from the ongoing tensions between the Federal Government and the Government of Sindh regarding the management of the pandemic. Being based in the province of Sindh, it was even questioned as to why she was assigned to cover what was happening elsewhere.

The imperative of keeping an eye on the vulnerabilities of women during Covid-19 was especially important because not only do most women not have any means to verify and cross check the reasons behind a certain directive, they rarely have a choice to question, or chance to go against the directives.

A case that got highlighted during the lockdown announced by the provincial government in Sindh was the flouting of directives to not hold congregational prayers during the holy month of Ramzan to minimize the risk of spread of infections. The defiant ones attending the congregations took the risk of taking the infection home and exposing those who were not part of the flouting of the distancing directives, mostly females, children and the elderly of the household.

This flouting took place despite the fact that there were religious leaders who were part of the decision-making and had been taken on board before the lockdown announcement. They were armed with the necessary information and relevant religious edicts to make the arguments in favour of social distancing. Their opinions and edicts did not find as much space in the media as much as of those in the opposing camp who consumed, and spread misinformation through all the means available.

The conspiracy theory that irreligious and anti-religion forces within and outside the country were conspiring to keep people from earning the blessings in the holy month found its way through the social media and other channels and even in sections of mainstream media.

The higher decibels drowned out the voices of the informed clergy and religious influentials, and led to the wanton flouting of the directives not to assemble. The pushback was seen in a violent reaction when a woman police officer was manhandled by the congregation members when she went there to stop them from gathering.²⁹

The same pattern could be seen among shop-keepers, traders, eateries, even hair-salon owners. While there were businesses that closed down voluntarily, those that insisted on opening up even surreptitiously were not all doing so due to economic compulsions. They were influenced by the fake news that evil forces wanted the economic annihilation of the country and its people through harsh and 'unnecessary' measures. For them, even the news of infections and fatalities in Iran and Italy were part of that larger conspiracy.

Unfortunately, the appetite for fact checking among common users is very low, and 'forwarded as received' or Retweets and Shares have become second nature. Most people who start using these social media platforms are unaware of the presence and ease of use of fact checking, hoax busting, picture and video verification sites, and there has not been an across the board attempt to educate users on how to keep themselves safe from half truths and outright lies.³⁰

The ease of content creation on the various social media platforms, and easy image altering and video doctoring apps makes it easy for the creation of content, at times to inject humour, at others with clear malicious intent. The virality of such content drew an immediate response by developers who created authentication and verification platforms, and the role of academia, the tech community, media houses and media development organizations needs to be appreciated for this kind of development.

In Pakistan, the familiarity of the media fraternity with the use of these available tools has been slow, and it is only now that journalism schools, institutes and training organizations

29. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1548201>

30. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1560219>

are running short courses to bring it up to speed. However, their geographical as well as demographic reach is limited for now, and needs to get to a point where every journalism practitioner gives as much importance to content verification as is given to content creation. This is especially important if they rely on social media as one of the sources of their information and dissemination. Never has this point been driven home as hard as during Covid-19!

Kazi Asad Abid, Chairman of the Ibrat Group of publications, finds this tussle for balance between these two extremes very interesting. He says, *"it has been interesting to observe the nature of the content being put out. In my opinion this has also been a phenomenon of opposite extremes. On the one hand, the sheer ignorance of the situation and fallacious news and reporting is on clear display. However on the other hand, some journalists seem to be going the extra mile to really do their research and ensure they are putting out accurate and useful information and are trying to make a positive impact amidst all this barrage of negativity. Analytical pieces and Op-eds seem to be following a similar pattern as well where either they are very questionable but on the other end of the spectrum they seem to be quite well thought out and logical with good useful analyses."*

To some extent the measures were taken by platforms like WhatsApp, which experienced an explosive growth, weeded out content that could be, and was, earlier passed off as organic and authentic. It first introduced the indication of 'forward' on messages, and followed it up by marking a message as one that has been forwarded multiple times.

While it is everyone's responsibility to check the veracity of any news, journalist and anchor Asma Shirazi believes the media bears a greater responsibility because of its outreach and impact. She says, *"since reliance on digital medium is growing, we have to see what safeguards can be put there, and how we can ensure that fact checking can be done on this medium. As a lot more people are watching television now and through social media many things are picked up. To weed out fake news I would suggest a fact check of the news in circulation; especially the 'trending' news should be made a regular part of the bulletins and unpacked for veracity."*³¹

When misinformation/fake news snowballed to an extent that the term 'infodemic' was coined for it, there were calls from individual journalists, as well as journalism organizations to tackle it through the available tools as well as by developing new ones.

International organizations as well as local media houses who were cognizant of the perils of spreading misinformation about Covid-19 tried to educate the viewers, as well as the fraternity on how to debunk myths and sift fact from fiction.

In addition to the measures taken by the platforms earlier mentioned, which took down as well as demonetized content that could contribute to the spread of misinformation, Google

31. Quote for this report received on 17th. June 2020

itself started a factcheck service specifically related to Covid-19.³²

In the fast paced world of electronic and online media, fact checking became a task. This was not just according to the mandate of the media, which is to inform and educate, but also served as a push back against the sudden flood of “fake news,” conspiracy theories, remedies and unverified immunotherapies that were awash on social media.

Unfortunately, the demanding pace meant that not everyone sifted fact from fiction. The multiplier effect on social media platforms meant that damage control was difficult. But this was not politics or elections. Here it impacted human health and made a difference between life and death.

From home remedies to conspiracy theories, the misinformation extended to the rumours about non-availability of hospital beds, ventilators, or the availability of miracle drugs and therapies that had prohibitive costs and very uncertain benefits. Some even had certain harmful side effects, but in the hope offered by such news, people ran from pillar to post trying to acquire them to save the lives of their loved ones, while heartless, callous people profited from their gullibility.

Conspiracy theories were just as damaging, as they allowed people to throw caution to the winds and venture out as if there was no threat lurking. The polarizing, politicized, divisive statements convinced a large body of people that there was something amiss and they should not change the way they live their daily lives or suffer any inconvenience or economic loss. The lifting of lockdown due to the Supreme Court order came almost as an endorsement of that stance.

Here the journalists could have played a more robust role by arming themselves with facts, and challenging statements that conflicted with them. This was done by only a handful of individuals and outlets.

Ziauddin Ahmed, senior Pakistani journalist and founder of Pakistan Coalition of Ethical Journalism curated and presented a compilation of all such caveats and cautions. For the digital media a very interesting and important point made was to be careful, lest debunking contributed to or proved to be a springboard to virality. This could also happen because of the large following of the verification platforms rather than the content originator's own following.³³

The nature of social media is that the more vehemently something is debunked, the more viral it becomes. This is why those who teach social media usage usually advise to ‘cut off the

32. <https://toolbox.google.com/factcheck/explorer/search/Covid%20OR%20Coronavirus;hl=en>

33. <https://nayadaur.tv/2020/04/dont-just-debunk-misinformation-4-tips-for-navigating-the-Covid-19-infodemic/>

oxygen’ of harmful or hateful content by not retweeting or sharing it, even with the intent to call it out.

An analysis into the type of content that was contributing to the ‘infodemic’ was also done by Ramsha Jahangir. She put together a simple list of examples, fact checking methods and do’s and don’ts for all those who were not sure of the veracity of the information they were accessing.³⁴

International journalism organizations also stepped in and circulated their guidelines to deal with the infodemic, and these were shared with their partners in Pakistan too.

The following are excerpts from a report compiled by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) Network (IJNet) in partnership with ICFJ’s Global Health Crisis Reporting Forum:

As the coronavirus began to spread more rapidly around the world in February, the World Health Organization (WHO) deployed the term ‘infodemic’ to describe the information and misinformation circulating alongside it. Many rumors, myths and falsehoods have made the rounds — and still are — covering anything from ‘cures,’ to mandatory quarantines, to conspiracy theories about the virus’ origin.

Experts and journalists have advocated fighting the infodemic by debunking falsehoods, rumors and speculation. Many fact-checking services and articles are doing just this, trying to set the record straight.

Covid-19 has triggered a fountain of rumors — an indistinguishable mix of unverified information, helpful information, misinformation and intentionally manipulated disinformation.

How best to deal with falsehoods and misinformation during this pandemic is one of many difficult tasks facing journalists and publishers.

(1) Consider whether debunking is the right move

If you’re dealing with what looks like a falsehood that has found an audience, debunk it explaining why the falsehood has spread, and keeping debunks short and sweet.

However, avoid the urge to ‘correct’ every falsehood. Doing so can sometimes boost a false belief. Hold back if a piece of misinformation still hasn’t found a wide audience. This holds for myths that carry racist tropes and xenophobia, too. “It’s a similar problem – if you report on racist social media posts that haven’t gotten a lot of attention yet, you risk drawing attention to

34. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1544256>

them and exposing more people to them.

Still, there are times when racist references aren't so obscure. Some high-profile figures continue to refer to SARS-CoV-2 as the "Wuhan virus" or "Chinese virus," for one. Consider adding context when reporting on this: it can be helpful to explain that naming new diseases after a place used to be common practice, but has since been abandoned to avoid stigma.

Don't dismiss all speculation outright. Instead, take a closer look. Do some research to distinguish between rumors founded on legitimate anxieties from well-intentioned actors, and those spread deliberately by ill-intentioned groups, perhaps for political reasons.

Keep in mind that little is known about the virus still, and guidance can evolve rapidly.

When psychological states are peaked and people are anxious, they're more apt to share [inaccurate] information.

If you're dealing with a rumor circulating an anxious public, seek input from social scientists and psychologists on how best to understand and respond to it.

Focus on reporting that helps assess risk

Providing clear information on what we know and don't know about risks based on the best available evidence also helps combat false information. Be transparent, and distinguish between known, maybes, known unknowns, and speculation.

Coverage that prioritizes science and public health over the politics and economics of the response can help keep fears from being exaggerated on the one hand, and highlight real health risks on the other.

We are in an unprecedented situation when it comes to the Coronavirus pandemic. This is the first pandemic of the social media era, and the information environment is already unstable given the lack of effective content moderation policies and infrastructure, and the breakdown in the traditional gatekeeper role of journalists.³⁵

As has been mentioned earlier, the impacts of fake news or misinformation were perceived as a public danger, and compilation and circulation of tips for journalists became a serious effort. How far they reached the rank and file can be judged by the veracity of the content put out, and the factors that influenced it. For those who were conscious about credibility and truth, the guidance was there.³⁶

35. <https://www.icfj.org/our-work/covering-Covid-19-resources-journalists>

36. <https://ijnet.org/en/story/10-tips-journalists-covering-Covid-19>

Despite all these difficulties and constraints, according to independent media analyst and former editor of The News on Sunday, Farah Zia, *“The pandemic was a big story and offered an opportunity to do good journalism, it also amplified the weaknesses of journalism in this country. Values like professionalism, ethics, responsibility, editorial judgment came into sharp focus. As governments dithered in decision-making and rumours floated widely, the absence of investigative journalism was most strongly felt.*

“However, some journalists and media have done sustained good work, covering the state of public health, treatment of medics, women issues, issues pertaining to education, psychological impact, measuring government response, discrimination, equitable distribution of relief effort, stigma and prejudice pertaining to the disease etc.”³⁷

With the media focusing on the health pandemic and allocating more than normal human resources to its coverage, alongside other topics mentioned, even other health issues started getting ignored. One example was of the increase in polio cases which indicated a reversal in the efforts Pakistan had made in its eradication.

Waqar Bhatti, who is a very experienced health reporter working at The News, expressed his concern. *“I don’t think that there is much in depth analysis of health issues. Even now many journalists are unaware of the difference between a virus and bacteria, how a virus is detected, how it affects. Also, because of the total focus on Covid-19, other pressing health issues are not being focused on.”*

This lack of understanding stems from a lack of specialization in certain fields of reporting - health being one of them. The media houses who have reporters dedicated to the health beat can be counted on the finger tips.

According to Kamal Siddiqui, Director of Center for Excellence (CEJ-IBA), *“there is little training on how to report a pandemic. Almost all reporters have turned to reporting on Covid-19 related stories but their knowledge is basic, and in some instances they end up sharing false or misleading information. There is the challenge of being able to fully comprehend the issue at hand. Journalists will have to increase their knowledge of medical issues and all that relates to Covid-19. That would mean more trainings.”*

37. Quote received for this report on 12th. June 2020

Covid-19 captures the eyeballs!

As Pakistan unfortunately joined the ranks of countries severely affected by Covid-19, coverage of the pandemic took center stage in the media. There is no organized segment-wise content audit arrangement of journalism outputs in Pakistan to track trends. It is easier to conduct an analysis of newspapers and magazines than of TV and digital media.

Data mining for critical analysis of the subjects the media picks up – and consciously drops – is a gap waiting to be filled by academia and research organizations. The Media Credibility Index that had been launched to judge media content on qualitative parameters is no longer functional.³⁸

All available analyses are through a special lens. For instance: gender sensitive content, measuring coverage of climate change, health and education issues, etc. A more holistic analysis beyond very obvious media trends is missing.

The absence of analysis also restricts data to assess outreach through the Target Rating Points for electronic media and the figures issued by the Audit Bureau of Circulation for print publications. For the digital sphere, there is a track maintained through the impressions each platform gains. However, there is no measure of whether the content is getting a thumbs up or down and whether the news media is being accessed more than the other genres, like entertainment and sports.

Two to three subjects that have dominated content for the past two decades have been the war on terror and political conflict and, of course, relations with India. Anything else has been incidental; for instance, the 2005 earthquake, 2010 floods, insurgency, dengue, smog, heatwaves, lawyers' movement, to cite a few examples.

Changes in the wake of Covid-19 have already altered the way we function - the way we live, interact, go out, get an education, access sports and recreation, take care of health, etc. These changes have especially impacted the already vulnerable and marginalized communities, and the long term impact of the pandemic on their socio-economic life and resilience, or lack of it, are still to find adequate space in the discourse we see at all levels of media.

They did feature in the debate over the pros and cons of the lockdown, in the context of loss of livelihood and economic challenges of the poor but a dispassionate and critical follow through of the social safety nets, like the Ehsas programme, got lost in the political polarization and credit taking of this assistance programme.

38. [https://www.agahi.org.pk/media-credibility-index/#:~:text=The%20Media%20credibility%20Index%20explores,%20fairness%20and%206\)%20timeliness.](https://www.agahi.org.pk/media-credibility-index/#:~:text=The%20Media%20credibility%20Index%20explores,%20fairness%20and%206)%20timeliness.)

The pandemic definitely changed the media landscape as far as the business model, economics, human resource allocation, health and safety of its workers and depth of journalistic ability is concerned.

Whether the pandemic has also changed the practice of journalism is something we still need to assess before arriving at a definitive verdict. It has to be assessed whether the changes are reactive and are a response to 'dealing' with the crisis at hand. It is not yet clear whether the pandemic will have a long term effect and change the face of journalism as we knew it before it struck. The nature of the medium may change and the tools employed, but the practise of taking stances and assigning priorities according to those stances has not shown much of a change yet.

What we can analyse are the shifts in content prioritization, the depth or lack thereof in the outputs, and the updates in technological and human resource requirements. There is discussion about the financial outlay required to remain relevant as a profitable media organization or a business, as well as a satisfying career option for those who choose this profession.

Tracking the advent of Covid-19 and its coverage in the media illustrates a lack of comparative data available for electronic and digital media. However, analysis of some leading print media publications by Gallup Pakistan on a monthly basis indicates that there was a definite spike in the reporting of certain 'health' issues, for which Covid-19 was responsible.

Media development specialist and analysts Zaigham Khan of Civic Action Resource has also flagged the omissions and commissions as far as media coverage is concerned. He says, *"Covid-19 is being reported as a standalone issue, not something that is linked to the overall situation of health and socio-economy of the country. Other health and education issues, already under-reported, have become even less important. For example, human rights, gender, child rights issues are now getting less coverage. Media throws all kinds of data at readers and viewers. Some of this data is unreliable, while some needs elaboration while reporting. For example, reports related to new discoveries and prevention and treatment of Covid-19 can confuse the reader. This has resulted in people coming up with their own conspiracy theories."*³⁹

Gulmina Bilal of Individualland, a media development organization, believes that the media ecosystem needs to be understood before commenting on its performance. It is not just a rural urban divide where the disparity is seen but even in smaller urban centers, media workers who go by the designation of District Reporters wear many hats and were impacted differently in financial terms.

She says, as far as content is concerned, the pandemic definitely overwhelmed all other coverage in the beginning, and the other issues of politics and economy, started to gain space much later.

39. Quote received for this report on 4th. June 2020

Context before Covid-19

Journalism in Pakistan was hard-hit even before it was struck with the devastating effects of Covid-19. Some of its recent troubles stretch back to the past two years, a result of a tussle with those in the corridors of power.

The financial crunch due to the economic downturn was already pushing many media outlets to the brink. A confrontational relationship of some media organizations with the government also saw the struggle impinge directly on the fundamental right of freedom of expression.

Pressure and curbs of various nature were brought to bear on many media groups, and those refusing to bend were brought close to the breaking point through various means, including by withholding payment for previous government advertising and placing curbs on new advertisements. The Government of Pakistan owed a cumulative amount of over 6 billion rupees to the media accrued over successive governments.

The government took the position that in the first place, the bills were highly inflated because the departing government of the PML-N had overspent trying to 'buy' the media and, secondly, it was not possible to pay even the legitimate dues as the government's coffers were almost empty.

Financial woes were not the only problem the media was dealing with. This was just one of the levers that was pulled to gain compliance with the government's narrative. Voices critical of the government were eased out of their column space and air time through overt and covert measures, such as non-renewal of contracts, purportedly due to the financial crunch, or consistent vilification of their stance as being 'against national interest.'

Some prominent names fall into this category: Cyril Almeida, Talat Hussain, Rauf Klasra, Amir Mateen, Matiullah Jan and Murtaza Solangi, Shahzeb Jillani to mention a few.

More coercive measures were the ones through which two of the country's largest and oldest media groups, Dawn and Jang/Geo, were pressurized. Just prior to the rapid spread of Covid-19, the media in Pakistan was rallying together to protest the arrest – without charge – subsequent incarceration and repeated cancellation of bail of Mir Shakil ur Rehman, the Editor-in-Chief of the Jang/Geo group, in a property related case by the National Accountability Bureau (NAB). He was finally granted bail after 243 days of incarceration.

The arrest sparked countrywide protests by journalists, mostly belonging to the Jang/Geo group, and garnered support from opposition political parties, Bar Councils and the different factions of the representative bodies of journalists. This was a rare show of unity in an otherwise

fractured space of media trade unions. However, very few from the competitive rivals came out in support.

In the words of Ziauddin Ahmed, senior Journalist and founder of Pakistan Coalition of Ethical Journalism, *"Indeed, Covid-19 has come at a time when journalism's role in informing the public and holding governments to account has never been more critical. At the same time, disinformation, safety risks and press freedom threats are mounting. Newsrooms are coming under intense financial, physical and psychological pressure as pandemic spreads."*⁴⁰

It was Covid-19 that put an end to the protest rallies that were being held in a sustained manner for over two months. They were called off when the pandemic struck. SOPs for media workers required social distancing and isolation to avoid the spread of the infection. From his prison cell, Mir Shakil-ur- Rehman asked for protests to be called off for the safety of the workers.

Coupled with this was the economic downturn. Advertising is said to be a reflection of market conditions, and the shift in that industry had a great impact on the media. Seema Jaffar, Vice Chairperson of Pakistan Advertising Association, explains, *"In terms of the Pakistan advertising Industry, we have seen a substantial drop in ad spend across all media. Apart from essential products, (soaps, sanitisers, food items), most advertisers have held back on spending."*

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Many large brands also diverted their funds to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities in the wake of Covid-19, assisting in the drives to provide ration during lockdowns, and supplementing the Government's measures of extending the nationwide social safety net through the 'Ehsaas' cash support programme.

As far as media workers were concerned, by February 2020 already some 5,000 media persons had lost their jobs, a number of newspaper editions were closed down or had their pages reduced. Salary cuts became the rule rather than an exception, and not many could avail the cushion of support offered by the above-mentioned programme. The benchmark for support catered to the lowest socio-economic class and despite being in dire straits financially, they hovered above it.

According to the President of APNS, (All Pakistan Newspapers Society), Sarmad Ali, *"a number of smaller channels and newspapers shut down completely while others had to lay off a major part of their staff and cut down salaries. Even the biggest newspapers had to terminate their high profile staff members as they were unable to retain them. People with years of experience, who gave their lives to the industry and helped it grow, were either let go of or had to accept pay cuts, causing a dent to their careers and their lifestyles. The people who are*

40. Quote received for this report on 8th. June 2020

41. Quote received for this report on 15th. May 2020

working in middle management or are fresh journalists, are in pretty bad shape too as they are constantly struggling to make ends meet in these times of crisis."

Explaining the crunch, CEO of Samaa Naveid Siddiqui says, *"the economic slowdown of the last 20 months has dented the overall advertising spend on media, with 2019 being the worst year of the last decade in terms of revenue streams. Ad spend on electronic media dropped by PKR 10 billion in FY 2018-2019, as compared to the corresponding period in the previous year."*

This struggle was exacerbated by the measures media houses undertook when staff members started to test positive for Covid-19. The provision of safety gear such as gloves, masks, sanitizers, the closure and disinfection of premises, all had a financial cost attached which was unforeseen and not planned for.

For the bigger media houses that had in place health facilities for its staff, the infection also meant spending monetarily from that account by providing health cover and support to staff and their families members.⁴²

As explained by Shakeel Masud Khan of the Pakistan Broadcasters' Association (PBA), *"Before the pandemic, because of the uncertain economic conditions, media houses were struggling to meet the almost 30-35% revenue dip that had taken place since August 2018. For electronic media, the single source of revenue is advertising, and the advertisers propensity to advertise is highly elastic. With the advent of Covid-19, advertising took another steep dip. The incremental decline was a further 20-25%. Radio being the worst hit, losing almost a cumulative 75-80% revenue."*⁴³

APPEAL

MR. SHIBLI FARAZ
FEDERAL MINISTER OF
INFORMATION AND BROADCASTING

MR. IMRAN KHAN
HONORABLE
PRIME MINISTER

LT GEN. RETD. ASIM SALEEM BAJWA
SPECIAL ASSISTANT TO PRIME MINISTER
FOR INFORMATION

SAVE THE RADIO INDUSTRY FROM DEATH

Due to the insistence of PEMRA on astronomical fees for license renewal, the radio industry in Pakistan is heading for imminent collapse – with the closure of over a 100 radio stations all over the country and rendering thousands of people jobless.

Since the grant of licenses to the private sector in 2003, radio had become a thriving industry, providing information and entertainment to millions of Pakistanis in big cities and small towns.

Radio has been struggling to survive in tough economic conditions over the past few years due to drastic cuts in advertising expenditures. With the advent of COVID-19 pandemic, the situation has become worse.

While governments in other countries, including our neighbouring countries, are taking steps to help the radio industry in this moment of crisis, PEMRA is demanding a renewal fees from broadcasters that is more than ten times the original license fees.

We acknowledge the steps taken by your Government for the stability of the economy and businesses in light of recent events. The radio industry also desperately needs your support to continue providing a much needed service to the nation, especially in these testing time.

YOUR KIND INTERVENTION IS URGENTLY NEEDED TO SAVE THIS INDUSTRY FROM IMMINENT DEATH.

PBA
PAKISTAN BROADCASTERS ASSOCIATION

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42. Image of the newspaper advertisement published by Pakistan Broadcasters Association

43. Quote received for this report on 8th. June 2020

The plight of FM radio stations forced the workers to appeal to the Prime Minister for a bailout because too many things had come to a head at the same time. As Zulfikar Ali Shah of Hot FM 105 explains, *"Private FM Radio Stations were already getting the smallest share of 1.8% from the advertising pie. On top of that, PEMRA began to ask for Multifold Renewal of Radio Licence Fee, or shut down the Stations, which caused panic among FM radio operators.*

Many media houses asked their employees to work on 50% salary, while others just fired employees and closed their departments which were developed to enhance the capacity of their content, research and development. These departments were almost closed in every media house. Drivers, peons, support staff members were sent home, and others were asked to multi-task.

Appeals for economic packages were sent to relevant authorities, but in vain. Paid awareness campaigns by federal and provincial governments could add some life, but FM Radios still have not gotten the importance while planning the awareness campaigns for the masses. Decision-makers still prefer TV to disseminate the messages, whereas a large part of the country is still surviving without electricity and Radio is the only source of information."

While the pressure of the crunch was not felt with the same intensity across the media industry, survival depended only on drastic cost saving measures. Interestingly, unlike in other parts of the world, Covid-19 is not the biggest contributor to the financial woes of the media.

As explained by Naveid Siddiqui of Samaa TV, *"Covid-19 was expected to add to the economic woes of electronic media in keeping with the global trend noted since February 2020 in North America, Europe, Africa, Middle East and even India. Despite the surge in TV eyeballs, the advertising spend was dipping. In Pakistan, so far, until the first week of June, that has not been the case.*

The export based industries, which have been the hardest hit, do not contribute significantly to the electronic media ad spend. The construction industry was a major spender till a year ago, but not anymore. The major sectors that significantly contribute to electronic media ad spend such as FMCGs, financial institutions, telecom and pharmaceutical/chemicals have not really seen a slowdown so they haven't pulled the plug on advertising either.

*Honestly speaking, the direct economic impact of Covid-19 on electronic media with respect to revenues has not been as damaging as it was anticipated. But, moving forward, any economic slowdown will obviously have a direct impact on media ad spend."*⁴⁴

Despite the fact that Covid-19 was not really the reason for the financial woes of the industry, the edging out of media workers by some media houses was done on this very pretext.

44. Quote received for this report on 12th. June 2020

For instance, Aap News shut down without notice, rendering hundreds of workers jobless in a market already awash with the number of people beyond what it could sustain as a business model.

Azhar Abbas, Director News Geo TV network also believes that, *"the salary cuts and job losses are going to happen in the coming months. But to be honest, it is going to have a bigger impact on the print media rather than on television. This is because TV advertising, though has shrunk a little, but it is still there. So some of the bigger media houses may survive, especially those channels who have entertainment channels as well. The smaller ones may suffer because their advertising rates are not very high. Digital advertising is insignificant to the extent that it can sustain the digital properties of the media house, but does not make enough to sustain its sister organization like the channel itself."*

Covid-19 exacerbated the plight of print media. The lockdowns made life difficult not just for reporters to source news, the production of the paper demanded a physical presence and that became a challenge. Already having been pushed into a corner by the electronic and digital media, the pandemic and the prescribed precautions meant that many customers stopped buying the newspapers and magazines for fear of infection on the surfaces. Hawkers on the roadside also went into an existential crisis, and this loss of sale and circulation brought extreme economic hardship to publications.

Some publications folded up while others, even some belonging to the leading media houses bringing in multiple editions, saw a curtailment in the number of pages to keep expenses down. Working spaces shifted, sometimes to residences of owners/editors, because rental space and utilities were no longer manageable.

This goes to show that the pandemic not only impacted journalism and journalists and the practice and content of journalism, but everyone connected to the media industry was impacted. It included the support staff in offices, the drivers, technicians, as well as external persons like the hawkers and newspaper agents.

According to Shehribano, the first female vice-president of Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), *"as far as the print medium is concerned, the non-implementation of the 8th Wage Board Award (financial package agreed to by the government for media workers) was a contributing factor in exacerbating the financial plight of the print media journalists, who were now facing retrenchments and salary cuts. There should be immediate implementation (of the Award) to alleviate their financial difficulties."*⁴⁵

While the issues of the Wage Board Award settlement have been dragging on for years, Sarmad Ali of All Pakistan Newspaper Society (APNS) says, *"APNS understands the need of the*

45. Quote received for this report on 15th. June 2020

hour and supports the entire newspaper community in whichever way they need. For journalists, we have made sure they keep themselves protected through masks, gloves and sanitizers when out in the field. In case any journalist falls prey to the virus and needs help in its treatment, APNS assists him/her or the family.

In the meanwhile, the office spaces are regularly sanitized with walk-in sanitization doors in some media houses as well as installation of sanitizer dispensers in every office. Along with this, the media houses are providing masks and gloves to the employees who are coming to work at these times.

We are trying to protect all the media employees as much as possible and encouraging them to follow strict SOPs when in field or at work.”⁴⁶

46. Quote received for this report on 18th. June 2020

Delving into digital space

The reasons for retrenchments, i.e due to the financial crisis and because of the shrinking space for critical, analytical voices, swelled the ranks of the journalists bridging the digital divide. While still in a nascent stage where webtv has yet to become the norm, those pushed out of the mainstream created space for themselves beyond the digital properties of the existing media, print and electronic.

Personal digital platforms were used by those individual journalists who were forced out because they refused to succumb to pressure. They are able to voice their opinion for now. While some very prominent journalists - who were earlier prime time anchors of flagship shows - communicate with their audiences through YouTube channels, it is not entirely a risk-free medium. Legislation and coercive policing of cyberspace exists, and cases have also been lodged against journalists like Matiullah Jan who was slapped with a contempt of court notice.⁴⁷

The memory of the 3-year-ban on YouTube, and the takedown requests by the Government of Pakistan to Google, Facebook and Twitter, and recent banning of popular apps on the subjective grounds of moral policing makes it difficult for media houses to have the confidence in putting all their eggs in the digital basket. Again, this is a completely different discussion in itself.⁴⁸

Whether the above mentioned journalists have been able to monetize this medium to an extent that the compensation is commensurate with their earlier one is also the subject of a separate study. However, it is pertinent to mention here that barring the very few mainstream channels where critical questions were asked regarding Covid-19 and its response, most of the analytical, critical content about the pandemic came from these independent, digital mediums.

Asad Beyg of Media Matters for Democracy is very emphatic in his opinion about digital being the way forward. He says, *"I am going to draw a distinction here between the digital media (established digital media outlets) and the social media platforms (citizen journals and conventional social media users). Overall, the digital media has proven once again that it is the future of journalism not just in Pakistan but across the world through its quality reporting and integration of technology. It was also clear that digital media platforms, although some of them are independently run and do not have a massive staff, are least likely to fall for the fake news."*⁴⁹

47. <https://aurora.dawn.com/news/1143833/ptas-banning-spreed>

48. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-03/youtube-becomes-refuge-for-pakistan-journalists-battling-censors>

49. Quote for this report was received on 5th, June 2020

Other than the segment of journalists mentioned above who had been 'eased' out of their space in traditional print and electronic media, there is a thriving bloggers community which earns through ad placements on their blogs. These blogs cover a range of topics from food, lifestyle, fashion, sports and products, and they remain relatively less impacted by the existing economic crunch or Covid-19 related downturn.

In fact, their ranks swelled as many people discovered their talents at vlogging and making Tik Toc videos, first as a hobby, and then as a serious mode of expression where they could delve deep into their topics of interest and create an audience for themselves. They were also roped in by the government to use the platform for Covid-19 awareness.⁵⁰

The newer entrants into the field of social media journalism were not necessarily entering it for economic reasons, but the long Covid-19 confinement allowed them to hone their skills and step up the ladder to becoming influencers.

Their numbers swelled in the Covid-19 confinement period, as people came up with creative ways to promote their work and services, professionally, as well as voluntarily. This fraternity proved especially valuable during the lockdown period when assistance drives were launched with or without the assistance and collaboration of the governments, to provide ration to the marginalized. While not actually a part of 'journalism,' the content put out by the organizations and groups was picked up by media outlets and disseminated widely.

Many other mainstream media workers also took to the digital platform to be able to express their opinions, and some became freelance contributors on digital platforms that have so far escaped the financial crunch as well as pressures to comply with an 'acceptable' narrative.

President Pakistan Software Houses Association and The Nest i/O, Jehan Ara, was of the opinion that, *"considering that most of Pakistan was resisting going digital pre-Covid-19, everyone has been quick to jump aboard and produce and deliver as much content as possible. The number of online shows put up by amateurs – and on a regular basis – is beginning to out-shine some of that which is being produced by mainstream media. A lot of people are opting to watch interviews, listen to comedy and even partake in discourse regarding subjects like health, education, exercise, etc. Mainstream media has not taken up the challenge and continues to produce lackluster content that is not appreciated because people with connectivity have so many options."*⁵¹

In digital space, there is a sizable Pakistani presence (see Annex 1). Most of them use Youtube as the primary platform. However, a cursory glance at the list according to the number of followers shows that top slots are captured by the established media houses. Music and

50. <https://thecurrent.pk/tiktokers-make-Covid-19-awareness-videos/>

51. Quote for this report was received on 13th. June 2020

religious content are the other genres gaining maximum subscribers.⁵²

The digital outlets which had already been making their mark by putting out innovative content also picked up the theme of the pandemic. Some, whose forte was comedy and lifestyle based content, restricted themselves to carrying news from around the world and Pakistan. Others, whose raison d'être was socio-political commentary and in depth analysis, offered that and grew the size of their audiences.

These independent outlets had an edge over those of the established media ones because they could draw analysts and experts from any media platform, whereas in the case of the former, each media house could only allow their own staff and analysts to represent them.

The digital transformation is definitely taking place. All mainstream media houses no longer consider their digital properties to be in the 'also ran' category. Just a decade ago these properties had more archival value, but now the interactivity they afford provides them an instant feedback mechanism even for the content they put out on the mainstream platforms.

During Covid-19, consumers of journalism content have increasingly been exercising the options this medium affords them. The mainstream media houses putting resources behind making these platforms slick professionally by hiring trained resources. Even before Covid-19, Pakistan's shift towards digital by even the smaller, newer platforms could be seen, which were investing in quality content to gain maximum viewership.

When the pandemic happened, not only were these outlets able to shift focus of content to it, they were also able to dedicate segments to the awareness raising of their audience.

The relatively lesser number of people required to run these online channels and less capital outlay is the biggest attraction. Lean organizations mean opportunity to attract good human resources and acquire technology that would serve beyond the here and now. Islamabad based DBTV Live, South Asia's first internet TV outlet, is one such platform where Artificial Intelligence is being used in the Newsroom.⁵³

In the opinion of Adnan Rehmat, Researcher and Media Development Professional, "*without staying focused on its principal mandate of public interest journalism, media in Pakistan will simply die out as Covid-19 has made clear for conventional media. Public interest digital media can instead be the phoenix that resurrects professional journalism in Pakistan.*"⁵⁴

52. <https://www.phoneworld.com.pk/top-20-youtube-channels-of-pakistan-with-highest-number-of-subscribers-in-2020/>

53. <https://dbtv.live/>

54. Quote for this report was received on 17th. May 2020

Enterprises that cannot strictly be put in the bracket of media also started using digital properties like Instagram and Facebook through live sessions for engaging with their particular constituency. They started to put out content that was socially engaging, relevant and current, and all under the umbrella of socially distant times of Covid-19.

They ranged from fashion houses, to delivery services, to stand-up comedians, singers, poets, writers, individuals, business houses and social groups. Other than established influencers, new TikTokers and

Youtubers also played their part in creating content. We even saw professional mental health specialists offer their services for free through online mediums.

This ease of adoption to the digital media and possibility of its sustainability to bear the shocks which sent the many established and mainstream media outlets reeling was borne out by Mansoor Ahmed, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Vcast Online Pvt. Ltd.. He also explained how a quick response to bring in responsive content was easier in the digital medium.

According to him, "thankfully, so far no economic impact at VCast across all levels including lower cadre. We are a small organization. We decided to put a stop on regular publishing and started exploring stories around Covid-19. The effect is not dominating all our reporting though it has certainly dominated new content generation. Going forward, the media in Pakistan should start an open and transparent dialogue to set future ready/ sustainable standards around journalism." 55

Another example is of Daes TV, managed by Beehive People's Media, which broadcast a series of webinars covering the various impacts of the pandemic. CEO Imran Shirvani was, however, not too happy with the content generally being posted on digital media and sought to bring depth to it through the web series.

According to him, "most of Digital Media journalism is second-hand journalism. Most of digital journalists take stories that are already filed elsewhere, rehash some of them with their comments (if they work on those stories at all) and republish them. During a recent survey it was found that the top three independent digital news platforms of our country do not have anybody covering stories from anywhere, though they report stories from everywhere." 56 57

The indications that the future of media is digital are quite obvious. However, Pakistani media is likely to witness a longer transition period where print and electronic shall not completely

55. <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCW0tibT8VMgEmhGSGlj2dyw/search?query=Covid+19>

56. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LB9xk5RBaw&ab_channel=DaesTV

57. Quote for this report was received on 14th. June 2020

lose their relevance in a hurry. They are quite likely to shrink due to the market forces and compulsions of economic sustainability.

Another factor hampering growth is the uncertain environment for media as an outlet of expression. Until laws, like the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act, that monitor and 'regulate' content in the cyberspace are amended to foster an environment of confidence, the growth is not likely to spike. The arbitrary banning of digital apps, the surveillance of citizens and prosecution under the incorrect, even maliciously incorrect sections of the Cybercrime Law are very real hurdles in the growth of this sector.⁵⁸

This is despite the opportunity to monetize the online content much more rapidly, and at a much higher rate than is possible in the traditional sphere. There are already many print publications which are earning revenues from their online versions in multiples of their offline versions.

Similarly, in a very narrow job market, further buffeted by the pandemic, these tools were a source of earning for many who did not have any other option. The sudden pulling off the plug from the content or the platform itself rendered these people 'jobless' and without any other source of income due to lack of opportunities during the lockdowns and closures.

The fact that the government also relied on digital tools for maximum reach during the pandemic indicates that the time is ripe for the media and government to find common ground in the use of the digital medium for effective communications. In a country as densely populated, and with a large geographic area, efficacy of messaging has already been proven by its teledensity.

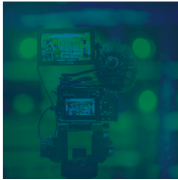
During the pandemic, the government has used the medium for sending out messages through SMS, chatbot, the dashboard, and the followup messages with travellers are all through very simple digital tools.

On part of the tech industry, many organizations, not directly related to journalism, put out informative material that was used by journalists for their pieces on Covid-19 specific reports. They included the graphs prepared by tech sections were dedicated to policy papers and information through print and videos.⁵⁹

In a country as diverse as Pakistan, the value of multi-lingual content cannot be overemphasized. Value addition was brought to this content by keeping it animation and visual based rather than text to be able to reach the widest possible.

58. <https://techcrunch.com/2020/07/21/pakistan-issues-final-warning-to-tiktok-and-blocks-bigo-app-over-immoral-obscene-and-vulgar-content/>

59. <https://www.tabadlab.com/Covid-19-response/>



Public Service Videos

Covid-19 is among the most profound global and local problems the world has faced in the 21st century. An effective 21st century response to a challenge like Covid-19 must be clear, and credible public messaging.

Tabadlab has developed four kinds of public service ads (PSAs) to support clear and credible public messaging around Covid-19. The first are bespoke PSAs that reinforce the essence of the need to protect, diagnose and treat the Covid-19 challenge. The second are a series of adaptations of pre-existing concepts and material, for local audiences—including multilingual versions of the adaptations. The third are translations of pre-existing videos, in multiple languages. The fourth are PSAs for government entities.

Our videos are available in [English](#), [Urdu](#), [Sindh](#), [Balochi](#), [Pashto](#), [Punjabi](#), and [Brahvi](#).

A group of volunteers from the tech industry got together to seek permission to adapt and localize content and shared it in the public sphere for use by journalists as well as others wanting to raise awareness about the pandemic.

The range of options afforded by the digital medium and their parallel use were also demonstrated by an individual adept at its use due to his experience as a digital journalist. This is being specially mentioned here as an inspiring proof of concept.

It was in February 2020 that videos of Pakistani students in Wuhan started circulating on social media where they were seen demanding that the government repatriate them back to Pakistan in view of the spread of the virus in the Chinese city. The initially muted reaction gained decibels when the parents of these students lent their voice to these demands and held demonstrations that were then covered by the mainstream media.⁶⁰

There were also reports about PIA flight crew that was stuck in Beijing for nine days due to the indecision about whether to quarantine them in China or to allow them to return to Pakistan.

Many countries were rushing to close borders and airspace, and Pakistan followed suit. This set in motion yet another crisis which resulted in thousands of its citizens being stranded abroad. There were people who were stranded in transit in the countries they were visiting, and in countries where they had their jobs, which suddenly were eliminated, especially in some of the UAE states.

60. <http://www.radio.gov.pk/11-02-2020/dr-zafar-briefs-pm-about-steps-taken-to-keep-pakistan-safe-from-coronavirus>

The handling of this crisis in the wake of Covid-19 merits a case study in itself, as it showcased the shortcomings or compulsions of the mainstream media in taking up issues due to airtime and column space limitations versus the creativity the digital space offers to very quickly respond to and present a certain subject in all its dimensions, integrating the multiplicity of social media platforms available. The mainstream media covered official flight closure announcements and government arrangements to get the stranded Pakistanis back. Few in print and television went to the extent of reaching out to the stranded.

However, a young freelance journalist, Tahir Imran Mian, for whom aviation was just a hobby, proactively decided to use social media as a public service by creating a YouTube channel, Pakistan Aviation. He immediately integrated it with Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to provide one on one live, personalized service through information, and also updated answers to queries of the worried Pakistanis by asking Embassy officials of various countries, airlines, government officials, and provided even visa requirement information.

Fostering an environment that facilitates the growth of the digital medium should also be viewed in the context of disaster response, of which this pandemic is just one example. The volume and value of content creation witnessed on the digital media clearly points to its potential. This can only be realized if an enabling, progressive environment is provided.

Media responds to Covid-19's Pakistan connection

Matters rapidly escalated due to the return of 'zaireen,' or pilgrims, from Iran, a country struggling with the full-blown pandemic. Media in Pakistan turned its attention to the developing situation. The border post of Taftan in Balochistan came into focus, but more in the context of the (mis)management at border control, the poor quality of quarantine arrangements – residential as well as medical.

Proximity meant that the Balochistan journalists took the lead in covering the influx, as well as the arrangements, and the mainstream national media leapt to its feet after reports of mismanagement and protest at poor facilities made its way out on social media by the pilgrims themselves, as well as Balochistan-based media.

The escalation of events and the intensity and breadth of the spread of infection in the early days meant that media management as well as journalists in the field were actually thinking on their feet. The advisories that were put out by global organizations, such as the WHO, were changing rapidly and by the time an SOP was drafted, the need to modify it arose.

This is where the existing dividing lines within the media sharpened. With the federal and provincial governments disagreeing on the measures to tackle the pandemic, barring very few, the alignment and preference of the media to support or oppose the measures remained according to their pre Covid-19 stance, rather than the merits or demerits of the measures proposed and implemented.

If a timeline was drawn for the way this pandemic panned out, there are some clear markers which showed the escalation and intensity with which it gripped Pakistan, and pushed it at an unenviable high rank in the list of countries affected. Timing also contributed to this.

On the heels of the return of the pilgrims from Iran came the scheduled large annual religious gathering of the Tableeghi Jamaat in Raiwind in Punjab, which attracts hundreds of thousands from across Pakistan. Muslims from other countries also participate in it.

The government dragged its feet to put in place a ban on large gatherings, which meant that by the time any semblance of a lockdown was put in place, the carriers had already spread to different parts of the country, and abroad. People returning to their countries were detected as Covid-19 positive and the infection was traced back to the gathering.

Earlier, Gilgit-Baltistan, the farthest part of the country from the port of entry, Taftan, received

its first Covid-19 affectee, and experienced the first death from the infection.

Here, the role of the media suddenly shifted from the reportage of a purely medical issue into a polarized sectarian and religious one. Analysts who were not medical practitioners were seen giving their edicts about the handling of the pandemic, based on their understanding of religious text.

The absence of clear, coherent, scientific and medical information on the media, which had more eyeballs than before, played a part in the religious argument becoming a stronger factor during Ramzan and Eid. This was not the only drawback. The lack of genuine analysis created an environment that was conducive to polarization and politicization of health as an issue.

As Benazir Shah, GEO News Features editor and TV analyst remarks, *“One change I noticed immediately was how ill-prepared the media was to report on a health crisis. Political issues have always taken precedence in newsrooms. In many channels there were either no reporters who covered health, or the ones who did were a bare minimum. As for talk show hosts, there was a level of unease towards talking about the virus. And attempts were made to give it a political angle.”*⁶¹

The daily bulletins and numbers issued by the National Command and Operation Center established by the government to deal with the pandemic found their slots in column space and airtime; the media slowly tried to unpack it beyond the realm of press conferences of government officials giving updates and announcing measures.

There is no doubt that Covid-19 spelled trouble. It brought in its wake disease and death. It devastated families, destroyed livelihoods, disrupted any semblance of normality. Fear of the unknown was all pervasive. The media aptly and amply reflected that, especially in the early days of the pandemic. It covered the physical pain of those infected, the stress and loneliness of those in Intensive Care Unit (ICU) wards and quarantine facilities, and even funeral arrangements at the graveyards.

The accompanying imagery contributed to the heightened fear and stress, which became another reason for people to hide their symptoms. The pandemic took on an aura of social stigma and led many people to not just refuse testing, but even those who tested positive, and went through the full cycle of recovery, did not let even very close friends get a whiff of it.

However, dominance of the doom and gloom narratives served to underplay the many stories of the wonders of human spirit, of courage and compassion, of overcoming the odds and showing others the way. The display of volunteerism during the lockdown brought forth many such unsung heroes and sheroes.

61. Quote for this report was received on 6th. June 2020

There were heartwarming examples of families in isolation being taken care of by friends and neighbours; of doctors, nurses and janitorial staff at hospitals going beyond the call of duty while undergoing extreme stress. It was only when the threat level seemingly lessened to an extent when those media houses who had earlier strict protocols wherein their reporters were to get news only through WhatsApp allowed them to capture stories after arming themselves with full protection.⁶²

There were groups, already organized and some coming together as a response to the pandemic who diverted a part of the food drive to serve not only the poorest of the poor but people in isolation centers and doctors and staff at the hospitals.

Not enough attention was given to bringing these stories to the fore. These inspirational stories were not too difficult to find, but again digital medium fared much better than the mainstream print and electronic media in acknowledging these inspiring instances.

Akhtar Shaheen Rind was quick to point this out as well. He says, *“although we find them on social media, but mainstream media has not really been carrying positive stories associated with Covid-19, like those of the recovered patients so people can be given some hope.”*⁶³

The quick turnaround and responsiveness shown by the dedicated digital media platforms, especially in putting out engaging, relevant and prompt content related to Covid-19, especially the human interest stories, is yet another indicator of the potential as well as the future direction of the growth of media in Pakistan. These include the digital properties of the mainstream media as well as independent set ups.⁶⁴



Shahzeb Jillani, who works for Deutsche Welle, draws a parallel with the coverage of war on terror, where, in his opinion, the media was obsessed with numbers and didn't bring out the human face of those numbers. He says the coverage of Covid-19 followed a similar pattern.

62. <https://www.facebook.com/bbcurdu/videos/316894472685622/?v=316894472685622>

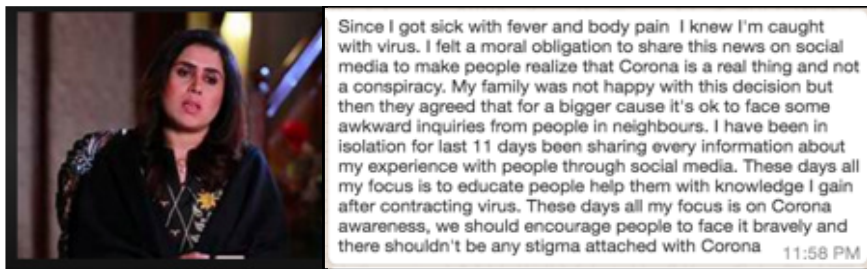
63. Quote for this report was received on 19th. June 2020

64. <https://www.mediasupport.org/media-in-pakistan-responding-to-Covid-19-challenges-with-innovation/>

Newsmakers become the news

The role of those belonging to mainstream media must be appreciated in their efforts to take away the fear and stigma associated with the pandemic. Media workers, reporters and prominent anchors who were infected with Covid-19 willingly shared their struggle and the manner in which they overcame the infection.⁶⁵

Many kept performing their normal professional duties, despite the physical, mental and emotional stress they were under, while others took part in conversations to show how to stay on an even keel.⁶⁶



Then there were those media workers whose family members –wives, husbands, siblings, parents – were infected and they not only were taking care of them, but also performing duties professionally while juggling added responsibilities on the home front. While some men who were not familiar with child care and home making began fulfilling that role, a majority of women remained the primary caregivers, and were doubly burdened due to the social expectations as they continued to work from home.

The mental and social wellbeing of journalists who were combating the infection, and were struggling to stay relevant despite the illness and home responsibilities, with the added stress of pay cuts, and possibility of job losses, has not really been reviewed adequately in the context of Covid-19. An uptick in domestic violence due to lockdowns and mental stress was also not covered in depth.⁶⁷

Unions and press clubs have been active in providing assistance in cash and kind to its members - at times with the assistance of government grants, and at others, through their

65. <https://www.geo.tv/latest/317006-i-tested-positive-for-coronavirus-here-is-my-experience>

66. <https://www.facebook.com/PeopleMagPakistan/videos/556645651716065>

67. permission to use the image and quote was given by Tanzeela Mazhar

own efforts. Monthly rations were provided to members of press clubs and monetary assistance was given to those journalists who had contracted the infection. However, psychological and emotional counselling by hiring professional help was not really made a priority. As Alia Chughtai, of AlJazeera Digital, said, *"I think the psychological impact on people has been huge as well as monetary - and no one has really talked about the mental impact"* ⁶⁸

Other than the Karachi Press Club, whose Health Committee had already established a counselling service for its members even prior to Covid 19, one did not hear of other journalist bodies taking similar measures for their members.

Just like conflict reporting requires protective gear, so did the pandemic. However, as with coverage of conflict, most, not all, media houses were found wanting and they sent their reporters and camera persons out without the necessary protections.

From the time journalists began reporting on Covid-19, the goal post kept shifting. The list of threats, the measures needed to safeguard themselves, and the categories of people vulnerable, kept changing.

For this very reason, it was imperative that those who could not take advantage of work from home, or needed to be provided with a safe working environment, which was sanitary, where social distance could be maintained, and protective gear was provided when in the field.

Reporters and camera crew, especially of the electronic media, with and without the DSNG vehicles manned by technicians, were regularly sent to infection hotspots, such as crowded markets and press conferences as well as hospitals with flimsy masks, and were asked to report from there.

The bigger media houses, as has been mentioned earlier, invested in sanitization protocols of the working premises and providing protective gear to their staff. However, most other journalists had to purchase protective gear, such as gloves, sanitizers and masks out of pocket.

Laxity in observing the SOPs saw the cases of infections rise among media workers and hit the three figure mark, and sadly the fatalities as a direct result of Covid-19 as well as complications due to pre existing conditions after having recovered from the pandemic kept increasing.

Serious gaps in the protocols in place for journalists' safety and welfare became all the more apparent, and there were calls to address them urgently. As Puruesh Chaudhury of Agahi Media, a media development organization, said, *"journalists should have their health insurance covered by their respective organization, if that is not the case. I feel that this is something the unions*

68. Quote for this report was received on 5th. June 2020

and the press clubs need to focus on.”⁶⁹

The steady and alarming increase in number was happening despite agreed upon SOPs by media houses as laid down by the AEMEND (Association of Electronic Media Editors and News Directors). Its President Azhar Abbas explained that they took cognisance of the situation as early as March 2020 and issued the SOPs. However, they were not applied across the board.

The difference in the application of protocols was evident from the manner in which the foreign press and its representatives functioned as opposed to most local journalists.

As explained by Asad Hashim of Aljazeera English, “for the international media, we have strong guidelines in place to continue delivering the news in ways that do not expose our reporters to undue risk. We have suspended most travel for stories within the country, relying more on remote reporting where it is possible. We are not sending journalists to report from infection hotspots. If they do so, we ensure that all of our staff are strictly following hygiene SOPs in order to minimise the risk of infection.”⁷⁰

It was however, pointed out by another Pakistani journalist based outside Pakistan but working for a foreign media outlet that the standards their organization was implementing were far more stringent in the Western countries than they were in some South Asian countries, Pakistan included.

Field reporting became a difficult space to navigate. The realization of risks and the

Safety protocols with regard to COVID-19 for all journalists and media workers issued by Association of Electronic Media Editors and News Directors (AEMEND)

The guidelines apply specially to all staff working outdoor including Reporter/ Correspondents, Cameramen, Technicians, Sanitize Engineers, staff related to assignment and DSGO Operations. Outdoor Assistants, Sales Personnel, any other staff specifically designated to perform office assignment outside office premises.

Goal of this guideline is to prevent our outdoor staff from getting infected from the external environment and also prevent external infection to contaminate our office and equipment.

Primarily it is the responsibility of the management of a television channel to provide all possible facilities and safety equipment/gear for the protection of the staff that is assigned outdoor jobs. The Director News should ensure that all such precautions are in place before a team is sent out on assignment. In case, adequate equipment/gear, as mentioned in the guideline below, is not available, the assignment should be cancelled as safety of the team members, and rest of the staff working in the office, takes priority on everything.

Leaving office for outdoor assignment:

1. Wear mask before leaving office.
2. Wash or sanitize hands before leaving office.
3. All DSGO's and assignment vehicles are sanitized after each assignment (by disinfectant spray on seats, steering, dashboard, door handle from both side etc.)
4. If you are traveling using your own vehicle you should sanitize after every use by using a spray of Dettol and water mixture. Using small spray bottle makes it more cost effective.
5. Before start of journey, ensure that you have sanitizers and gloves available in vehicle or with you.
6. Try to travel to your destination with no or minimum physical contact with any other person or colleague.

Reaching assignment location:

7. Wear gloves before disembarking the vehicle.
8. Ensure you are wearing gloves and face mask properly before you touch any equipment or enter the assignment premises.
9. Enter assignment premises with utmost care and keep a safe distance from others and furniture and fixture of the premises.

Working at assignment location:

10. Use face masks and gloves all the time when you are working outdoor on any assignment.
11. Come in contact of persons, equipment and fixture at assignment location only if this is very important and unavoidable i.e., fixing collar mic, lifting purchased good etc.
12. Try to stay as minimum as possible at assignment, do not stay after completing assignment specially to socialize i.e., leave as soon as a video beepers ends and you pack up equipment.
13. Try not to eat anything on assignment location, specially served by others.

Leaving assignment location:

14. Dispose off gloves in Dettolbin, don't throw carelessly, before heading back.
15. Check all equipment is placed on appropriate locations. If you are given disinfectant please apply on equipment before storing in DSGO or assignment vehicle.
16. Try to maintain distance if possible with your colleague traveling with you.

Arriving and entering office after assignment:

17. Before entering office dispose off your mask in nearest dustbin. Please avoid throwing it carelessly.
18. Immediately after entering office premises, wash your hands with soap for 20 Second if you are wearing a short sleeve wash hands up till elbow.
19. If washing is not possible please use sanitizers placed at different locations.
20. Store equipment and other items at respective locations and wash your hands again or sanitize.

Other important points:

1. Try to use your own vehicle for outdoor use and keep disinfecting the same by mixture of Dettol and water.
2. Keep giving feedback to administration and your departmental heads/supervision in case of shortage of supplies like mask, soap, sanitizers etc.
3. Report if any of your colleague do not follow the above despite your reminders.
4. Washing hands and keeping safe distance are the key measures to avoid coronavirus.
5. All paper and plastic material should be handled while wearing gloves and masks as per the protocol of disinfection of Corona virus.

Safety protocols/measures for all journalists and media workers working within Office Premises:

Arriving at office:

1. Try to travel in your own personal conveyance with no or minimum physical contact with any other person.
2. Use face masks and gloves when you are travelling from home to office.
3. Properly dispose off these before entering office premises in dustbin don't throw them carelessly.
4. While entering into office premises you shall cooperate with the security and health scanning staff with respect to your health screening, which is utmost important for a SAFE work environment.
5. After entering office premises wash your hands with soap, if it's not possible use sanitizer placed by Administration Department at different locations.

Working office:

1. Try to wear masks within office premises as well, you can also contact Administration Department if you are facing difficulty in acquiring masks from open market.
2. If you are using a common/board desktop system used by other team members as well, make sure that you are using disposable gloves to protect yourself and your colleagues.
3. Frequently wash your hands with water and soap for 20 second, in locations where water and soap is not available, you can use sanitizer.
4. Try to avoid face to face meetings as much as possible, conferencing through video link, using voice call or extension are more advisable these days.
5. Also do not forget to wash your hands with soap or sanitizer, after attending meetings or visiting the work station/office of your colleagues.
6. Try to use your own cap and glass for tea and water during office hours.
7. Please restrict yourself to your work station, and avoid making unnecessary visit to irrelevant floors and buildings.

Other important points:

1. In case if you identify or suspect any of your colleague or their family members suffering from COVID 19 symptoms, make sure that you bring the same into the notice of the HR Medical Facilitation Help Desk (MFD). Do not discuss the same with any other employee this promote gossip and misinformation which can result in chaos and confusion.
2. Employees assigned to work from office are responsible to avoid unnecessary mobility and follow following:
 - a. Avoid inviting guests at office and home.
 - b. Avoid visiting public places like parks, restaurants, shopping malls etc.
 - c. Avoid visiting relatives, family and friends who are suspected of Corona infection.
 - d. Observe health of your loved ones closely.
 - e. Regularly observe health condition of your domestic servants like maids, drivers etc. at home.
 - f. In case of self illness of staff or anyone from his / her immediate family and colleague, staff shall immediately inform the MFD.

It is the duty of all Director News to implement their protocols in their organizations.

Best regards and stay safe

Azhar Abbas
President
AEMEND

69. Quote was received for this report on 12th. June 2020

70. Quote for this report was received on 13th. June 2020

responsibility for the well being of staff weighed heavy on the shoulders of the seniors in the newsroom. In the words of Farzana Ali, Bureau Chief Aaj News, Peshawar, *"the way journalism is being practised and the manner of news gathering has undergone a drastic change in the wake of Covid-19. Although it is sometimes unavoidable, we have cut down the number of field stories due to safety concerns. We realize that our reporter and camera persons can get infected or become carriers of infection that can pose a threat to the vulnerable family members."*⁷¹

The rising numbers compelled the different unions of journalists to call upon media houses to be stringent in the implementation of SOPs, and also to refuse to attend any press conference physically, and asked the government functionaries, politicians and others to address the media over video calls. They also demanded that the government provide free testing as well as health facilities for journalists.

A similar sentiment was expressed by Owais Aslam Ali, of Pakistan Press Foundation, who said, *"it is necessary to overcome the issues faced by journalists. Media outlets as well as the government need to develop a clear strategy on how to support staff and ensure that their safety, economic well being and mental health are maintained in this trying time. A starting point can be effective communication by media houses regarding the situation, the measures they are taking and will take and a reassurance to staff. In addition, they need to work with the government to ensure that journalists on the frontline are provided with the support they need."*

Senior journalist and long time trade union leader Mazhar Abbas, who himself contracted Covid-19, along with family members, urged media houses to implement safety measures and said, *"all media houses must announce special 'Corona Life Insurance' plans for their employees and take responsibility for the employee's immediate family in case anyone tests positive."*⁷²

The worry about exposing oneself to the infection is all too real. So is the danger of not working and being declared redundant. According to Zaibunnisa Burki, Assistant Editor at The News, *"there's the to-be-expected challenge of reporting from the ground while also ensuring safety. For editorial work, the work from home option is obviously the safer choice but it does also add to the rather overlooked issue of editors having to use their own resources (electricity, technical). That may seem a small issue but is definitely something worth looking into, especially since most journalists are already underpaid. Then there's the glaring issue of a general lack of health security for most journalists. Barring one or two larger media groups, very few media organisations even offer minimum health insurance."*⁷³

The calls for caution came from many other quarters as well. Dr. Shahjahan Syed, Member Academic of PEMRA, Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority, explained that, *"for*

71. Quote for this report was received on 5th. June 2020

72. <https://www.geo.tv/latest/287946-the-fear-of-reporting-during-Covid-19>

73. Quote received for this report on 16th. June 2020

journalists working across the country, individual news organizations have issued guidelines regarding social distancing and protective equipment while reporting, but implementation on the ground has been inconsistent, as they were not being enforced or followed by many journalists. Competition in Pakistan's news media landscape is cut-throat, with more than 30 24-hour television news channels competing for ratings, in addition to dozens of national and regional newspapers.

"Reporters without Borders' (RSF) recommendations to Pakistani news organizations include no longer requiring television reporters to report live from places with large crowds, restricting coverage of press conferences where large numbers may gather and avoiding commissioning reports from hospitals. However, implementation of such recommendations has been seldom followed by journalists and media outlets." ⁷⁴

Cognizant of the various pressures members of the media fraternity were working under, Iqbal Khattak of Freedom Network Pakistan (FNP) said, *"though the TV channels did come up with safety protocols to protect journalists, the increasing number of tested positive cases among journalists show there are gaps between the policy and practice. Over 98 percent tested positive journalists are working for TV channels. I think journalists tend to take risks which they should not"*⁷⁵.

Despite that, the Organization stepped up to arrange for financial assistance to those whose organizations were not able to, or were unwilling to, support those staff members hit by the pandemic. Its provincial focal persons prepared a list of journalists who had contracted Covid-19, and from the Journalists Safety Fund FNP manages, it diverted finances to assist them. Over 150 journalists were helped through this fund.⁷⁶

Financial assistance to media workers was also provided by different press clubs out of the amount released by the government and was besides the help they provided through ration packages. Despite this, there is no doubt that the financial impact is far wider and deeper than has been mapped because those who lost their jobs were beyond the pale of this assistance, and it is not clear how they have fared.

Senior journalist Amir Mateen summed up the situation by saying, *"in my 35 years in Journalism, I haven't seen a worse time encountered by this industry."*

74. Quote for this report was received on 10th. June 2020

75. Quote received for this report on 17th. June, 2020

76. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/11/journalists-on-front-line-of-pakistans-coronavirus-outbreak>

All about Covid-19

Like elsewhere in the world, as the pandemic unfolded its intensity, media content in Pakistan became overwhelmingly focused on it. The magnitude merited a corresponding response. However, as was pointed out by Talat Aslam, Editor of The News, *"while we have been covering other issues, most writers and reporters seem keen to find a novel Covid-19 angle to write about. Even our editorial writers are now mainly focusing on various aspects of the pandemic."*⁷⁷

Covid-19, despite being primarily a health pandemic, has had a domino effect and impacted the economy, education, industry and services. However, within the health sector, it has uncovered many shortcomings. The corresponding shortcoming within the media fraternity that was uncovered alongside these was the lack of trained health reporters and analysts.

The media's focus on politics has provided it with journalists who find it easy to talk or write on it. This could be one reason why, though Covid-19 hogged the headlines, to put it crudely, it became more a political topic rather than a health issue.

There were too few medical practitioners and people from academia with sufficient knowledge whose opinion was being given due weightage by the media. Instead, far too many politicians received airtime making a global pandemic a partisan issue. He says/she says traversed the airwaves and found column space.

It also took the eye off the ball as far as other important issues were concerned. Only issues that could be contextualized by Covid-19 found resonance with the journalists. Those who had a professional niche could see the issues they covered put on the back burner.

Issues such as climate change, water scarcity, education, poverty alleviation, sports, music, fashion, art, science, other health issues like the recurring polio cases, did make it into columns and sometimes on the airwaves of media houses and general publications.

However, as environmental journalist Rina Saeed Khan says, *"It is much more difficult now to do field reporting in a pandemic. So many of us have become armchair journalists -- there is more reliance on phone interviews/whatsapp messages so one has to work harder to get contacts, cross check information and make sure facts are correct. There is now a heavy reliance on local contacts to send information/photographs etc. I think it has impacted the quality of reporting as nothing can beat going to the field and seeing the situation for oneself and interviewing affectees. Accuracy has been compromised and reporting does not have the depth it would otherwise. I feel it is lazy journalism to just print out hearsay without verifying the facts"*

77. Quote received for this report on 19th. May 2020

on the ground."⁷⁸

What is interesting is that the tendency to look at a Covid-19 connection for stories to make them seem current and relevant, many issues were viewed through this lens. For instance, the confinement, and subsequent lessening of traffic on roads had an immediately noticeable effect on air quality. While most in the media stayed with cursory reporting and posting pictures of vistas hitherto not visible due to air pollution, the environmental journalists were quick to pick up on the topic and did in-depth analysis.

The fact that the electronic vehicles policy reached fruition has a lot to do with this sub-group of journalists highlighting the need to take action for air quality in the post-Covid-19 world.

Yet another highlight was the launch of the 'Green Stimulus' by the government as a response mechanism to the pandemic to alleviate poverty by providing jobs through massive afforestation. Here too the lead was taken by the environmental journalists, whereas the mainstream journalists remained content with the government handouts and sharing of the international validation received.

Another example of niche journalism highlighting something that the other journalists were late to pick up on was the very grave threat of the locust invasion that posed a threat to food security in times when the country was already reeling due to the impact of the pandemic.

Similarly the incentives announced by the government, again as a response to Covid-19, to boost the tourism and construction industry were analysed threadbare by this group of journalists while critically examining their impact on the environment.

Right from February 2020 to the time these lines go into print, Covid-19 has been running as a constant thread through the media content. There have been peaks and troughs, but its intensity can be gauged from the fact that several incidents, some catastrophic, took place. They rightly gained the attention they deserved, but were never able to knock the pandemic off the frontpage.

Besides the aforementioned locust attack, these included the very tragic PIA plane crash in Karachi, the Sugar Commission Report and its political fall out, the budget exacerbating the economic crunch, and the floods caused by heavy monsoon rains.

The situation was much more dire for the trade press, like fashion publications, sports and travel magazines. In the absence of sporting events and cancellation of future big ticket items like the Olympics, the opportunities to sustain the publications became few and far between.

78. Quote received for this report on 9th. June 2020

The travel boom that came in the wake of government incentive came after many months of no activity, and was short lived as it resulted in a spike in cases of infection, so the respite to travel publications too was short lived. Their corresponding websites needed fresh content to act as Plan B to the publications, and that was in short supply too.

In the absence of economic safety nets, such publications are more likely to fold up, just like smaller newspapers, and even TV channels have, rendering even more media workers economically vulnerable.

The State Bank 'stimulus' package announced for the media industry could benefit the bigger players wherein they could borrow money to beef up their payroll to avoid laying off staff. The low rate of return meant that the media houses were basically being given the opportunity to tide over the difficulties caused by the pandemic and shield their staff without going under financially. This was beyond the reach of small publications and media houses.

Way forward for the media

As far as the media in Pakistan is concerned, Covid-19 has laid bare many shortcomings that need to be addressed. The very business model has been exposed for its vulnerability and requires robust restructuring to allow for resilience against such economic shocks as came with the pandemic.

It has also highlighted the need for capacity building of the skills of the practitioners of journalism, in whichever medium they choose for themselves, though the viability of the existing media has also come into question, as far as future sustainability and relevance are concerned.

It has also underscored the need to patch up the fault lines within the fraternity wherein lack of unity has not allowed for a unified response to the problems of media workers. One glaring example is the absence of a commonly agreed upon figure for the number of journalists whose health was impacted by the pandemic, and how many from among those lost their lives.

The media also needs to be more aware of, and deal with the crisis of credibility that was rampant during the peak of the pandemic by being more thorough in its fact checking..

Covid-19 has jolted humankind. Since the Spanish Flu, the most recent pandemic of such proportion over a century ago, communications and the media have metamorphosed. From a single dimension, mostly localized print media, it has been transformed into many genres, each with its own peculiarities and required skill sets.

It can also look around the world and see that it is neither alone in this crisis, nor is it facing some unique problems. Around the world serious media practitioners are introspecting about the challenges and responses that have come to light in the wake of the pandemic.⁷⁹

Fundamental principles remain the same. It is said that 'Journalism without a moral position is impossible.' That moral principle makes journalists merchants of truth. In times of peace and calm, as well as in chaos and crisis.

Covid-19 is chaos and crisis. But it demands that the truth be told. In an age of rampant fake news, seeking and telling truth becomes that moral position.

79. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3726892

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