



Newspapers in Peril: Rationalizing the Economic Challenges of Novel Coronavirus (Covid-19) upon Regional Journalists in Hyderabad, Sindh, Pakistan



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Abstract: *Mass media play a decisive role in distributing health knowledge and awareness about health diseases. Covid-19 has been measured as the most dangerous health hazard of the 21st century that has constituted social, environmental and financial perils for humanity, including the media outlets. However, the Pakistani newspaper industry was already witnessing a decline in its readership and coronavirus has further deteriorated the situation for journalists working in regional newspapers. The methodological design using in-depth interviews seeks to discover the financial difficulties faced by journalists employed in local or regional newspapers in Hyderabad city of Sindh province, Pakistan. The distress of unpaid salaries, financial security and paid leave were recognized as dominant elements that emerged during the present investigation as the extension to studies conducted concerning health communication. Therefore, this research suggests that government and business tycoons should financially collaborate with each other to consider challenges encountered by journalists for the survival of the newspaper industry in Pakistan.*

Key Words: Covid-19, Economic Effects, Journalists, Newspaper Industry, Regional Newspapers

Introduction

During the global pandemic of health diseases, the role of media has always been found to be influential and investigative by keeping the public updated through information;

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otherwise, it creates panic, fear and confusion among people. Therefore, it is crucial that credible media outlets not merely dismiss the inaccuracy of information but also seeks its obstructive measures. Newspaper as an industry globally has been facing financial crisis since the emergence of social media; thus, this coronavirus (Covid-19) have aggravated financial equity among press journalists (Olsen, Pickard & Westlund, 2020). Covid-19 is a world health contagious disease that surfaced from China in December 2019, and the World Health Organization declared an international health emergency in January 2020 (WHO, 2020). Coronavirus has been considered the most harmful health hazard in world history, especially in developing nations as Pakistan, where health information and management is not enough to deal with such a crisis (Hayat et al., 2020). Newspaper industries across the world have witnessed a sizable decline in advertising revenues resulting in the economic closure of firing its employees (Dawson et al., 2020). However, journalists in Pakistan during the outburst of coronavirus have not been paid regularly due to curtailing in their travel allowances and salaries as they are working from home for safety measures. In accordance with a report published by the International Journalists of Federation (2020), Pakistani journalists working in the largest group of a newspaper named Jang group are deprived of their basic salaries for four months because of coronavirus pandemic. The reason cited in the above-mentioned report is the non-payment of government advertisements to media owners lacking financial resources. The spread of covid-19 drives a prolonged lockdown of all business and social movements globally since March 2020. During

this lockdown period of March, many press media houses in Scandinavia instantly cancelled their supposed advertising revenues, and similar practices were seen worldwide (Olsen, Pickard & Westlund, 2020). Post this first round of lockdown from March till August of the year 2020, newspapers are suspending the publishing of newspapers, curtailing pays and firing journalists. A similar situation was seen in Pakistan, where the country's largest city and main business industry, Karachi, is expected to deal with a loss of around 380 billion rupees amid lockdown (Noreen et al., 2020). Pakistani newspaper industry already dwindled that triggered around 3,000 journalists during 2019-202 before the epidemic disease of coronavirus (International Media Support, 2020). The same report also quoted that few local newspapers in the region were also shut down due to complete loss of finances and profits that are earned through advertisements, and it hardly affected Pakistani journalists.

The cessation of journalists employed in regional newspapers in the time of global pandemic is a threat to the information role of media when the true and local facts are required to keep the public updated through actual messages and dismissing the rumours. Regional newspapers are increasingly crucial in determining the local proximity of issues concerning readers' interests, public knowledge, coverage to minority issues without the interference of powerful elite segments of society, including political pressures (Harte, Howells & Williams, 2018). Local journalists are essential in playing a social catalyst among communities. Furthermore, apart from being a commercial commodity, the field of journalism is also a

contributing constituent in the democratic doctrine that is affected by a coronavirus (Olsen et al., 2020).

Thus, journalists in Pakistan have always burdened by a lack of press freedom and economic restraints. Economic pressures encountered by journalists to meet their daily needs also causes their low performances in the media field ([Adnan, Ali & Aslam, 2019](#)). Though media discipline in different private universities of Pakistan has been introduced that is producing a good amount of younger journalists to be employed in the media field, however, at the same time, media outlets are declining and generating a huge gap of financial securities for the new generation ([Adnan, Ali & Aslam, 2019](#)). Journalism patterns in third world countries deduce that their profound impulse of functioning in media houses is based on income-generated profits (Vujnovic et al., 2010).

On the basis of the preceding analysis, the researcher in this current study intends to investigate the effects of coronavirus on journalists working in local or regional newspapers in Hyderabad city of the Sindh province, Pakistan. This research focus to investigate how this disease has impacted journalists' working patterns and financial stability during covid-19? Do these newspaper organizations provided these journalists with certain health and monetary safety measures to cope up with the challenges confronted during coronavirus. However, little is known in academic research about the effects and crisis confronted by the newspaper industry or journalists after the coronavirus manifestation in the world particularly, in Pakistan. Furthermore, previous studies in the context of coronavirus and the health communication

domain have discussed the role of media in informing the public about the disease, but rarely these researchers have discussed the economic restraints that became the hurdles for journalists in fulfilling their journalistic responsibilities.

Literature Review

There is a definite quantity of problems dealt with by newspaper industries and journalists working in Pakistan as low salaries, ethical and geographical challenges, impartiality, the privacy of individuals, accuracy, fairness etc., that are less focused and requires immediate action, particularly during covid-19. Journalists in Gujranwala city of Punjab documented minimal pay, no pension, non-registration, political interference, no salary for overtime and blackmailing of publishing certain stories as the professional dilemmas faced by them in Pakistani journalism ([Adnan, Ali & Aslam, 2019](#)). There is no such governing body that safeguards the rights of journalists. Neither newspaper owners nor the government is ready to support and address journalists' job insecurities in Pakistan ([Aslam, 2015](#)). It is observed that in comparison to urban areas, journalists in rural areas of Pakistan are underprivileged in terms of economic facilities. [Jamil \(2018\)](#) accounted for several ways to dissuade journalists from functioning in a stress-free environment helpful for their productivity as life threats, physical and mental torture and feudalistic pressures in rural areas. In Pakistani journalism, it is noticed that in order to combat financial issues, journalists often compromise their creativity and ethical norms with monetary benefits. In this regard, The Pakistan Press Foundation (2015) exhorted

journalists for pursuing moral values in performing journalistic writings; thus, no such plan was made to deal with professional journalistic challenges.

It is derived that during the crisis situation as covid-19, when advertising revenues are not high, the expenditure of distributing and publishing news content must be given to audiences unless grants are generated (Olsen et al., 2020). However, no feasible approach from the audiences' perspective is evidenced. Readers are prepared to pay more online charges in the form of aid or subscription for news stories to journalists if readers found that journalists need financial assistance in crisis for the sake of information (Goyanes, 2020). But such a method cannot fulfil the requirements of working journalists and newspaper industries that function manually and physically rather than merely on digital platforms in Pakistan. It is because a proper system needs to be established in the newspaper organization, which can help them in the news pattern techniques and its distribution as well.

Adnan, Ali & Aslam (2019) carried a research study that stated the monetary pressures on media houses and their impact on journalists. According to the above-mentioned research, newspapers in Pakistan are declining due to economic constraints and ownership absorption even though the number of university graduates in media and communication disciplines is increasing. The reason behind this is the recession of employment and jobs globally as well as in Pakistan. However, this financial stress of non-payment about salaries and being unemployed or fired from a job are two of the basic and potent insecurities that journalists in Pakistan

are facing for a few years. In this regard, Memon (2015) postulated that journalists specifically in rural or remote areas could not function freely in a healthy environment because of issues as death threats, mental distress, and fear of losing jobs or feudalistic power. Despite these professional disturbances and fears, journalists carried their responsibilities about the dissemination of news in this pandemic in a positive manner by verifying facts and information (Anwar et al., 2020).

During health crises, it is the obligation of the media to cover stories that interact with the public for dispersing crisis information in an expeditious and effective manner. However, the coverage of Pakistani electronic media in rationalizing the emotional and psychological effects of the public was disappointing and destructive (Bilal et al., 2020). The above research further elaborated that it is because of the non-seriousness of journalists in electronic media, especially television, as they reported the stories without including the medical experts' knowledge and focused on politicians' opinions. Pakistani television telecast special programmes in terms of songs or dramas with so much enthusiasm and positive spirit to celebrate special events and festivities of the country, but unfortunately, the coronavirus pandemic did not witness such transmission that could address the public's mental issues of fear and anxiety emerged from this deadly global infectious disease (Bilal et al., 2020).

Anwar et al. (2020) discussed the positive and negative impact of media and public health reporting on covid-19 and stated that in times of an outbreak of health disease, media should avoid the trend of breaking news in order to confront any stress or anxiety among

the masses. This panic was observed among the public in this pandemic, where both traditional and digital media spread misleading news without checking the facts and figures (Anwar et al., 2020). All the above-discussed researches regarding covid-19 revealed and shed light on the role of mass media in giving coverage of the disease and how the media should perform under such health circumstances. But firstly, there is a dearth of researches that discloses the financial impact and loss coronavirus has placed upon journalists' livings particularly, in Sindh, Pakistan. Secondly, covid-19 being a relatively new subject in the research arena, there are still many studies and data needed to be explored for a clear and new horizon in apprehending journalists' adversities and obstructions.

Method and Procedure

The present qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with 20 journalists in Hyderabad city of Sindh province, Pakistan using purposive sampling in order to prompt journalists to get insights into their financial stresses and strains caused by covid-19. In-depth interviews offer rich data and guide them in probing the research participants to obtain the required information (Brounéus, 2011). However, the investigator in this study accomplished the saturation point at 20 when the information or themes were insistent, and new opinions or themes were not discovered. Therefore, the information from the journalists was collected till the saturation point during fieldwork. In accordance with All Pakistan Press Society (APNS) statistics (2019), there is a total number of 15 registered newspapers working in Hyderabad city of Sindh, Pakistan. Among these newspapers,

there are 2 weekly newspapers while 13 are daily newspapers published mostly in regional, i.e. Sindhi language. Thus, there is no official data available that can count and address the total number of registered journalists in these newspaper organizations. The criteria for selecting these journalists. All the interviews were semi-structured and recorded on mobile phones through zoom meetings instead of physically visiting the journalists keeping in view the severity of coronavirus disease and social distancing.

However, the notes regarding the research participants' views for this study were written, which later assisted the researcher to transcribe and analyze the data. Themes were generated to analyze the data. These themes were then contrasted with observing if there is any distinction involved in themes, and permanent codes were settled at the final stage. Moreover, for the privacy and safety of the journalists, the names of newspapers and journalists were not disclosed in this present research investigation. Therefore, the names of newspapers are denoted with alphabets from A to O in the excerpts of journalists.

Findings and Discussion

Distress of Unpaid Salaries

The prevalent drawback of coronavirus and lockdown that kept journalists under pressure was the terror of losing jobs because everyone has the responsibility to provide basic necessities to their families and which is only possible from their earnings. However, in this covid-19 pandemic where globally media industries sense an economic decline, Pakistani journalists are no exception to it. Therefore, in this regard, one journalist

working for one of the regional newspapers demonstrated his opinion in the following way:

“In the newspaper organization where I was working, fieldwork was restricted in coronavirus, pages of the newspaper were reduced, and advertisers limited their advertisements. Therefore my institution decided to down seize its staff and curtail our salaries, and I was among those whose salaries were reduced. However, when I objected and raised my voice regarding it, instead of helping me in this crucial time, the organization fired me without clearing my outstanding dues. So, my family, after some time, dealing with the situation where we do not have enough money to meet with one meal of a day” (Journalist_1, “A” Newspaper).

The above narrative discloses the psychological trauma that can be a way of leading to mental disorders. In this regard, some journalists narrated that financial strains affects the work performance of people in a negative manner and influences their health. Monetary compression among individuals working in different organizations leverages their working abilities which in turn outcomes their mental health issues (Van der Velden et al., 2019). Articulating the stated phenomenon, one journalist in pain explained his miseries,

“We were not safe in this environment, and to report stories on coronavirus with social distancing was a huge challenge. Because at the end of the day, we have to return home to our families, and there was a risk of contracting this disease. Even then, just due to the fear that my pay (which is only 8,000 monthly) is not cut down by my owner, I was reporting and

fulfilling my duties with heavy heart” (Journalist_3, “B” Newspaper).

Few journalists hold obligations against the government rather than on newspaper industries in the world where the state is providing some economic assistance to its citizens in the form of certain monetary packages, especially to those who are front line workers in this pandemic. But the Pakistani government is just offering official facts and figures on covid-19 without providing any substantial support to the people working in the field. In this regard, two journalists shared their thoughts with teary eyes as,

“I contracted with corona while reporting, as I am a field reporter and my beat was hospitals. I am appointed here on daily wages. I had to quarantine myself at home for 20 days and take precautionary measures till I was corona negative because I had no other option. But unfortunately, my boss curtailed my 20 days salary without any prior announcement. When I requested him that please, it is not my fault, I have no other job and how my family will survive. He stated that his institution does not operate on charity or on humanitarian grounds, and it is a business because newspapers must be published timely to get advertisements” (Journalist_3, “C” Newspaper).

“We were the ones who were providing every related information of covid-19 to the public with its reliability putting our lives at risks. However, no training or brainstorming sessions were designed to strengthen our psychological health and emotions, either by our organization or government. Instead, neither our incomes were paid regularly in this crisis, nor extra amount of money was given to

us for our healthcare if we fall sick reporting” (Journalist_4, “D” Newspaper).

However, two journalists were optimistic in sharing their thoughts about their newspaper industries and perceived the world to be in an unfortunate health catastrophe where blame cannot be placed on media owners for offering low salaries to their staff or curtailing a number of workers in the organization. As one of the informants concluded,

“It is not the fault of any newspaper as every human being, and mass media all around the globe were facing the repercussions of covid-19, so even in this situation, we were lucky that my newspaper was paying me monthly despite the content shortage in newspapers” (Journalist_12, “D” Newspaper).

On average, every newspaper has 10-11 pages consisted of various subjects, and due to coronavirus, my organization restricted our movements. We were working safely from our homes, and field reporting was less. But even then, we were getting our dues though a little bit late than before” (Journalist_7, “O” Newspaper).

Financial Security

Security in employment, frequently dignified applying the perceived peril of job forfeit in nearby imminent time, is a substantial dynamic of job contentment. Job security is deeply linked with the complete conduct and achievement of any institution (Ritcher, Elst & Witte, 2020). Therefore, it is supposed that the security of a job includes financial, psychological and mental health attributes for an enhanced working setting. During this research study, it was deduced that lockdown

and social distancing of covid-19 also slashed job security from journalists, which is the largest motivating domain for any individual, specifically in the media industry. Thus, journalists were previously remunerated minimum by their newspaper houses due to the erosion of the Pakistani newspaper industry in the last few years.

“Due to the downfall of media in Pakistan, our jobs are already uncertain, and this covid-19 increased our insecurity on a daily basis. My boss threatened me in this strict lockdown to visit fields to report new story every day; otherwise, he will kick me out from job without providing any safety kits regarding this epidemic disease” (Journalist_13, Aqeedat Newspaper).

Similarly, another informant with ambiguity in his feelings expressed that,

“In my organization, we journalists were not provided with masks, gloves or even sanitizers and we were continuous at jeopardy and fear of half payment from our salaries, so there was no of health or financial security from my organization” (Journalist_8, “N” Newspaper).

Financial job safety increases loyalty among journalists for their organizations. It may be because it allows journalists to function themselves with peace of mind and determination to improve their working capacities. Therefore, Sharif & Nazir (2016), in their study, determined that every individual in their institution desires to get a handsome amount of money because it offers mental well-being and inspires them to attain greater job satisfaction. The majority of the journalists during this research investigation organizations are long and indefinite.

Therefore, mental peace is very imperative for them, which entirely derives from monetary profits and the environment.

“I am working for this organization for 5 years. As monetary dependability, I was given petrol if I had some outdoor reporting and health insurance annually. But in this covid-19 plague, my organization slashed my petrol and health allowances. I am worried as I have four kids and parents to look after, and my kids are school going. Firstly, I also have to give their school fees, and this extra burden of internet charges for online classes has pressured me, which has lost my focus on my journalistic work and attributes because it is not possible for me to run my home from my monthly cut off income. Secondly, I cannot even think or try for another job in such crisis where economically every small or large business has suffered massive destruction” (Journalist_9, “M” Newspaper).

“Though every year based on our work performance, my newspaper industry promotes its staff. However, understanding the circumstances, we did not compel them to promote our designations or upsurge our earnings. But our due protection in terms of suitable reimbursement must be released as per policy (Journalist_19, “C” Newspaper).

Equal treatment among journalists was also noted to be one of the obscurities that followed and impact adversely upon journalists’ economic positions. Partiality has always been observed to be a vital fragment among media outlets in Pakistan, where political giantess and supremacy has ruled Pakistani media institutions over fair and deserved people, particularly journalists (Yousuf, 2013). Therefore, the informants in

this present research communicated their insights by describing the bias attitudes of their organizations where some journalists were preferred over others regarding the slashed incomes due to the covid-19 epidemic.

“Because of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), my boss asked us to come office on alternate days. However, our workload increased because of the fewer number of people, but we were happily fulfilling our as well as our fellows’ duties with the same remuneration. Later, nowadays, when the coronavirus is decreased, our boss is keen to fire some journalists as he thinks that if the workload can be distributed among 5-6 journalists then why hire a greater number of people. Though I am worried I will be fired as I am from a very poor background, I do not have any political influence and my fellows who previously have also been given priority over us because of their political affiliation will be in a secure position” (Journalist_18, “D” Newspaper).

“How can I work with dedication and calmly, when my owner is sending me to cover outdoor beat reporting daily, and my fellow journalist is enjoying the benefits of working at home based on coronavirus SOPs. I know I will get suffered because I was not employed on some powerful source’s orders. Every time I am nervous and bothered about my job, so my focus is less on work” (Journalist_17, “N” Newspaper).

Equality is the key towards achievement of any institution because discrimination adversely affects people’s psychological health by stressing them, which contracts their attention at the workplace and increases their concerns over their financial status of the job

(Cheung et al., 2016). However, during the enquiry of the data, the researcher distinguished that journalists strongly perceived the notion of political machinery's authority over Pakistani newspaper industries for their personal interests.

“As far as big newspaper industries are concerned, they were mainly concerned about their journalists' financial and health safety as these journalists and reporters were the main sources of dissemination of information for them but small regional newspapers like mine, they went through the issues of transportation, mass lays offs, late salaries' disbursement and imperils of powerful, influential forces to media” (Journalist_16, “F” Newspaper).

Thus, newspapers were also not distributed to remote areas because of the transportation issue during the lockdown, so it affected hawkers' income and journalists salaries too. It was because the number of newspaper issues was decreased, which generated doubt among journalists on their monthly or daily earnings.

Paid Leave

Paid leave is the benefit that every staff member working in an institution looks for it because it provides monetary and non-monetary advantages to them (Hill, 2013). It is because the employees are in an assured position for not switching one job over another. This research observed that journalists were in persistent depression and insecurity that in certain necessary situations where they intend to take paid leave for personal work or family issues, their organization would not allow them, and they may be laid-off from jobs. It may be because

print media in Pakistan, particularly during covid-19 plight, are facing recession issues where these organizations are not prepared to take any risk that may further drag them into economic catastrophes. For instance, one journalist in deep grief shared his experience as:

“My wife was covid positive, and she was having breathing problems, it was an emergency I took her to the hospital, but there was no bed available in government hospital so she could not be admitted. My friends suggested me to take my wife to a private hospital, but they were charging very high fees, which were beyond my capacity to pay. Therefore, I requested my previous organization to grant me a medical allowance, which is our due right, and it is a part of our contract signed during our employment. However, my boss refused me to pay and gave “dhamki” that they will employ another journalist if I insisted on them. And the time I could arrange money, my wife's condition further worsens, and she could not survive and died.... Ah, I left that job” (Journalist_14, “G” Newspaper).

The term “Dhamki” used in the above narration of the journalist denotes the self-centred attitude of the newspaper organization towards them in difficult global times where people were helping each other to be united and deal with the pandemic as one organization or nation. The approach of togetherness in crisis is achieved through fact-finding journalism in a collaboration that pertains to people, non-profit organizations and business dealers (Jenkins & Graves, 2019). Highlighting the newspaper industry, covid-19 affected mainly small, local and regional newspapers. However, the present study

discovered that in Pakistan, the main issue was the transportation issue with these regional journalists as they mostly belong to rural areas, and for the sake of employment, they reside in cities, away from their families. But covid-19 and lockdown increased their miseries and created a lack of communication and contact with their family members. In this regard, two journalists communicated as,

“I belong to district Tharparkar, which is around 5-6 hours far from Hyderabad, where I work. When this lockdown was about to happen, I urged my organization to give me few days leave so I can take some emergency and safety measures for my family as I am the only son and my father is very old, and after this lockdown, it will be difficult for me to go there because of no transport. However, my owner gave me to leave after cutting my two days salary by reasoning that our newspaper's advertising revenue is also decreased. So we cannot give you paid leave which was my due right” (Journalist_13, “F” Newspaper).

“I went to meet my wife and kids on paid leave after my newspaper grants me to leave and suddenly as this covid-19 occurred and imposed lockdown and everything was stopped, there was no bus, no transport so how I can travel from Thatta district (where I live) to Hyderabad city. Therefore, I called my boss and requested that in this situation, it is not possible for me to travel instantly so until the situation becomes a bit better, allow me to work from home, give me paid leave and I will cover my beat and will send you reports in writing. My boss rejected my request and said he would fire me from a job if I do not come physically and join the office” (Journalist_9, “O” Newspaper).

Future Research

Future studies can determine newspaper owners' and television authorities' experiences about the post-covid-19 calamity on Pakistani newspapers or television channels with reference to their economic eminence. In this manner, narratives can be documented from media forces' and government perspectives that can be refuted with journalists' insights.

Conclusion

This research study has recognized a framework concerning journalists' stories and experiences about the impact of covid-19 has placed upon journalists' economic status or monthly earnings in Hyderabad city of Sindh province, Pakistan. It is significant here to pinpoint that newspapers are considered to be the fourth pillar of the state, and journalists are the catalysts of providing appropriate information, specifically in coronavirus health tragedy across the world. Being the front line workers, they were in constant challenge of reporting and publishing the unusual and current news items with the danger of contracting the disease. However, newspaper organizations did not offer any health or precautionary monetary measures to journalists that could support or benefit in their earnings as well as institutions' performance of awareness. “Health and unemployment insurance and social protection are necessary, to also support business (large, medium, small scales) to prevent job losses” (Djalante et al., 2020, p. 8).

Pakistani newspaper owners blame the government for seizing advertisements' payments due to which curtail in salaries or

late incomes to journalists was executed in this lockdown of covid-19 monetary emergency (Voice of America (VOA), 2020). It is also because Pakistani media heavily rely on advertisements for their financial survival. Thus, current research findings also enlightened newspaper organizations' depletion in their pays, late and non-payment issues. Covid-19 health emergency, especially in the developing region as Pakistan, has worsened the circumstances of print media industries which were already bearing the

wages theft dispute among media houses because of social media popularity. Therefore, this research study concludes that in order for the survival of the newspaper industry in Pakistan, necessary actions must be undertaken by the government of Pakistan and business tycoons to support print media for its sustainability so that the owners of these newspaper organizations can provide monetary benefits to journalists. This will help journalists to improve their work productivity and creativity in the journalistic field.

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