

## Economic Issues and Ethical Journalism in Pakistan: Prospects and Challenges

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### Abstract

*Journalists are expected to perform truthfully and ethically which contributes to the strengthening of democracy by sharing reliable information. However, the political economy of media suggests that political and economic elites use the media for their vested interests.*

### Key Words

Local Journalism,  
Journalists Issues,  
Economic Pressures,  
Ethical Journalism,  
Political-Economy of  
Media

*Politicians and media owners exploit working journalists. Journalists are not well paid, and they are forced to do unethical practices. The present study explores the journalists' economic issues at Gujranwala (A city of Punjab, Pakistan) and how economic issues affect the ethical practices of journalists. Data was collected through in-depth interviews of 13 working journalists of Gujranwala city. Findings revealed that journalists are facing serious economic issues and these issues are leading them to unethical practices. It is suggested that government, judiciary, NGOs and journalistic bodies should play an effective role for overcoming this alarming situation.*

### Introduction

Journalism is a missionary profession. An upright, fair and responsible press is a vital component of democracy and a democratic state. The free flow of information to the masses not only makes people aware of their rights and duties but also make authorities accountable to the public. Hence the press is considered as the fourth pillar of state which must perform in a judicious and fair manner to contribute towards the progress of a state by highlighting the positive as well as negative aspects of the government and authorities (Schultz, 1998). The real force behind the strong democratic traditions in advanced countries can directly be associated with the free and responsible press (Coronel, 2003). The basic and primitive requirement of democracy is to equip the citizens with knowledge and information as only those people can play an active role in a country that has information and knowledge about state affairs (Schieck, 2003). This is the reason that promotion of a free and responsible media is an integral part of the foreign policy of USA (Cramer, 2003).

In a free democratic state, the journalist should have to reflect and engage with the interests, anxieties and concerns of citizens as well as to investigate and to report freely on without having any kind of risks or threats to the social, economic and political order (Cushion, 2007).

However, the situation in under developed countries is not ideal, and the press has facing serious problems. The state of press freedom is not ideal in developing countries and authoritarian rule often placed obstruction of free expression. Financing is also one of the key factor behind low performance of media in developing countries(Wasko, 2012).There is an increasing global trend towards minimizing the budgets in news departments it has been considered by the media owners that news in comparison with other genres are unable to attract big or advertiser friendly audience (Cushion, 2007). The situation worsens in small cities where the journalists often get less paid and more exploited. In Pakistan, there are serious issues linked withjournalism especially with the journalists working in the small cities. Journalists in the world are often forced self-censoring by power players, including politicians, publishers, advertisers and other pressure groups. Therefore, journalists feel fear for losing their jobs and they move towards self-censoring practices (Yesil, 2014). Similar issues are also found in journalism of Pakistan. Media ownership concentration or media conglomerates and competition regarding revenue generation caused serious harms to the ethical standards of journalism in Pakistan. After decades of suppression the Pakistani media is now enjoying freedom of expression in the last decade (Khan & Khalid, 2017).

Due to financial problems and ownership concentration, the number of newspapers and periodicals in Pakistan is decreasing (Eijaz, Rahman, Ahmad, & Butt, 2014) while the number of journalism graduates are increasing as there are number of universities who introduced journalism as an established discipline. This fall in print journalism caused economic pressures on journalists especially working in small cities of Pakistan like Gujranwala, Sheikhpura, Kasur and Bhakar etc. In a research study about vernacular press conducted by Riaz (2015), it was concluded that the rural journalists and correspondents are neither facilitated by their media organizations, nor supported by the government. Memon (2015), discussed various factors and cause problems for working journalists. He noted that the various means to deter the news workers to work freely include threats, arrests, torture, job insecurity and feudal influence, particularly in rural areas. These factors are directly or indirectly associated with the economic issues and hence are accelerating the economic problems of local journalists. These issues and factors directly affect the news quality and caused harm to journalistic practices which leads to demoralizing the people associated with the press.

This study aims to gauge the severity of the economic problems of journalists working in Gujranwala city of the Punjab and to assess that how these economic problems are associated with the ethical practices of journalists.

The ethical issues faced by the journalists in Pakistan includes coverage of various topics that are considered as taboos yet needed to be addressed, accuracy, truthfulness, impartiality, fairness and the respect of individual's privacy (Raza & Akbar, 2013). Waqar (2002) argued that for meeting the ongoing competition of rating, Pakistani media often indulges in sensational, controversial, and negative information. In covering certain issues often media got involved in illegal and unethical practices to earn the highest rating. It was observed in connection with the journalism practices in developing countries that profit orientation remains the major motive behind the participatory journalism practices (Vujnovic et al., 2010). As in developing countries like Pakistan, the media industry is not that much independent to survive without financial aid in shape of advertisements, hence often media compromised the journalistic norms to earn financial benefits. As no fixed pay or incentive has been given to the journalists working in small cities of Pakistan except certain media houses, hence the local journalists heavily rely on political and industrial public relations sources for keeping alive their circulation and profit (Lewis, Williams, & Franklin, 2008). These are the factors and constraints that are affecting the ethical practices of journalists. The Pakistan Press Foundation (2015), urged journalists to follow ethical norms and values while practicing journalism, yet no coordinated efforts have been made to improve the financial condition of the journalists.

Keeping in view the scenario discussed above, it can be concluded that there are serious concerns for ethical journalism in Pakistan that are directly associated with the economic problems of the journalists. Therefore, present study aims to explore the effects of economic pressures on ethical journalism of Gujranwala.

The role of journalistic bodies regarding the grievances of journalists is ineffective especially in addressing the issues of journalists belongs to small cities of Pakistan. Paracha and Tahir (2012), studied the institutional role of the All Pakistan Newspapers Society (APNS) and observed that the organization seems apparently working for safeguard journalists' rights. But in actual fact it is only performing its role against government taxes and hence efforts are directed towards ownership elite rather than the welfare of the journalists. Organization members, large media houses and media owners are also engaged in economic exploitation of their working journalists. The income sources available for working journalist are almost negligible as the media houses are not paying their workers adequately in developing countries like Pakistan. Despite of the importance associated with the profession of journalism the salaries and financial incentives of journalists are surprisingly low (Cushion, 2007).

The participation of female journalists is also critical in Pakistan. Female working journalists generally in Pakistan and especially in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan are facing serious threats and pressures. They are often unable to do justice to their profession and portray the real picture of the issues that they cover (Shabir, 2012). According to Women Media Centre (2009) the number of women journalists in Pakistan are increasing in profession of journalism yet often they have to face certain kind of difficulties to pursue their journalistic career. There is a need for proper training for women journalists for attaining the objectives of productive and responsible journalism. There is also gender pay gap in the field of journalism and female journalists are comparatively less paid. In a study about Gender Pay Gap in Journalism conducted by the wageindicator.org, it was observed that although female journalists face all the same kind of dangers like their male colleagues, and are often more vulnerable to harassment and bullying, yet the pay and benefits of male journalists exceed female wages (Lobo, Silveirinha, Torres da Silva, & Subtil, 2017).

According to the 2010 Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), women make up only 24% of the people heard, seen or understood about in the news stories and this depiction is not only limited to traditional news media rather online outlets too. Furthermore, it was observed that despite the growing participation of women in the profession of journalism, they have relatively less decision-making power inside media organizations (Macharia, O'Connor, & Ndamang, 2010). In a research study on media and gender in Asia and the Pacific conducted by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ Asia Pacific), UNESCO and UN Women it was observed that there are less than 10 percent females that are working at an executive level like at senior editorial level in media organizations. The situation becomes more pathetic in small cities like Gujranwala where female journalists are prone to unfriendly working conditions.

### **Political Economy of Media and Ethical Journalism**

The term Political economy can be comprehended as a collection of theories and approaches that aimed to analyze the interplay between economic processes and specific political circumstances (Schubert

& Klein, 2011). The term political economy has a broadly 'critical' signification in media research which rises emerged with the evolution of the mass media. It is often associated with macro-questions of media ownership and control, along with other factors that bring together media industries with other media and with other industries, and with political economic and social elites (Baran & Davis, 2010).

McChesney (2003) focused on the political economy factors of American journalism. He stated the grounds for miserable journalism stem not from ethically bankrupt or untalented journalists, but from a structure that makes such journalism the normal effects of its operations. The mass media industry today stand at the center of our financial system, politics, culture, and everyday life matters (Kellner, 2016). Political economy of media explains the production process and ethical practices of journalism. It seems a helpful approach for exploring the link of economics, politics and journalism.

### Objectives of Study

Followings are the major objectives of study.

- To explore the economic pressures on Gujranwala journalists.
- To examine the ethical problems in Gujranwala journalism.
- To highlight the relationship of economic pressures and ethical journalism in Gujranwala.

### Research Questions

Followings are the major research questions of the study.

- What are the major issues of Gujranwala journalists?
- To what extent ethical journalism is being practiced in Gujranwala?
- To what extent, economic pressures lead journalists to unethical practices?

### Methodology

Present study is exploratory in nature. Therefore, the qualitative research design is applied for achieving the research goals. In-depth interview method was employed. Data was collected from 13 working journalists of Gujranwala city. Respondents were accessed personally. Proper consent was taken, and consent Performas got signed by the interviewee before starting interview. They were introduced to the topic and were granted right to withdraw at any stage. Respondents were also ensured about confidentiality of information. Average time of interview was recorded 25 to 30 minutes. The collected data is analyzed thematically to elaborate the results of the study.

### Interview Protocol

An interview protocol was developed. Firstly, questions about demographic detail of respondents like education, working experience, organization and age were asked. Secondly, 13 question items were designed. These questions were about interest in journalism, perception about Gujranwala journalism, issues in local journalism, economic issues in local journalism, ethical issues of journalism, relationship of economic issues and ethical issues as well as suggestions for improvement.

### Results

#### Demography of Respondents

All 13 respondents who were journalists were male, because only two females were found employed in Gujranwala and were not allowed by their respective Bureau chiefs to access them for interview. Most of the journalists were found middle aged (M=40.69, SD=13.02). All were well experienced journalists, having years of working experience (Min=5, Max=40, M=18.92, SD=9.08). There were 5 journalists from print and 8 journalists from electronic media were interviewed. Journalists also included cameraman, reporter, bureau chief, editor, sub-editor, non-linear editor, and columnist. Most of the journalists were found educated. Some journalists were also found engaged in M.Phil Communication Studies (Table 1)

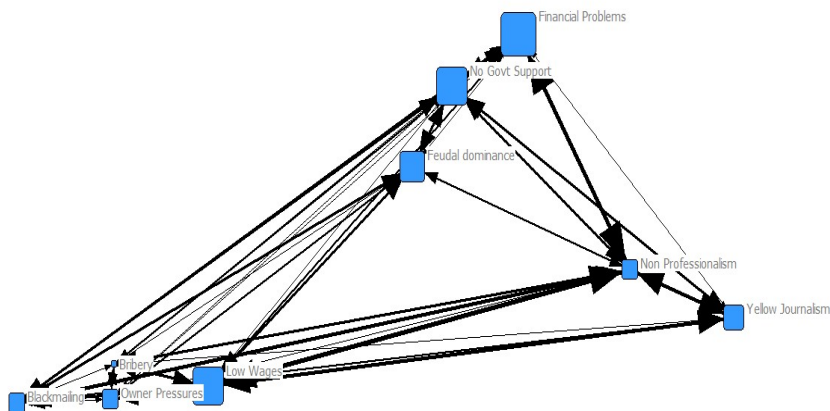
**Table 1.** Education of Journalists

	Frequency	Percent
10 Year	2	15.4
12 Year	1	7.7
14 Year	3	23.1
16 Year	4	30.8
16 Above	3	23.1
Total	13	100.0

**Table 2.** Inductively developed Thematic Categories

Category	Thematic Category	Key Terms
<b>Economic Pressures</b>	Lack of Government Support	No pension, No registration, No license, No residence, No facilities, No criteria for journalism, Judiciary role
	Financial Problems	difficult to manage expenditures, no handsome earnings
	Feudal dominance	Bureau Chief Hegemony, family Journalism, Industrialists Owner, Political Influences
	Low Wages	No Salary, or Minimal Salary, no TA/DA, No overtime payment.
	Owner Pressures	Advertisements demands, Marketing pressures, breaking pressures, rating pressures.
<b>Ethical Issues</b>	Yellow Journalism	Distorting facts, conceal truth, sensationalism, invade privacy
	Non-Professionalism	No proper education, No experience, no previous background of journalism, blackmailers. Burglars, political elites, industrialists
	Blackmailing	Threatening gentle persons, the poor, demanding money, “deharibaz” “toutism”
	Bribery	Selling news, deal of money for personal projections, “lifafa journalism”

After data collection, an inductive approach was applied to collect thematic categories (Table 2). Most of the journalists talk about the low wages, job insecurity and financial problems of journalists. They have also associated these issues with yellow journalism, unethical journalism and blackmailing. Figure 1 highlights that low wages are very closely interlinked with owner pressures, bribery and blackmailing. It presents that owner ideological factors are exploiting journalists and leading them towards unethical journalism. Secondly, figure 1 shows that non-professionalism is nearly linked to yellow journalism. Therefore, it can be interpreted that the major reason of yellow journalism are non-professional journalists. Lastly, figure reveals that financial problems are majorly caused by feudal domination and lack of government support. The certain issues faced by the journalists in small cities like Gujranwala are nominal or no salary, political and industrialist’s influence, ownership influence, rating issues etc. The owners of the media outlets are more concerned with the profit rather than information dissemination and ethical practices. Another critical issue found is the low education of the media owner and establishment of media outlets to gain certain benefits to run other kind of affairs by using journalism as an umbrella. The kind of pressures and issues forced journalists to get muddled in unethical and corrupt practices which not only caused misinformation and distortion of facts but also cause severe distrust among public resulting in overall defamation of journalism. These factors are the major cause that resulted in lowering the credibility of media in the eyes of public.



**Figure 1:** Thematic Categories and their Associations

*Note:* Element size represents frequency of element, lines darkness shows association strength, and closeness of elements shows inter-linkage of themes.

One journalist said “80% working journalists are non-paid journalists”. Another journalist told that “there are more than 2000 journalists in Gujranwala, out of which only 250 are registered in Press club”. Journalists told that bureau ship is on sale. Every bureau further appoints non-paid workers, and these workers are then motivated towards unethical journalism due to their financial problems. A young journalist, having M.Phil. degree in Mass Communication, told that he is only getting Rs.10000 pay, which is not sufficient for his family. He raised questions from media owners and government agencies that how he can manage his wife, his children, and his monthly expenditures in this limited income. Another journalist, who was working in famous newspaper from last 20 years, told that journalists do “lifafa journalism” due to their financial reasons. Moreover, Bureau offices, local politicians and industrialists are also exploiting journalists.

Another thing was also found, that there is strong influences of politics and “bradarism” in journalism of Gujranwala. A working journalist told that 5 big media offices’ bureau chiefs belong to a specific caste. Moreover, one famous media house bureau chief is under matric, and not a professional journalist, but he was appointed as bureau chief due to the relation with a government minister. A cameraman told that “Industrialists and business men are publishing newspapers just for the sake of power, and money. They are selling their press cards without any check and balance. A senior journalist said, there is no criterion implemented for politics and journalism. Everyone is doing journalism, without any registration, without any license and permission. Journalistic bodies were also criticized for their poor performance in safeguarding journalists’ problems. One journalist blamed judiciary for yellow journalism. He said “there are more than 400 petitions in session court Gujranwala against a newspaper about blackmailing, defamation and corruption. But not a single petition was decided yet”. Judiciary should also perform its role for ethical journalism. Gujranwala is second largest division of Punjab, yet its press club was established in 2015. One journalist blamed so-called journalist unions for promoting yellow journalism. He said that most of members of Press Club are Industrialists, which is one of the major reasons to exploit their working journalists.

## Discussion

Journalism was once considered a mission. In Pakistan movement, its role cannot be under estimated. But now the situation has become vice versa. This mission has been adopted as profession and business. At local level of Gujranwala, lack of government support, financial problems, low wages, feudal dominance and owners’ pressures for marketing, profit making are the major issues of journalists (Table 2). Low wages, financial problems, and lack of government support were much emphasized by the journalists (Figure 1). Journalists are not paid well; they are not paid for overtime. These are the major economic concerns of local journalists as it was noted by Riaz (2015) in his study regarding vernacular press. Present study finds this phenomenon in big city of Punjab i.e. Gujranwala. Furthermore, bureau chief hegemony, industrialist owners, and political elites’ influence are also the major problems of local journalists. As it is previously argued that journalism in Pakistan still sufferings a lot of political and economic pressures (Memon, 2015). These findings provide sufficient answers to RQ1. In this way, study indicates that journalism and press at gross root level, is not flourishing. It is causing disrupt in journalism profession. Freedom of press becomes a nightmare at gross root level in Pakistan, specifically at Gujranwala.

Study further finds out that ethical journalism is not much more practicing in Gujranwala. Yellow journalism, blackmailing, bribery, “deharibazi” “lifafa journalism” non-professionalism, and profit making has become the central to journalistic practices (Table 2). Journalists are taking envelopes of money from government and private organizations for hiding their corruption and negative aspects to publish in newspapers. Majority of non-professional persons, like industrialists, burglars, and political workers has become journalists just for the sake of power and money. Beat reporters has become tout of that particular department or organization. For example, a crime reporter is involved in making money by performing the role of middle man between police and criminals. Therefore, study find out support for previous assumptions about unethical journalism in Pakistan (Pakistan Press Foundation, 2015; Raza & Akbar, 2013). All these findings provide sufficient answers to RQ2. It is very alarming situation for the development of journalism at specific and society at large. Policy makers must strive hard to overcome these problems in journalism at priority basis. Moreover, female participation in journalism is very low at local level. Efforts should be made to promote gender equality at gross root level journalism.

The major focus of this study was to explore the relationships of journalists’ economic issues and ethical journalism. Concept of political economy suggests that media has become industry and political, economic elites used media for their interests (Baran & Davis, 2010; Boyd-Barrett, 1995; McQuail, 2010). Findings of the study highlight that lack of government support, feudal dominance and financial problems are closely associated (Figure 1). It is argued that political and economic elites are the major reason for financial problems of journalists. Political economy of media is also prevailing at micro-level. Gujranwala local journalism provides evidence for the political economy of media. Due to political-economic elites’ influences, and profit orientation, non-professionalism is extending in Gujranwala journalism. And this trend leads towards yellow journalism.

Although, majority of journalists claimed that yellow journalism is prevailing in Gujranwala, but there are also exists some professional journalists, who are doing ethical journalism. Yellow journalism was mostly associated with non-professional journalism. Non-professionalism is the production of political-economic elites. Furthermore, study found close

connections among low wages, bribery, blackmailing and owner influences (Figure 1). Findings of study provide enormous support for answering RQ3 that there is a close connection of economic pressures on journalists and their ethical practices. The situation is not good for the media development in Pakistan. Not only government, but journalistic bodies should also focus to combat these economic constraints of journalism. In this way, a positive change can be brought in journalism at gross-root level. Economic problems and non-professional journalists should be restricted through careful monitoring, scrutiny and proper registration of journalists, either by the Government or by Journalistic bodies. Judiciary should also perform active role in accountability of “yellow journalists”.

## **Conclusion**

Journalism in Pakistan is passing through critical phases at gross root level. Gujranwala journalists are facing serious economic issues. These issues include; financial problems, no salary, or minimal salary, no TA/DA, no overtime payment, no pension, no registration system, no license system, no residence, no facilities, no criteria for journalism, bureau chief hegemony, family journalism, industrialists owner, political influences, marketing pressures, and rating pressures. These issues are leading journalism towards; yellow journalism, Distorting facts, conceal truth, sensationalism, invading privacy, non-professionalism, ‘lifafa journalism’, ‘dehari journalism’, ‘toutism’, blackmailing, and bribery. Government, judiciary and journalistic bodies should perform an active and effective role for overcoming this alarming situation.

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**Definitions of Regional or Local Terms**

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“DehariBazi”  
دیهاری بازی

A term is used for “daily wagers”. It is common in journalism, the most of journalists in Pakistan, earn through daily wages by exploiting, blackmailing others on daily basis.

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“Lifafa journalism”  
لفافہ صحافت

In English “envelop journalism”, In the context of Pakistan, it signifies the bribery in journalism.

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“Toutism”

In Pakistani journalism, “tout” as a middle man between public and government institutions, for any related task. Journalists also have become “tout” and get money from public for helping them.

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Bradarism  
برادرزم

In English, “caste system”.

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