

Crisis Reporting Under Constraint: Journalists' Experiences of Information Access During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Pakistan

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines the challenges faced by journalists in Pakistan, Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK), and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) while reporting during the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on thematic analysis of forty-two focus group discussions conducted with experienced journalists from seven major press clubs, the study explores how structural, institutional, and logistical constraints shaped journalists' ability to gather, verify, and disseminate crisis-related information. Five interconnected themes emerged: delayed access to official information, restricted physical access to sources, misinformation and verification pressures, reliance on digital communication, and institutional deficits in transparency. Despite these challenges, journalists demonstrated adaptive resilience using digital tools, informal information networks, and collaborative verification practices. However, these adaptive strategies were frequently constrained by systemic institutional shortcomings, including centralized communication systems, information gatekeeping, and inadequate professional support mechanisms. Guided by the Hierarchy of Influences Model (Shoemaker & Reese, 2007), the study highlights how macro-level structural pressures and organizational limitations shaped journalistic practices during the health emergency. The findings underscore the need for improved crisis communication mechanisms, stronger coordination between governments and media organizations, and enhanced digital verification training for journalists. The study further contributes to crisis journalism scholarship by foregrounding the structural realities of information access in the Global South.

Keywords: crisis reporting, access to information, COVID-19, journalism, Pakistan, thematic analysis, qualitative research

Introduction

The SARS-CoV-2 outbreak in 2019 and its rapid global nature spread highlighted in unprecedented clarity how fragile the systems are via which modern societies produce and consume public health information. With national governments declaring states of emergency and imposing physical lockdowns while they scrambled to coordinate their respective

coronavirus health response efforts, the journalistic burden- to inform, clarify and put into context what was happening, became both acute and difficult to carry out. The journalists who were assigned to report on the pandemic, were in many respects on the front line of an information emergency that was co-occurring with the health emergency itself. This phenomenon was termed an "infodemic" by the World Health Organization, which recognised that there were two simultaneous but mutually reinforcing epidemics. ie. one of accurate information, the other of misinformation (Makri, 2020).

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About the topical issues surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to mention within the context of Pakistan, there were already significant structural vulnerabilities in Pakistani journalism prior to the onset of the pandemic. Before the onset of COVID-19, Pakistani journalism was navigating multiple issues that placed stress on the media, including: censorship, decreased advertising revenue, increased harassment of journalists, increased numbers of poorly controlled, poor-quality digital platforms, and ongoing voids in journalistic skill and institutional capacity (Jahanzeb, 2019; Satti & Sadiq, 2019). The fact that Pakistan was rated 145 out of 180 countries in the 2021 Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index illustrates the degree to which structural restrictions on journalistic autonomy existed before COVID-19, not because of COVID-19 (Palmer, 2021). Therefore, once the COVID-19 pandemic reached Pakistan, the structural issues facing Pakistani journalism that existed prior to the COVID-19 pandemic became worse and in some instances were weaponized as the government used its authority to centralize control over information under the guise of managing the COVID-19 pandemic (Khan et al., 2021; Sadiq, 2020).

The situation in Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) posed additional layers of difficulty, not just because they are geographically remote; their media infrastructures are limited and have historically been challenged by a lack of physical connectivity. Thus, the realities faced by journalists in these regions during the COVID-19 crisis were starkly different from those experienced by journalists based in urban centers across Pakistan. In addition, internet penetration, access to government data, and the realities of field reporting were greatly limited, resulting in a compounding disadvantage for these journalists (Shah & Shah, 2024).

This research will analyse the barriers encountered by journalists from Pakistan, AJK, and GB in accessing and reporting on crisis information during the COVID-19 pandemic through a qualitative lens, and how they adapted their professional practices. The questions outlined above are not simply descriptive, as the body of research related to crisis communication has long established a connection between the

quality of public information and subsequent population-level outcomes, particularly during health emergencies (Barnes, 2020; Rauchfleisch et al., 2021).

Problem Statement

There is a growing body of literature worldwide about what journalism has looked like during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, much of the research done about Pakistan and its administered territories has yet to be represented in any significant way in the scholarly record. Work that has been done in relation to the pandemic has tended to be concerned with either the economic impacts of the disruption of media during the pandemic or high-level comparisons between journalistic practice in different parts of the world (Hafeez, 2022; Jamil, 2023; Nizamani et al., 2021). However, the qualitative nature of the challenges journalists face when accessing information, both as a professional ethics challenge and in terms of experiencing the day-to-day challenges of accessing information and working under conditions of institutional opacity; physical restriction; uncertainty with respect to digital and connectivity; and pressure to spread misinformation; has not been a significant focus in this body of literature.

This lack of focus on the lived experience of journalists in Pakistan is important for several reasons. The context of journalistic practice within Pakistan is not merely a scaled-down version of the Western or Northern European contexts that have dominated the existing body of literature about crisis journalism. Structural relationships between state institutions and media organisations, the unique ways in which governments manage access to information, the uneven state of communication and digital infrastructure throughout Pakistan, and chronic underfunding of the journalistic profession, all contribute to the challenge of finding and accessing information while working as a journalist and require that researchers providing contextually relevant analyses. Generalising from media environments that are more robust than that in Pakistan risks misclassifying the challenge and therefore misidentifying the nature of the solution.

This research is addressing this gap by foregrounding access to information as a central

analytical concern and examining it through sustained qualitative engagement with journalists whose professional experience during the pandemic spanned the diversity of Pakistan's media landscape, including its geographically and institutionally marginal territories.

Research Objectives

The study pursues the following specific objectives:

RO1: To identify the primary barriers that journalists in Pakistan, AJK, and GB encountered in accessing reliable and timely information during the COVID-19 pandemic.

RO2: To examine how restricted information access affected the quality, timeliness, and comprehensiveness of crisis reporting.

RO3: To analyze the adaptive strategies journalists developed in response to information access constraints.

RO4: To assess the role of institutional transparency and government-media relations in shaping journalistic information environments during the health emergency.

RO5: To contribute evidence-based recommendations for strengthening crisis communication infrastructure in support of effective journalism during future emergencies.

Research Questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What structural and institutional barriers did journalists in Pakistan, AJK, and GB encounter when attempting to access official information during the COVID-19 pandemic?

RQ2: How did restricted physical access to information sources affect journalistic practice during the pandemic?

RQ3: What role did misinformation play in complicating journalists' information-gathering and verification processes during the global health crisis?

RQ4: What adaptive strategies did journalists develop to maintain their reporting functions in the face of information access constraints?

RQ5: How did institutional transparency—or its absence—shape the character of crisis reporting during COVID-19?

Literature Review

Journalism and Crisis Communication

Over the last several decades of research on media studies, there have been extensive theoretical and empirical examinations of the connection between communication and journalism during a time of crisis. Extensive evidence supports a concept within the literature that suggests a vital role for journalists to serve society during psychological crises or emergencies. That role is to provide members of society with timely, factual, and contextually valuable information to make appropriate decisions regarding their own health, safety, and civility (Barnes, 2020; Russial et al., 2015). Accomplishing this role is usually vital, but also the most challenging in times of crisis when circumstances exist (e.g., travel limitations, disorganization, informational overload) that are especially disruptive to the normal operations of journalism.

COVID-19 presented global challenges to journalism and resulted in journalism systems that were both functioning and non-functioning in different ways. Studies conducted in a variety of different countries highlight the existence of many common, related obstacles to journalism during the pandemic, including limitations on access to government information, barriers to reporting in the field, the amplification of misinformation through social media platforms, and increasing political pressure on journalists to maintain their independence (García-Avilés, 2021; Papadopoulou & Maniou, 2021; Trifonova Price & Antonova, 2022). The types of challenges mentioned above were not equally distributed throughout the different journalism systems. Journalists from developing nations and areas with weaker institutional communication structures experienced additional barriers not experienced by journalists from more developed parts of the world (Radcliffe, 2021).

Information Access as a Structural Problem

Accessing information is not only a technical/logistical impediment within crisis reporting but encompasses an inherent structural deficit which is defined by the institutional architecture on which journalism functions or operates. In most cases, during times of emergency the Government's method of processing information will lead to the establishment of communication protocols that, as they facilitate the legitimate co-ordination of activities, present an avenue for gate-keeping of information that may be in contravention of the public interest (Bernadas & Ilagan, 2020; Van Aelst, 2021). There has always been tension between these two tendencies and it has come to the fore during COVID-19, with Governments around the globe using the rationale of public health management arising from the pandemic as grounds for the imposition of restrictions on access to data (i.e., not having to provide access to data), access to public officials, and access to on-location coverage by the media, and in many cases, such restrictions extended beyond what was required for epidemiological purposes (Maerz et al., 2020).

This dynamic was played out through several different avenues in Pakistan. For instance, as critics alleged, in April 2020 the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority issued directives that were intended to suppress media coverage that was critical of the government's handling of the pandemic (Alam, 2020). There were reports from journalists that there were delayed and inconsistent releases of case data from government departments, and that journalists were being deliberately stymied in their attempts to ask questions of officials responsible for communicating with the public about such health issues (Iqbal et al., 2021; Naeem et al., 2021). These results were not simply isolated communication failures but instead were indicative of systemic issues in the government-media relationship that were exacerbated by the urgency of the situation.

The Infodemic and Verification Challenges

The World Health Organization's declaration of an "infodemic" represents a new phenomenon in the COVID-19 information environment: never before have so many millions

of people had access to reliable and fact-based health information and at the same time been inundated with misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories that not only are being published but are also undermining the reliability of that information at the same time (Greenspan & Loftus, 2021; Vraga et al., 2020). This has posed an unprecedented professional challenge for journalists trying to adhere to the verification standards that are the basis of responsible journalism, the essential elements of which are: verifying sources, consulting with established authorities, and allowing enough time for fact-checking (López-García et al., 2021). They are now being confronted by two conflicting pressures: on one hand, the urgency of the news cycle is compelling them to publish quickly; on the other hand, the complexity and novelty of the information environment are requiring them to exercise substantial caution.

Pakistan experienced a highly challenging environment due to pre-existing patterns of rumours dissemination interwoven with low levels of public health literacy and subsequently compounded by the infodemic. Conspiracy theories surrounding such issues as the origin, severity, and effectiveness of public health preventative measures for COVID-19 proliferated throughout multiple avenues including WhatsApp message systems and many social media platforms that served as primary sources of COVID-19 related information for many Pakistanis (Akhtar et al., 2021; Naeem et al., 2021). Journalists struggled to stay ahead of the conflicting information from official sources; being forced to verify information being withheld from them while attempting to disprove false information being disseminated freely; thereby placing unprecedented demands on their professional resources and time.

Digital Adaptation and Its Limits

The global pandemic has forced journalism all over the globe to suddenly transition to digital communication tools and has created a complex situation overall. On the plus side, communicating with sources and conducting interviews using Zoom, WhatsApp, and other social media channels allowed journalists to do so when physical distancing made it impossible to

meet in person to do so (Schoenberger & Proffitt, 2020). News organizations set up virtual newsrooms, and the need for digital communication tools to conduct journalism has led to an accelerated pace of learning digital skills due to the urgent need to use certain digital tools that were previously available but not frequently used (García-Avilés, 2021).

However, there were limits to this kind of adaptation. Digital forms of communication have their own set of verification challenges: with online sources much easier to create, verify & assess, and more susceptible to manipulation as opposed to generating in-person relationships based on time (Makri, 2020; Usher, 2020). In places such as AJK and GB, where internet connectivity was unreliable and broadband (i.e. bandwidth) was not available to enable sustained video communication, the digital change that worked well in Karachi or Lahore often did not work at all (Ilyas et al., 2020; Shabbir, 2020). The digital divide therefore reflected, in the journalism profession, the larger pattern of infrastructural inequity that reflects the current state of Pakistani society.

Press Freedom and Political Pressures

The effect of the pandemic on freedom of the press in Pakistan is closely linked to the effect on access to information; both are bound together by structural links. Governments restrict the press through their ability to control how information flows and controlling the way that information flows diminish the independence of journalism. Authors from around the world have documented that authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regimes have used pandemic-traveling justifications to increase their surveillance and censorship mechanisms (Papadopoulou & Maniou, 2021). Pakistan has shown and displayed many of these same traits, specifically documented experiences of journalists being harassed or intimidated and one instance where a journalist was kidnapped in connection to reporting around the pandemic (Sadiq, 2020).

These forms of pressure impacted individual journalists—the chilling effect caused by reporters' activities—likewise, to an increasing degree, impacted media outlet operations—increased reliance on government-provided

advertising revenues due to the loss of commercial advertising revenues during lockdown (Ali, 2020), creating a mutually-reinforcing cycle between economic/political pressures that limited journalist independence for aggressive news-gathering activity.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws upon the Hierarchy of Influences Model developed by Shoemaker and Reese (2007), which proposes that journalistic content and practice are shaped by influences operating at multiple levels: the individual journalist, media routines, organizational structures, extra-media institutions, and social systems. The model is particularly well-suited to analyzing crisis journalism because it provides analytical tools for understanding how macro-level pressures—government policy, political economy, social norms—cascade downward to shape what individual journalists do and do not report, and how they go about doing it.

Applied to the COVID-19 context in Pakistan, the model illuminates several dynamics of relevance to this study. At the social systems level, the pandemic intersected with Pakistan's broader press freedom environment to create conditions in which information access was constrained not simply by practical logistics but by political calculation. At the extra-media level, government communication strategies—characterized by centralization, inconsistency, and selective transparency—shaped the information environment within which journalists operated. At the organizational level, media houses confronting acute economic pressures were in many cases unable or unwilling to provide journalists with the resources needed for effective crisis reporting. At the level of media routines, the enforced disruption of traditional field-reporting practices compelled improvisation and adaptation that produced their own information quality challenges. And at the individual level, journalists navigated all of these pressures with varying resources, skills, and institutional support.

This multi-level analytical lens resists the tendency, common in journalistic practice discourse, to locate the solution to crisis reporting challenges primarily at the level of individual skill or professional training. While capacity building

is clearly relevant, the Hierarchy of Influences framework insists that individual journalists' capabilities are always exercised within structural conditions that enable or constrain them in ways that no individual-level intervention can fully address.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, grounded in interpretive inquiry, to explore the subjective and intersubjective dimensions of journalists' information access experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative approaches are appropriate when the research aim is to understand the meanings that participants attribute to their experiences, the social processes through which those experiences are shaped, and the contextual factors that give specific practices their character (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The phenomenon under investigation—the lived experience of information access constraint in crisis journalism—is precisely the kind of complex, contextually embedded process for which qualitative inquiry is methodologically suited.

The study does not seek statistical generalization from its findings. Rather, it pursues what Braun and Clarke (2006) term "theoretical transferability"—the development of conceptual insights that can inform understanding of analogous situations in other contexts, even if the specific empirical findings cannot be mechanically applied elsewhere.

Data Collection: Focus Group Discussions

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were used to collect data from senior journalists affiliated with press clubs throughout Pakistan, Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), and Gilgit Baltistan (GB). FGDs were conducted within seven different locations, including the cities of Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, Quetta, Islamabad, Muzaffarabad, and Gilgit. 58 senior journalists participated in total across eight different FGDs, with group sizes distributed from seven to ten participants. Sessions were conducted in person and over Zoom; the former is due to geographic

and logistical challenges faced by participants during the pandemic, and the latter due to internet connectivity issues in Gilgit, leading to the need to repeat one session.

Participants were purposively selected for this study because they were expected to possess sufficient depth of professional experience as well as relevant specific experiential knowledge. In addition to possessing at least ten years of experience in the field of journalism, the participant cohort must have also been actively engaged in their profession during the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants who made up the cohort can be classified into different roles within journalism: reporters (including stringers), sub-editors, photojournalists, producers, and assignment editors. The journalists that participated were comprised of both printed and electronic media. As a supplementary action to purposive selection, snowball techniques were used to identify other potential participants through the initial contact recommendations of their colleagues whose experiences were deemed highly relevant to the proposed research.

Discussions were structured around a semi-structured protocol which contained ten open-ended questions, these included the impacts of the pandemic on the ability of journalists to perform their role, specific challenges faced by them, the psychological and physical harm suffered by them, adaptive strategies, access to information and of sources, to what degree they received aid and support from others; safety measures that were suggested to enhance their safety while working; the role of institutions in terms of providing support during the crisis; support mechanisms around organizations that could be used if similar circumstances arise; and lessons learned as a result of this for future resiliency. Each discussion could last between two hours to three hours. All discussions were audiotaped with permission from each participant. The audiotapes were transcribed for purpose of analysis.

Sampling

Participant selection was done using a purposive sampling method that was then augmented utilizing a snowball referral. Qualitative research typically employs this

method for sampling participants who have specific and pertinent experiential background rather than creating a sample that represents the entire population (Gibbs et al., 2007). The geographical area covered by these samples consists of 7 different locations of press clubs over 4 provincial boundaries in addition to the federal capital territory, AJK and GB. Such a sampling strategy is meant to capture the breadth of different journalistic experiences within the context of all of Pakistan's media which includes some geographical areas that are not currently included in existing literature.

Data Analysis

This study utilized thematically analysed material using Braun & Clarke, (2006) and six stages of data analysis, which are explained below.

- Familiarisation with the data (transcript) by reading all transcripts multiple times.
- Initial coding of data (meaningful units of content).
- Search for themes by grouping related codes together.
- Review themes against the data to ensure coherence and completeness.
- Define and name themes.
- Produce a final analytical account of the data.

The study also used a theoretical lens of the Hierarchy of Influences influencing the analysis and understanding of the structural and institutional conditions under which journalists accessed information.

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent for participation was acquired from participants, with an emphasis on their right to withdraw at any time. Prior to recording sessions, explicit agreement was required. Transcripts and all other analytical materials were de-identified regarding the participants' individual identities and institutional affiliation. Data was secured on password-protected encrypted devices, which are only accessible to members of the research team. The

study was conducted without any external sponsorship or funding; therefore, there were no potential conflicts of interest that can be attributed to the research.

Findings

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of FGD data produced five primary themes, each capturing a distinct dimension of journalists' information access experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. These themes are presented below with supporting evidence drawn from participant testimony and situated within the relevant scholarly literature.

To optimize traceability and maintain scientific clarity, focus group discussions are labeled as FG1 through FG8, and individual respondents are assigned unique participant codes (e.g., P1, P2) within their respective groups.

Theme 1: Delayed and Inconsistent Access to Official Information

Across all manageable levels of the FGD sessions conducted in this study, there was a common and profound level of frustration with the continual tardiness and inconsistency of the provision of official information by the relevant government departments and health institutions. The FGD participants described an information environment characterised by irregular briefings, conflicting or contradictory data releases, and an inherent lag between the urgency of the event occurring and the speed of obtaining official confirmation through appropriate channels for the event's occurrence.

A member of the local press in Lahore (FG2, P4) articulated this problem clearly when he stated: "During the entire crisis period, we faced many difficult moments in obtaining public interest information. The government agencies were consistently very slow in providing timely and accurate information to the media."

Another participant in Islamabad highlighted how these systematic delays fundamentally crippled the day-to-day work of field journalists, noting:

"We would stand outside government offices for hours waiting for daily infection

figures, only to be given data that contradicted what we were seeing on the ground in the wards. By the time the official notification came out, it was already yesterday's news." (FG5, P2)

This member's description of his challenges in obtaining public information was expressed consistently by other FGD participants in all geographical locations represented within the study population. Thus, delayed official communications were found not to be a phenomenon limited to a specific geographical location but rather a characteristic of how the government has managed to inform the public and the media throughout the pandemic.

This situation has created significant challenge to the journalistic profession today, as reporters have been forced to decide whether to delay the release of news until they could verify the details of events or put the public at risk of missing critical details by publishing after obtaining only part of the facts. Some of the participants found informal sources and cross-referencing to be their methods of trying to address this problem, but they all described these methods being time-consuming, costly and not always reliable. Consequently, there has been several downstream professional difficulties resulting from the structural inadequacies of government communication due to occur at each stage of the journalistic process.

These findings are consistent with broader literature on government communication during COVID-19. For example, Usher (2020) showed how journalists in many different national contexts also experienced insufficient, delayed and/ or selectively curated government information and therefore found it difficult to provide the public with accurate reporting about public health. However, these issues appear to be accentuated to a substantial degree in the Pakistan situation than they were in those of other countries probably because of the underlying tensions that existed in the relationship between media and government before the pandemic and because there did not exist sufficient institutional mechanisms that facilitate the government's transparent communication in times of crisis.

Theme 2: Restricted Physical Access to Sources and Field Locations

The pandemic-related lockdowns and movement limitations presented a second major barrier to accessing information: it was physically impossible for journalists to visit the sites and reach out to the sources necessary to accurately report on the situation. Critical locations for pandemic reporting, such as hospitals, quarantine centres, government agencies, and public gathering places, became completely off-limits to reporters due to both mandated restrictions and the necessary protocols required for journalists and their sources to minimize the risk of exposure to the virus.

Reporters in the focus groups frequently noted the difficulty of covering a health crisis while being physically kept away from the institutions that provided the primary response to the public health crisis. The comments of one reporter based in Muzaffarabad (FG6, P1) demonstrate why the lack of digital alternatives resulted in a direct connection between being physically inaccessible to information collection:

"Most institutions within the area that I live in do not maintain digital archives or provide real-time updates via their websites, and during the time of the Coronavirus pandemic, when there have been questions regarding the availability of information, designated representatives of those institutions were either unavailable or did not respond to requests for the necessary information promptly."

A photojournalist participating in the Peshawar focus group further expanded on how physical restrictions severed vital community ties, explaining:

"Our job requires our eyes and our cameras to be on the ground. When they blocked us from entering hospital courtyards under the label of safety protocols, it wasn't just about security—it cut off our access to the families who were suffering. We could no longer verify if oxygen shortages were real or exaggerated." (FG3, P7)

The field access issue was especially serious in AJK and GB because geography, few major institutions, and poor internet infrastructure combined to restrict the ability to access information remotely. Participants in these regions shared instances of limited options (and often no possible options) to gain reliable information from

locations they could not access, and which had no digital means of reporting events.

For many years, research has documented how important it is for journalists in developing countries to have a field presence, especially in places where institutional communication infrastructure is weak because relationship-based informal sources cannot be supported through only digital channels (Parahita, 2021; Radcliffe, 2021). COVID-19's movement restrictions thus disrupted precisely the information-gathering practices that were most critical in Pakistan's particular journalistic environment.

Theme 3: Misinformation and the Intensification of Verification Demands

The unprecedented challenges provided to journalists throughout all FGD locations (in addition to the extreme volume of unverified, contradictory or purposely deceitful information posted on WhatsApp groups, Facebook pages and other digital platforms related to the pandemic) created a verification problem across the board. Many of the participants reported a considerable amount of unverified information concerning the public health crisis that affected their ability to report accurately, despite the reported validity of that information.

One Quetta-based journalist (FG4, P5) noted that "we [journalists] did not have adequate training dedicated toward verifying information that is health-related". This comment illustrates the professional capacity gap created by the complexity of the pandemic-related information provided to journalists. In other words, typically journalists rely on general knowledge and relationships with sources to assess the credibility of information but due to the new and highly scientific nature of content, journalists were regularly confronted with technical scientific content that they didn't have the knowledge necessary to validate.

An assignment editor from Karachi emphasized the intense psychological toll and commercial friction caused by this dynamic:

"We were caught in a terrible vice. On one side, social media was exploding with remedies and fake death tolls, and our management wanted us to put out updates every

five minutes to keep up with the clicks. On the other side, we knew that running an unverified rumor could cause mass panic or ruin our credibility entirely." (FG1, P3)

The resulting bottleneck in verification created by the pandemic's complexity, along with the demand for real-time news reporting, resulted in the likelihood that information reported, which had not been validated would not just be a lapse on an individual journalist's part, but would also create significant structural risks associated with publishing invalidated information.

Many interviewees mentioned that time constraints for verifying facts created frustrations. The existing pressure to produce digital news rapidly, which existed before the pandemic, became acute with audience demand for timely information about the pandemic. As a result, journalists reported significant conflicts between their professional responsibilities to confirm facts and the commercial or organizational pressures to get their news published as quickly as possible. This unique combination of the complicated, confusing nature of information and the urgency of information for the public created extreme stress for journalists.

Seaton et al. (2020) illustrate this situation as the "verification trap" of journalism in times of crisis: the increase in risk associated with providing accurate information occurs while verifying information becomes extremely challenging. López-García et al. (2021) demonstrate that this same type of experience production of verification occurred within Spain, noting that the infodemic has fundamentally changed verification as a profession, and that standard routines for journalists did not accommodate the urgency created by the infodemic. Similarly, researchers studying journalists' experience in Pakistan report that the pressures on journalists in Pakistan appear to be particularly severe due to pre-existing problems with the institutional capacity to use fact-checking to provide accurate, timely information, as well as the high rate of misinformation on social media surrounding COVID-19 (Hafeez, 2022; Naeem et al., 2021).

Theme 4: Dependence on Digital Communication and the Digital Divide

The period of enforced digital communication tools globalized journalist communication during the pandemic was apparent in Pakistan, but both ways of enabling and constraining manifest themselves. As an example of both enabling and constraining who participated discussed how they had widely adopted WhatsApp, Zoom, email and social media platforms to both gather information get to their sources; the journalist from Gilgit (FG8, P2) would illustrate how she kept her audience aware of events by using Facebook Live, "Many of my other colleagues learned how to use the new IT tools to deal with the situation in a short period of time; so that in a time of crisis, the adaptation of the process of journalism was not limited by learning on the job." that is, the journalist indicated both the adaptable nature of journalists and how they learned on-the-job while dealing with a crisis.

The extent to which digital tools had enabled an individual journalist's adoption of the above digital tools were concrete; for example, channels which previously existed as optional additional means of communicating with sources or readers became any journalist's primary means of doing so while under lockdown; support for this type of transition was offered through institutional channels, as illustrated by The Center for Excellence in Journalism worked together with Pakistani media outlets during that time to provide training on digital safety and best practices related to providing news coverage during a pandemic (Moeed, 2021).

There were also restrictions on the range of options available to professional journalists, and these restrictions have been felt unevenly across the geographic landscape of the journalism profession. For example, there is a significant digital divide in Pakistan's journalism profession as illustrated by the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority's own data, indicating that approximately 35% of citizens in the country have access to the internet (PTA, 2021). Journalists in Karachi and Islamabad, with access to high-speed broadband connections, typically had access to the resources and tools necessary to conduct video interviews and to download large files (e.g., documents and other items) from the internet. Journalists working in remote areas of Gilgit-

Baltistan and AJK did not always have the same access to these resources.

A regional reporter from Gilgit noted the extreme frustration caused by this infrastructural disparity:

"When our internet was down or throttled for days, we couldn't attend the federal video briefings, let alone download health datasets. The digital shift made us feel like second-class journalists who were cut off from the rest of the country." (FG8, P6)

The disruption of the group discussion that took place in Gilgit is just one example (albeit a small one) of how gaps in digital infrastructure impacted the experience of journalists in the geographical area included in this study. In addition to experiencing limitations in terms of access to digital technology and the internet, participants in the study also described qualitative limitations associated with the use of digital technology and conducting journalism through digital communication. The most significant qualitative limitations identified by participants were the risks that were associated with conducting confidential journalism through unsecured digital channels, the difficulty for journalists in assessing the credibility of sources using digital means (i.e., rather than communicating face-to-face), and the loss of contextual or ambient information (e.g., body language, physical environment, texture of social environment) that in-person journalism provides.

A reporter in Karachi (FG1, P6) noted: "significant privacy issues ... arise with reliance on telephones or the internet alone." This observation highlights yet another dimension of crisis journalism in the digital age, frequently overlooked when considering only the functional enabling aspects of digital technology.

Theme 5: Institutional Transparency Deficits and Strategic Information Management

What participants consistently identified as frustrating was a perception that government institutions were not only failing at communicating; they also had an active interest in managing the way information is made available to the public, for their own institutional interests, rather than those of the public. This theme not only touches on questions of press freedom and

government-media relationships but also speaks to matters of particular importance in the Pakistani context.

As noted above, participants at multiple focus group discussion (FGD) sites reported incidents of perceived deliberate information withholding, selective sharing of data to present a positive picture of the government's pandemic response, and active discouragement of critical reporting. For journalist from Karachi (FG1, P1), when he stated that the cooperation of the provincial government was a "joint venture for disseminating timely and accurate public interest information" he was probably trying to be diplomatic, as many other participants expressed directly that the provision of official information was conditioned on cooperation by journalists to use official definitions.

A senior reporter from Quetta was much more direct about this heavy-handed containment strategy:

"If you published a story questioning the actual bed capacity or the lack of ventilators in our provincial hospitals, you would immediately get a call from a state official. They wouldn't correct the facts; they would just threaten to pull your channel's government advertisements. It was strategic blackmail under the guise of national unity." (FG4, P2)

Participants and scholars alike characterized PEMRA's April 2020 guideline as directing media away from critical coverage of the administration's pandemic response, illustrating how institutional transparency deficits were, in some instances, indicative of deliberate policy choices and not merely passive failures in communication capacity (Alam, 2020). The scholarly literature on government communication in response to COVID-19 documented analogous trends across a multitude of political contexts by verifying that the emergency conditions often provide governments with expanded justifications and willingness to utilize them to control information (Maerz et al., 2020). In the case of Pakistan, these pressures compounded the institutional weaknesses of the protections that existed before COVID-19 for the independence of the press and the vulnerabilities of many media organizations, which rely on government advertising as a source of revenue, to economic coercion.

There were several practical consequences experienced by journalists during this period: fear of access issues preventing the pursuit of stories critical of government performance; difficulties distinguishing between genuine communication incapacity and deliberate gatekeeping; and an overall erosion of trust in official sources that is necessary for effective crisis journalism. The systematic unreliability of official information pushed journalists towards informal and digital sources, which present their own issues with reliability and result in a negative, self-reinforcing cycle of declining information quality.

Discussion

The analysis of this study revealed five main themes that provide a coherent, but unsettling picture of the conditions of crisis journalism in Pakistan, AJK and GB, all of which are related to COVID-19. Together, they illustrate a system that is stressed at several structural levels simultaneously, and each individual theme illustrates an identifiable challenge, also to be understood from the HIE (Hierarchy of Influences) Model.

Press freedom issues within the social systems level conditions of Pakistan established the macro-level conditions in which all other information access issues were experienced (state interference with editorial independence and economic vulnerability of media organizations, and limited institutional protection for journalistic inquiry). These conditions existed before COVID-19; however, they were exacerbated by it because of control-minded governments using the pandemic to provide further justification for expanding their information control measures.

When examining the explicit testimonies region by region, the systematic structural vulnerability becomes very evident, as suggested by the Hierarchy of Influences Model. As mentioned by one of the participants in Lahore (FG2, P4), the huge time lag in the release of official information made it impossible to choose between ethical verification and the timely provision of public information requirements.

Institutional opacity and systemic coercion were a major aggravation of this dilemma. The warning from Quetta (FG4, P2)

about the financial weaponization of state advertisement, for example, indicates that there was no logistical failure, but rather an institutional failure to be transparent, which was a policy.

The institution communication void identified from the additional media insights provided is due to the lack of adequate crisis communication infrastructure: dedicated press liaison systems are in place that can produce timely public health communications through easy access online entry points, protocols are available through which journalists/media can access the location of crises/media coverage (i.e., defined jurisdictional authority), and sufficient institutional support is provided for those who communicate with others about the crisis (i.e. training on how/whom/what to communicate).

This communication failure was not a coincidence; it is a result of a lack of resources (time, personnel) to develop messages related to COVID-19, which is a pointer to the scarcity of resources for effective crisis communication in Pakistan. Also, at the organizational level, media companies & agencies that have suffered substantial revenue losses in the pandemic have been made to struggle to ensure that their employees are getting the necessary tools (PPE, digital tools, training & time for factchecking) to do good journalism in the current context.

The results of the major study H20 which found that most of the journalists who participated in the study were not satisfied with the level of support they received from their employers during the pandemic (Shah & Shah, 2024) is consistent with the findings of the FGD analysis conducted in this study. Moreover, the lack of balance at the national level of journalistic structure highlighted the infrastructure crisis in Pakistan.

Journalists in peripheral territories had a crippling digital divide as cities made a relatively easy shift to online reporting tools. The evidence from Muzaffarabad (FG6, P1) demonstrates that the remote journalist had to deal with public institutions that had zero digital footprint or archiving ability. Digital adaptation was made almost impossible for the regional press in combination with the physical isolation of lockdowns and the poor internet connectivity explicitly stated in Gilgit (FG8, P6). This indicates that the disruptions to the field reporting routine required immediate adaptation to digital

alternatives, which had differential success by geographic location of journalists. The fact that this shift to digital alternatives has been happening at varying rates and levels across different geographic areas and with various levels of digital infrastructure has policy implications for information access during crises because information access during crises is also an issue of the presence or absence of a digital infrastructure; therefore, solutions to the digital divide will necessarily be partial in achieving solutions to information access during crises.

The study participants were very adaptive in their resourcefulness; they used informal verification networks, they learned to use new digital tools, they worked together across organizational lines to exchange information and resources, and they kept their professional careers in a very difficult and risky context. This is true resilience, and it deserves to be acknowledged. The Framework of Hierarchy of Influences cautions against relying on analytical approaches that place the blame for the problems of information access in crisis journalism at the level of the individual journalist, so that the structural conditions reported in this research will not be solved by intervention at the individual level. Additionally, the research outcomes position the developing sectors of journalism in the context of crisis journalism in the Global South.

The work of (Parahita (2021) regarding Indonesian and Matsilele et al. (2022) on African newsrooms suggests there is a qualitatively different experience - and one with a more challenging source of information - for journalists working in either of these two contexts. Therefore, the experiences of journalists in both situations during the COVID-19 pandemic and in other crisis situations may lead to a different approach to doing the job than the experiences of journalists working in more robust institutions will. Hence, in the development of support programmes for journalism, it is essential to have the higher, international-level understanding of this highly relevant difference, to not create greater uncertainty about the result of their implementation in a variety of international contexts.

Conclusion

Consolidating the qualitative analysis of experienced journalistic FGD testimony, this study presents a complex and multilayered set of information access challenges encountered by Pakistani crisis journalists throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. This study identifies five interrelated themes - delayed official information; limited physical access; misinformation/verification pressures; reliance on digital communication amidst an expanding digital divide; and lack of institutional transparency - and establishes how together these themes describe a journalistic system experiencing considerable structural stress. Based on the Hierarchy of Influences Model, this research positions information access as a structural/institutional issue (versus a purely technical/individual limitation) and claims that effective crisis reporting derives heavily from the larger context in which journalism operates. Therefore, to strengthen crisis journalism, reforms should occur at several levels: government communication systems; press freedom protections; media organization capabilities; access to digital infrastructure; and professional training mechanisms. Additionally, this research provides an empirical and contextually specific account of barriers to effective crisis reporting in Pakistan during the COVID-19 pandemic; this account serves as a basis for establishing recommendations directed towards institutional stakeholders who may address these structural challenges.

Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, the following recommendations are advanced:

Government Institutions: Create standalone crisis communications units, provide regularly updated, accurate briefing sessions, create real-time digital data systems or portals, and hire trained media liaison officers at all district/regional levels for emergency situations so that information will be accessible when it matters most.

Media Organizations: Ensure all journalists receive digital literacy training; verify news through proper documentary verification

procedures; conduct crisis reporting training programs; provide necessary equipment for safety; allow for flexible work schedules; promote health care through mental well-being support for journalists; collaborate on verification methods with other media organizations during crises.

Journalism Training Institutions & Professional Organizations: Include both health-related and crisis reporting topics in journalism courses; provide digital verification training for journalists; establish peer-support networks between journalists who cover emergencies.

Policy Makers: Increase the protection of press freedom; increase the ability of reporters to obtain public records in times of emergency; expand digital infrastructure to underdeveloped areas of AJK and GB; enact protections for the welfare of journalists (job security, mental health).

International Support Organizations: Build support mechanisms that are cognizant of the local socio-political and cultural landscape; make providing assistance to journalists who live in geographically isolated or poor infrastructure areas a high priority.

Limitations

There are several limitations that should be noted in this study. First, the FGD methodology utilized in this study is appropriate to the qualitative aims of the study but has inherent limitations related to the influence of group dynamics (e.g., the impact of conformity pressures and experienced/highly confident participants dominating the discussion). While facilitation practice/design/attention were utilized to try to mitigate the risks of using FGD in this context, these risks could not be fully eliminated. Second, while the geographic scope of this study is broader than most other journalism studies conducted in Pakistan, the geographic limits of this study were confined to journalists affiliated with seven press clubs located in provincial/territorial capitals. Journalists working in small or rural cities, or journalists not affiliated with a formal press club, would likely have experiences that differ substantially from those of the participants included in this study. Third, the

cross-sectional nature of the data that was collected after the peak of the pandemic rather than during the pandemic, affords the potential for retrospective reconstruction (i.e., whereby participants will be unable to fully remember/discuss real-time elements of their experiences) that may have been present at the time of the FGDs. Longitudinal designs—tracking journalists' experiences from the time of the experience to the time of data collection—would have provided a richer account of journalists' experiences. Finally, while the qualitative design of this study allows for an in-depth contextual understanding of the participants' experiences, it does not enable statistical generalization. The findings should be understood as generating theoretical insights and analytical propositions rather than empirical claims about the distribution of specific experiences across the broader journalist population.

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