



International Journal
of Kashmir Studies

IJKS: Vol.6 No. 1/2024

News Under Siege: The Impact of COVID-19 on Journalists in Pakistan with Focus on AJK and GB

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IJKS: Vol. 6 - No. 1/2024

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APA: Shah, S. M. H., & Shah, B. H. (2023). The Impact of COVID-19 on Journalists in Pakistan with Focus on AJK and GB. *International Journal of Kashmir Studies*, 6(1).

Suggested Citation: Chicago: Shah, Syed Mubashar Hussain, and Babar Hussain Shah. " News Under Siege: The Impact of COVID-19 on Journalists in Pakistan with Focus on AJK and GB." *International Journal of Kashmir Studies* 6, no. 1 (2023).



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Abstract

This study investigates the experiences of journalists during COVID-19 pandemic from Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) through a series of focus group discussions (FGDs). The research aims to develop strategies for enhancing journalists' capabilities and well-being in anticipation of future pandemics. The FGDs involved seasoned journalists from central press clubs in all regions, who provided insights into the challenges they faced and the strategies they adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thematic analysis, conducted using NVivo software, revealed eight key themes related to the pandemic's impact on journalism. These themes

informed a set of consolidated recommendations designed to improve journalists' safety, mental health, and access to information. The recommendations also emphasize strengthening legal protections, creating capacity-building opportunities, fostering networking and collaboration, and implementing specialized health reporting training. By addressing these recommendations, the study proposes a framework to bolster journalists' resilience and effectiveness in navigating future crises.

Keywords: *Journalism, COVID-19, Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan.*

Introduction

The global landscape has been significantly shaped by the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, posing an unparalleled challenge for journalists across the world. Pakistan, intricately linked through economic, religious, and geographical ties to early affected nations such as Iran and China, found itself particularly susceptible to the widespread repercussions of the pandemic.¹ The initial emergence of the contagion in Iran triggered the return of numerous pilgrims to Pakistan, resulting in a critical situation at the borders.² The first

¹Nasir Ilyas, Romuladus E. Azuine, and Alina Tamiz, "COVID-19 Pandemic in Pakistan," *International Journal of Translational Medical Research and Public Health* 4, no. 1 (May 8, 2020): 37–49, <https://doi.org/10.21106/ijtmrph.139>.

² Amjad Ali, Mumtaz Ahmed, and Nazia Hassan, "Socioeconomic Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic: Evidence from Rural Mountain Community in Pakistan," *Journal of Public Affairs* 21, no. 4 (November 1, 2021): e2355,

confirmed COVID-19 case in the country was reported on February 26, 2020, originating from an individual with recent travel history from Iran.³ This marked the onset of rapid virus transmission in urban areas, prompting a nationwide lockdown by the end of March. Initially implemented as a smart lockdown strategy, it underwent successive extensions, ultimately evolving into comprehensive countrywide lockdowns.⁴ Owing to a lack of coherent communication on a consistent policy to control the transmission of COVID-19 and a failure to adhere to WHO guidelines, Pakistan was classified as the 15th most impacted country globally by the pandemic.⁵

Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), spanning 13,297 sq.km within a larger land area of 222,236 sq.km, shares its borders with Gilgit Baltistan to the north, the Indian-held State of Jammu and Kashmir to the east, Punjab Province to the south, and Punjab & Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) to the west.⁶ With a population of approximately 4.8 million residents, AJ&K is a self-governing territory under the

<https://doi.org/10.1002/PA.2355>.

³ R. Ejaz et al., "Gender-Based Incidence, Recovery Period, and Mortality Rate of Covid-19 among the Population of District Attock, Pakistan," *Brazilian Journal of Biology* 83 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1590/1519-6984.249125>.

⁴ Asim Nasar et al., "A Qualitative Assessment of Entrepreneurship amidst COVID-19 Pandemic in Pakistan," *Asia Pacific Management Review* 27, no. 3 (September 1, 2022): 182–89, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apmr.2021.08.001>.

⁵ Muhammad Ittefaq, Syed Ali Hussain, and Maryam Fatima, "COVID-19 and Social-Politics of Medical Misinformation on Social Media in Pakistan," *Media Asia* 47, no. 1–2 (2020): 75–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2020.1817264>.

⁶ Ali Abidi and Qaeser Nazeer, "COVID-19 Wave 1 and 2; A Study on the State of Azad Jammu & Kashmir During Pandemic," *PSYCHOLOGY AND EDUCATION* 58, no. 2 (2021): 8178–90, www.psychologyandeducation.net.

administration of the Pakistani government. Despite having only three major hospitals and four supporting ones in the entire state, the initial wave of the COVID-19 pandemic was efficiently managed due to its remote location and prompt actions taken by the local government.⁷ Following a National Security Council meeting on March 14, the local government declared a health emergency and implemented a state-wide lockdown. As of October 2020, Muzaffarabad in AJK had the highest number of COVID-19 deaths at 48, followed by Mirpur with 37. Poonch reported 34 deaths, Bagh 26, Kotli 20, Bhimber 13, Neelum 8, Sudhnoti 5, and Jhelum valley and Haveli had the lowest number of deaths with only 4 in both districts.⁸

Gilgit-Baltistan, an administrative unit within Pakistan, plays a vital role as a connecting link between Pakistan and China through the Karakoram Highway (K.K.H). Covering an expansive area of 72,971 sq km and home to an estimated population of approximately 1.8 million, Gilgit-Baltistan reported its first confirmed case of COVID-19 on March 2, 2020.⁹ A study highlighted a surge in COVID-19 cases in Gilgit-Baltistan following the relaxation of lockdown

⁷ Muhammad Faraz Khan et al., "Perception, Preparedness and Response of Health Care Personals towards COVID-19 Pandemic in Azad Jammu & Kashmir, Pakistan: A Cross Sectional Interview Based Study," *Clinical Epidemiology and Global Health* 11 (July 1, 2021): 100783, <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.CEGH.2021.100783>.

⁸ Abidi and Nazeer, "COVID-19 Wave 1 and 2; A Study on the State of Azad Jammu & Kashmir During Pandemic."

⁹ W Ali, I Husain, and S Hussain, "Covid-19: People Perception Knowledge and Experience: An Evidence from Gilgit-Baltistan Pakistan," *International Transaction Journal of Engineering* 12, no. 6 (2021): 1–8, <https://doi.org/10.14456/ITJEMAST.2021.111>.

measures in Pakistan. The pandemic has significantly impacted the socioeconomic well-being of mountain communities in the region, leading to financial instability, reduced income, job insecurity, and food shortages.¹⁰ Challenges faced by the Gilgit-Baltistan health department in effectively combating COVID-19 are underscored by poor management and inadequate facilities. These challenges encompass a shortage of medical staff, essential equipment, testing kits, personal protective equipment (PPE) kits, laboratories, and a limited number of quarantine centers.¹¹

In the relentless pursuit of news coverage during the pandemic, journalists faced the delicate task of balancing productivity with the inherent risks of virus transmission.¹² The challenges encountered by working journalists amid the COVID-19 pandemic are not only widespread globally but are exacerbated in South Asian countries by factors such as scientific illiteracy, language and cultural barriers, and a shortage of adequately trained journalists.¹³ The Global South, comprising diverse nations, confronted various challenges in journalism and media coverage during the pandemic, including

¹⁰ A Saqib et al., “A Review of Covid 19 Pandemic in Physiotherapy Care of Patients with Coronavirus Disease in Pakistan: Limitations and Gaps,” *Turkish Journal of Physiotherapy and Rehabilitation* 32, no. 3 (2021).

¹¹ Ali, Husain, and Hussain, “Covid-19: People Perception Knowledge and Experience: An Evidence from Gilgit-Baltistan Pakistan.”

¹² Abdul Fadli Kalaloi, Rana Akbari Fitriawan, and Reni Nuraeni, “Journalism and Journalists’ Vulnerability during COVID-19 Pandemic in Indonesia,” *Jurnal Ilmu Sosial Dan Ilmu Politik* 26, no. 3 (March 1, 2023): 311–27, <https://doi.org/10.22146/jsp.68466>.

¹³ Sadia Jamil, “COVID-19 Pandemic and Science Reporting in Pakistan,” *Media Asia* 50, no. 2 (2023): 264–85, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2022.2137658>.

limited resources, inadequate infrastructure, and governmental constraints on freedom of expression.¹⁴

In Pakistani region, media organizations played a crucial role in disseminating information and educating the public about daily COVID-19 cases, particularly in regions with limited health facilities.¹⁵ They emerged as frontline workers in the global health crisis, fulfilling a vital role in informing the public and holding institutions accountable.¹⁶ Despite the risks of infection, journalists delivered essential updates on the virus and governmental actions.¹⁷ Investigative reporting uncovered corruption and mismanagement related to the pandemic response, ensuring transparency and scrutinizing government power.¹⁸ However, journalists faced challenges such as limited access to accurate information and safety

¹⁴ Sanan Waheed Khan et al., “The Challenges and Constructive Role of Journalism during COVID-19 in Communication Ecology of Pandemic Reporting in the Global South,” in *Handbook of Research on Deconstructing Culture and Communication in the Global South*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-8093-9.ch004>.

¹⁵ Akhtar Hafeez, “The Impact of Covid-19 on Journalism,” in *Societal Transformations and Resilience in Times of Crisis* (IGI Global, 2022), 147–54, <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-5326-1.ch009>.

¹⁶ John Russial, Peter Laufer, and Janet Wasko, “Journalism in Crisis?,” *Https://Doi.Org/10.1080/13183222.2015.1091618* 22, no. 4 (2015): 299–312, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2015.1091618>.

¹⁷ Andreu Casero-Ripollés, “The Impact of Covid-19 on Journalism: A Set of Transformations in Five Domains,” *Comunicacao e Sociedade* 40 (2021): 53–69, [https://doi.org/10.17231/COMSOC.40\(2021\).3283](https://doi.org/10.17231/COMSOC.40(2021).3283).

¹⁸ Peter Van Aelst et al., “Does a Crisis Change News Habits? A Comparative Study of the Effects of COVID-19 on News Media Use in 17 European Countries,” *Https://Doi.Org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1943481* 9, no. 9 (2021): 1316–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1943481>.

concerns, leading to stress and burnout.¹⁹ The journalism sector in Pakistan, already grappling with issues like government censorship, violence against journalists, inadequate training and resources, and low wages, encountered exacerbated challenges with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the early 2020s.²⁰ This crisis disrupted news production and delivery, posed financial threats to media organizations, and required adaptation to new reporting methods to cover the evolving situation.²¹

Despite these challenges, the pandemic provided journalists with opportunities to underscore the essential nature of their role in providing accurate and timely information to the public. In Pakistan, a significant number of journalists played a crucial role in dispelling misinformation about COVID-19 and explaining the ramifications of the pandemic on vulnerable communities.²² Faced with an unprecedented pandemic, journalists in this region lacked a predefined blueprint to navigate the crisis.

¹⁹ Ayesha Anwar et al., “Role of Mass Media and Public Health Communications in the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Cureus* 12, no. 9 (September 14, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.7759/CUREUS.10453>.

²⁰ S M Sadia and F A Gifty, “Challenges for Journalists amid COVID-19 Pandemic: From Individual, Organizational to Societal Levels,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 97, no. 4 (2020): 1032–47.

²¹ A Jahanzeb, “The Challenges of Journalism in Pakistan,” *Asia Pacific Media Educator* 29, no. 1 (2019): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1326365X19827514>.

²² S Saleem, “The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Media in Pakistan: A Mixed-Methods Analysis,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 55, no. 1 (2020): 47–61, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021909620978482>.

Pakistani journalists faced several challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic,²³ including limited access to information, insufficient investment in digital resources, and safety risks. Organizational issues included a lack of policy guidelines, inadequate training, and unequal opportunities, compounded by weak advisory committees for science reporting. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, journalists experienced safety risks, inadequate training, and threats, suggesting the need for government recognition as essential workers with healthcare support.²⁴ The lack of advanced technology and robust institutions also hindered their efforts to combat misinformation.²⁵

In Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), the pandemic disrupted news production, with movement restrictions and economic impacts reducing access to information²⁶ and causing financial strain on news organizations.²⁷ This led to decreased pay, staff layoffs,²⁸ and an increased workload²⁹ due to the need for extensive fact-checking and information verification. Despite these issues, some journalists

²³ Jamil Sadia and Appiah-adjei Gifty, "Battling with Infodemic and Disinfodemic: The Quandary of Journalists to Report on COVID-19 Pandemic in Pakistan," *Media Asia* 47, no. 3–4 (2020): 88–109, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2020.1853393>.

²⁴ Sayyed Fawad Ali Shah, Faizullah Jan, and Muhammad Ittefaq, "Health and Safety Risks to Journalists During Pandemics," 2020, 90–103, <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-7998-6686-2.ch006>.

²⁵ Ittefaq, Hussain, and Fatima, "COVID-19 and Social-Politics of Medical Misinformation on Social Media in Pakistan."

²⁶ N A Khan, "COVID-19 and Its Impact on Journalism in Azad Jammu and Kashmir," *Journalism and Mass Communication* 10, no. 1 (2020): 36–42.

²⁷ U Shabbir, "Journalism in the Age of Coronavirus: A Snapshot of Azad Jammu and Kashmir," *Global Media Journal* 18, no. 35 (2020): 1–11.

²⁸ Shabbir, "Journalism in the Age of Coronavirus: A Snapshot of Azad Jammu and Kashmir."

²⁹ Khan, "COVID-19 and Its Impact on Journalism in Azad Jammu and Kashmir."

adapted by using online platforms, though this was limited by restricted access to technology and the internet.³⁰

In Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), journalists faced compromised health and safety, movement restrictions, and financial instability³¹ due to reduced advertising revenue and cost-cutting measures.³² The pandemic led to journalist layoffs and reduced salaries. Like in AJK, some journalists adapted by embracing digital platforms for reporting, but this transition was hindered by limited access to technology and the internet.³³

Methodology

This research employed a thematic analysis approach to explore the experiences of journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thematic analysis is a flexible method used to identify patterns and meanings within qualitative data.³⁴ The study focused on a purposive sampling strategy, engaging journalists with over a decade of experience in

³⁰ Shabbir, "Journalism in the Age of Coronavirus: A Snapshot of Azad Jammu and Kashmir."

³¹ A. Waris et al., "COVID-19 Outbreak: Current Scenario of Pakistan," *New Microbes and New Infections* 35, no. 2 (May 1, 2020): 756–64, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nmni.2020.100681>.

³² M Iqbal, *How the Covid-19 Crisis Is Impacting Journalists in Pakistan* (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2020), <https://cpj.org/2020/05/how-the-covid-19-crisis-is-impacting-journalists-in-pakistan/>.

³³ Iqbal and Younas, "Public Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices towards COVID-19 in Pakistan: A Cross-Sectional Study."

³⁴ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706QP063OA>.

both field and desk reporting. Press clubs in Muzaffarabad and Gilgit-Baltistan were selected for their central role in regional journalism, ensuring comprehensive geographic insights into the industry's challenges during the pandemic. Participants, chosen through snowball sampling, included reporters, sub-editors, cameramen, and assignment editors, each with significant professional experience. Each press club provided a group of 7 to 10 journalists.

Data was collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) conducted both in-person and via Zoom to address geographic constraints. Discussions were moderated with open-ended questions, meticulously noted, transcribed, and analyzed using NVivo software to uncover prevalent themes and patterns, providing insights into the participants' varied experiences. Ethical protocols were strictly followed, with participants giving informed consent and the option to withdraw at any time. Interviews were recorded, anonymized, and securely stored on an encrypted computer. Based on the synthesized themes, the study formulated recommendations aimed at enhancing safety measures, mental health support, access to critical information, legal protections, capacity-building avenues, networking efforts, and specialized training in health reporting. These recommendations seek to address the multifaceted challenges faced by journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic and improve their working conditions and professional development.

Themes and Discussions

The thematic analysis facilitated the identification of eight key themes, each encapsulating the essence of the discussions:

Theme 1: Access to Information

The discussions surrounding access to information underscored the critical collaboration between journalists and government agencies during crises. Participants emphasized the need for streamlined processes that facilitate secure and timely access to crucial data, whether journalists are working remotely or in-person. The dialogue highlighted the significance of information flow between journalists and official sources for accurate reporting and the maintenance of public trust.

A journalist while taking part in FGDs in Muzaffarabad underscored, *During critical moments, our cooperation with governmental bodies is indispensable. It transcends mere information provision; it's a joint endeavor for precise reporting that garners public trust.*

Offering insights to the conversation, a correspondent hailing from Gilgit conveyed,

Across the entirety of the pandemic, we faced various hurdles in obtaining information. Governmental entities consistently lagged in furnishing timely and accurate information to the media.

The discussion emphasized the importance of streamlined processes for data flow, recognizing the substantial challenges posed for journalists during the COVID-19 pandemic in acquiring trustworthy information and sources.³⁵ Widespread lockdowns and travel restrictions severely limited access to physical locations and interviews.³⁶ Journalists in Pakistani region faced hurdles in accessing pandemic-related locations due to movement restrictions, with some officials being hesitant to share information, and incidents of intimidation and harassment were reported.³⁷ Moreover, the restricted access to information and sources raised concerns about the quality and accuracy of pandemic reporting, as journalists may face pressure to publish stories rapidly, leaving limited time for comprehensive research and fact-checking.³⁸

Theme 2: Capacity Building

The discourse shifted towards skill development, unveiling a unanimous consensus on the pivotal role of capacity building. Participants articulated the imperative need for specialized training programs tailored to crisis reporting, digital journalism tools, and

³⁵ N Usher, "COVID-19 and Journalism: Skills and Values for Resilient Reporting during a Pandemic," *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies* 9, no. 3 (2020): 343–57, https://doi.org/10.1386/ajms_00051_1.

³⁶ A Makri, "Covid-19: How Journalists Can Help Identify Misinformation," *British Medical Journal* 369 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m2020>.

³⁷ Iqbal, *How the Covid-19 Crisis Is Impacting Journalists in Pakistan*.

³⁸ Usher, "COVID-19 and Journalism: Skills and Values for Resilient Reporting during a Pandemic."

technological adaptability during emergencies. This emphasis on refining pertinent skills underscored their unwavering commitment to furnishing accurate and comprehensive coverage.

A correspondent from the Gilgit Press Club emphasized,

Effective crisis reporting demands a unique skill set, underscoring our dedication to being thoroughly prepared to deliver high-quality news, even in challenging circumstances.

Echoing a similar perspective, a journalist associated with the Central Press Club Muzaffarabad stated,

There is a pressing need for enhanced capacity in health reporting. This critical aspect is frequently neglected, and it is imperative to cultivate specialized skills for reporting effectively in crisis situations.

The unanimous consensus regarding the significance of skill development illuminates the dynamic nature of journalism. The call for specialized training in crisis reporting, digital tools, and technological adaptability aligns with the evolving role of journalists in the digital age. Journalists require specific training for reporting on pandemics, including vaccination, analogous to frontline workers. Specialized journalism courses can integrate pandemic reporting into their curriculum.³⁹ News organizations should extend logistical support, supplies, technology, and additional training to journalists,

³⁹ Kenneth Adibe Nwafor et al., “Knowledge and Practice of Safety Protocols among Journalists Serving as Frontline Workers in the COVID-19 Fight in Ebonyi State, Nigeria,” *International Journal of Ebola, AIDS, HIV and Infectious Diseases and Immunity* 7, no. 1 (July 30, 2022): 20–37, <https://doi.org/10.37745/IJEAHII.15VO7N1PP2037>.

thereby alleviating stress and augmenting their dedication to their work.⁴⁰ Journalism training institutions should contemplate incorporating pandemic reporting into specialized journalism courses, imparting essential skills to journalists, especially for highly contagious pandemics like the coronavirus.⁴¹ Developing a training program that emphasizes leadership, editorial writing, editing, proofreading, video production, and professionalism is advisable for campus journalism, ensuring the effective preparation of student journalists to report on pandemics.⁴²

Theme 3: Crisis Adaptation Strategies

In the face of the disruptions caused by the pandemic, journalists demonstrated commendable resilience by promptly adopting digital platforms and adjusting their reporting methodologies. They illustrated a varied array of tools, including online interviews, data visualization, and multimedia storytelling, employed to proficiently convey information to their audiences. These innovative adjustments

⁴⁰ Gretchen Hoak, "Covering COVID: Journalists' Stress and Perceived OrHoak, G. (2021). Covering COVID: Journalists' Stress and Perceived Organizational Support While Reporting on the Pandemic. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 98(3), 854–874. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990211015105>," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 98, no. 3 (September 1, 2021): 854–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990211015105>.

⁴¹ Nwafor et al., "Knowledge and Practice of Safety Protocols among Journalists Serving as Frontline Workers in the COVID-19 Fight in Ebonyi State, Nigeria."

⁴² Rowanne Marie Maxilom Mangompit, "CTU Student Journalists' Training Needs Report: Basis for the Formulation of Training Program," *Central Mindanao University Journal of Science* 26, no. 1 (December 2022), <https://doi.org/10.52751/VMGK2304>.

underscored their dedication to guaranteeing continuous and dependable news dissemination.

Despite contending with subpar internet services in our region, a correspondent from the Gilgit-Press Club disclosed, 'We utilized Facebook Live alongside our reporting responsibilities to keep the public abreast of unfolding events. Many colleagues, initially unacquainted with the latest IT tools, acquired fundamental skills during the pandemic, navigating the unprecedented situation and aiding people in staying well-informed.

Offering her viewpoint, a female journalist from Muzaffarabad asserted,

The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the pivotal importance of staying abreast of modern communication technologies. Those who embraced these tools encountered fewer challenges in accessing information and ensuring seamless reporting during these trying times.

From the standpoint of a journalist based in Muzaffarabad,

It's not merely about being versed in the latest technologies. We encountered an exceedingly challenging situation in accessing information. Institutions here lack digital archives and real-time updates on their portals, and particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, concerned officials were unresponsive in providing necessary information promptly.

Participants demonstrated remarkable resilience by swiftly adapting to the crisis through the utilization of digital platforms and adjusted reporting methodologies. This adaptation underscores journalists' inherent capacity to evolve in the face of challenges.⁴³ According to another research, virtual meetings, online interviews, and webinars have become customary practices for journalists worldwide, enabling them to seamlessly conduct interviews and report stories, thus overcoming the constraints imposed by the pandemic.⁴⁴

In Pakistan, journalists have similarly embraced this approach, as exemplified by major news channels such as Dawn News, leveraging digital technologies for news dissemination and audience engagement.⁴⁵ Furthermore, virtual meetings have facilitated effective collaboration among journalists, transcending geographical limitations. Noteworthy initiatives in Pakistan include the collaboration between the Center for Excellence in Journalism (CEJ) and various media outlets, offering training programs for journalists to equip them with the necessary skills for comprehensive pandemic coverage.⁴⁶

⁴³ Jose A. García-Avilés, "Journalism as Usual? Managing Disruption in Virtual Newsrooms during the COVID-19 Crisis," *Digital Journalism* 9, no. 9 (2021): 1249–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1942112>.

⁴⁴ C Schoenberger and L Proffitt, *Covid-19 and the New Work of Journalism* (Columbia Journalism Review, 2020), https://www.cjr.org/special_report/covid-19-new-work-of-journalism.php.

⁴⁵ Dawn, "PFUJ, PAMH Launch Mental Health Support Program for Journalists," 2020, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1559887>.

⁴⁶ A Moeed, "COVID-19 and Journalism in Pakistan: Challenges and Opportunities," *Journalism Practice* 15, no. 2 (2021): 267–83, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1797341>.

Collaboration has extended to content sharing among media organizations as well. For instance, the Reuters news agency introduced a platform to facilitate the exchange of Covid-19 related news content within its extensive global network of media partners.⁴⁷

Theme 4: Health Reporting Education

During the discussions, proposals advocating for enhanced health reporting education garnered significant attention. Participants acknowledged the imperative for comprehensive training aimed at equipping journalists with the requisite skills and knowledge necessary for effective coverage of health crises. They underscored the significance of accurate and informed health reporting in shaping public understanding and decision-making processes.

A correspondent associated with English Daily in Muzaffarabad underscored,

We encounter a deficiency in professionally trained reporters in health reporting. Our sole recourse is to rely on information from local health authorities, given our limited capacity to investigate whether our health authorities adhere to the standards set by the WHO.

Echoing this viewpoint, a representative from Gilgit Press Club conveyed,

⁴⁷ R K Nielsen, *Journalists and Media in the COVID-19 Crisis: Preliminary Findings of a Global Survey* (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2020), <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2020-04/Coronavirus>.

Prior to the pandemic, the health beat was regarded as one of the most neglected, with few expressing interests in becoming health reporters. However, as the pandemic unfolded, everyone found themselves reporting on health issues in the region.

An Editor from a prominent Urdu Daily proposed, *Each press club should have a few trained reporters in medical journalism so that others can leverage their expertise, particularly in crisis situations. We encountered significant challenges during the pandemic, as health professionals were overwhelmed with their responsibilities, making it challenging for us to cross-check our medical knowledge or terminologies.*

The proposal for comprehensive health reporting training acknowledges the pivotal role of informed journalism in shaping public understanding and influencing decisions. This aligns with the media's responsibility to provide accurate health information, particularly during pandemics.⁴⁸ Both Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and existing literature have consistently highlighted the formidable challenge faced by journalists in collecting and disseminating precise information throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴⁹ This underscores the critical role of health literacy in empowering citizens to effectively navigate COVID-19-related

⁴⁸Rohit C. Khanna et al., "COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons Learned and Future Directions," *Indian Journal of Ophthalmology* (Wolters Kluwer Medknow Publications, May 1, 2020), https://doi.org/10.4103/ijo.IJO_843_20.

⁴⁹ G Perreault and T Perreault, "How COVID-19 Has Transformed Journalism," *Journalism* 22, no. 2 (2021): 196–201.

health information.⁵⁰ Informed health reporting contributes significantly to mitigating misinformation and fostering evidence-based decision-making.⁵¹

Theme 5: Impact on Journalistic Abilities

Participants conveyed how the pandemic's impact significantly impeded their capacity to perform optimally. They detailed challenges arising from restricted access to information and sources, which in turn led to difficulties in upholding the accuracy and credibility of their reporting. The constraints imposed on physical interactions and the necessity for remote engagement presented distinctive obstacles, compelling them to devise novel methods for collecting, verifying, and presenting information.

A local journalist from Skardu associated with Gilgit Press Club shared,

Initially, we felt completely paralyzed, uncertain about the future. There was a fear that, like other businesses, journalism would shut down. However, we adapted, leveraging technology, minimizing physical interactions, and managing to report. While it didn't work

⁵⁰ Orkan Okan et al., "Health Literacy as a Social Vaccine in the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Health Promotion International*, August 1, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1093/HEAPRO/DAAB197>.

⁵¹ Eleonora Serafimovska, Marijana Markovikj, and Tea Koneska-Vasilevska, "The Challenges of Journalism in the Republic of Macedonia during the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Balkan Social Science Review* 18 (December 24, 2021): 345–67, <https://doi.org/10.46763/bssr2118345s>.

for every story, life moved on, though we faced challenges in chasing those who were avoiding us.

A journalist engaged in desk assignments during Covid, expressed, *Managing everything remotely was indeed a difficult task. In a country where electricity and internet availability are not consistent, waiting for hours during breakdowns became a common occurrence.* Participants articulated how restricted access to information and sources presented challenges in maintaining the accuracy and credibility of their reporting. The initial hurdle faced was the potential risk of virus exposure during on-site reporting, necessitating the implementation of safety measures to protect against the virus during news coverage.⁵² The second challenge revolved around the restricted access to information due to lockdowns and social distancing measures, compelling journalists to rely on virtual communication methods.⁵³ Additionally, journalists grappled with the challenge of covering an ever-changing situation, demanding extended hours and stringent deadlines.⁵⁴

Furthermore, the rapid dissemination of the virus resulted in an abundance of information, including inaccuracies and incomplete

⁵² Hoak, "Covering COVID: Journalists' Stress and Perceived Organizational Support While Reporting on the Pandemic." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 98(3), 854–874. <https://doi.org/10.1111>.

⁵³ Evan Faulkenbury, "Journalism, COVID-19, and the Opportunity of Oral History," *Oral History Review* 47, no. 2 (2020): 253–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00940798.2020.1791723>.

⁵⁴ Usher, "COVID-19 and Journalism: Skills and Values for Resilient Reporting during a Pandemic."

data, posing challenges for journalists in discerning and reporting accurate facts.⁵⁵ The limitations on physical interactions and the necessity for remote engagement prompted innovative approaches to information gathering and verification.⁵⁶

Theme 6: Legal Protections

With a focus on the broader implications of their profession, participants emphasized the necessity for enhanced legal protections and job security measures. They underscored the importance of fair remuneration, recognizing journalism's essential role during health crises. Discussions revolved around the requirement for improved social security provisions that acknowledge journalists' contributions during challenging times.

A Gilgit-based newspaper reporter lamented,

My newspaper slashed my salary during the pandemic, citing a lack of advertisement revenue and decreased circulation as reasons. Despite reluctantly accepting this, they failed to pay even the reduced salaries for almost three months.

A journalist from Muzaffarabad highlighted,

⁵⁵ Makri, "Covid-19: How Journalists Can Help Identify Misinformation."

⁵⁶ Samantha K. Brooks et al., "The Psychological Impact of Quarantine and How to Reduce It: Rapid Review of the Evidence," *The Lancet* (Lancet Publishing Group, March 14, 2020), [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)30460-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)30460-8).

We lack legal protection; our remuneration is tied to advertisement commissions. Throughout the Covid-19 period, with advertisements halted, we received no remuneration.

Journalists based in Gilgit-Baltistan and Muzaffarabad revealed that only a few received regular salaries during the pandemic.

The participants of the study advocated for enhanced legal protections and job security during unusual circumstances. A survey conducted by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) uncovered that journalists experienced severe job pressures, layoffs, and a declining working environment attributed to the pandemic.⁵⁷ Print media, in both developed and developing nations, suffered greatly during the pandemic. Many countries halted newspaper and magazine printing to curb infection spread, resulting in job losses and insufficient government support.⁵⁸ In Pakistan, the journalism industry was already in financial distress and under government pressure pre-pandemic. Over 3000 press workers lost their jobs in 2019, and the situation worsened during the pandemic with halted business activities and inadequate government support.⁵⁹ Globally, the

⁵⁷ Beauty Mondol and Basudev Paul, "Journalism in Bangladesh During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Overview," *Current Research Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 4, no. 1 (June 29, 2021): 45–53, <https://doi.org/10.12944/crjssh.4.1.05>.

⁵⁸ Shivaji Jadhav, "Impact of Covid-19 on Indian Print Media," *Dogo Rangsang Research Journal* 10, no. 06 (June 1, 2020): 1–8, www.drsrcjournal.com.

⁵⁹ S Ali, "COVID-19 and Pakistan's Media," *Journalism Practice* 14, no. 7 (2020): 847–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1800855>.

COVID-19 pandemic has hit journalism hard, causing financial strain due to reduced advertising revenue. It has also hindered journalists' effectiveness, with travel restrictions and social distancing measures impeding source access and event coverage.⁶⁰

Theme 7: Mental Health and Well-being

As the discussion delved into the personal toll of pandemic reporting, participants emphasized the urgent need for dedicated mental health support programs. They highlighted the unique stressors that journalists face in times of crisis, advocating for tailored self-care strategies to mitigate burnout and promote overall well-being. The significance of prioritizing mental health within the industry emerged as a unanimous concern.

A correspondent affiliated with Central Press Club Muzaffarabad conveyed,

The discernible and considerable adverse impact of Covid-19 on our mental health and overall well-being is noteworthy. Serving as frontline workers reporting on the pandemic's societal repercussions, we frequently confront substantial personal risks, leading to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and apprehensions regarding job security and financial stability.

⁶⁰ S Sushmita, T Pudjiastuti, and P B Santoso, "News Is Not Worth a Life," : : *The Challenges and Dilemmas of Journalists in Solo, Indonesia during COVID-* 31, no. 2 (2021): 185–97.

Similarly, another journalist associated with Gilgit articulated,

The challenges to our mental health encountered throughout the pandemic are deeply rooted in a myriad of factors. These include the apprehension of virus exposure, the proliferation of conspiracy theories and misinformation, obligatory isolation, quarantine strategies, and concerns related to socio-economic instability.

Discussion of the personal toll of pandemic reporting shed light on the need for dedicated mental health support. The unique stressors faced by journalists during crises emphasize the industry's duty to safeguard their well-being. Journalists faced mental health challenges due to increased pressure as traditional media became the primary information source during the pandemic.⁶¹ Many journalists, exposed to high-risk areas and traumatic events, have covered the pandemic's impact on vulnerable communities and reported on the death toll and health crisis.⁶² They face a greater risk of anxiety, depression, and PTSD than the general population due to fear of the virus, job uncertainty, and the pressure for accurate reporting.⁶³ Moreover, Media organizations' financial struggles during the pandemic have led

⁶¹ A Wake, B Kenny, and R Gibson, "Journalism and COVID-19 in Australia: Impacts, Innovations and Implications," *Media International Australia* 178, no. 1 (2021): 5–18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X20979944>.

⁶² Perreault and Perreault, "How COVID-19 Has Transformed Journalism."

⁶³ J Penney, "Journalists and Mental Health in the COVID-19 Era," *Digital Journalism* 8, no. 7 (2020): 835–38.

to job losses, pay cuts, and furloughs for journalists, increasing their stress and anxiety levels.⁶⁴ Awareness and support for journalists' mental health is essential during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. Media organizations can assist by providing access to mental health services, offering flexible work arrangements, and promoting work-life balance among their employees.⁶⁵

Theme 8: Networking and Collaboration

The theme of promoting stronger bonds among media entities, press clubs, and government institutions surfaced prominently. Participants emphasized the imperative of improved coordination to facilitate effective information dissemination and prompt responses during crises. Collaborative endeavors were deemed essential for surmounting challenges and ensuring a unified approach. A freelance journalist contributing to various international media outlets from Gilgit highlighted,

The outcomes achieved through collaboration and coordination among journalists have been remarkable. Mutual assistance in the collection and sharing of information has proven highly effective. Similar collaboration and coordination among institutions, including

⁶⁴ M Sadiq, "Pakistan: Media Use and Performance Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic," *Media Watch* 11, no. 3 (2020): 595–609.

⁶⁵ Moeed, "COVID-19 and Journalism in Pakistan: Challenges and Opportunities."

governmental initiatives, would undoubtedly yield a profound impact in crisis situations.

A journalist based in Muzaffarabad emphasized,

In situations marked by fear, institutions bear the primary responsibility of ensuring the protection of their workforce. We must halt the race for breaking news at the expense of risking the lives of journalists. Prioritizing safety over the urgency of news delivery is essential.

The imperative for strengthened collaboration between media organizations and government institutions emerged as a recurring theme in the focus group discussions and relevant literature review. Collaborations between media and government entities during the COVID-19 pandemic have played a crucial role in providing accurate information to the public, especially for those reliant on informal and local news outlets.⁶⁶ According to a report from the International Center for Journalists (2020), media organizations globally have engaged in collaborative efforts amid the pandemic, involving sharing reporters and pooling resources to cover COVID-19-related news. In Pakistan, media organizations have similarly joined forces to initiate

⁶⁶ Molly M. King, "Paying Attention to the Pandemic: Knowledge of COVID-19 Facts by News Source and Demographics," *The American Behavioral Scientist*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642231156784>.

joint reporting projects focused on COVID-19-related issues.⁶⁷

Collaboration has extended to content sharing among media entities, exemplified by Reuters news agency introducing a platform to facilitate the exchange of COVID-19-related news content among its extensive global network of media partners.⁶⁸ These collaborative efforts underscore the significance of efficient information dissemination and a unified response, highlighting the interconnected roles of media and government during crises.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been developed based on the themes identified during the Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):

- To enhance safety measures, comprehensive protocols should be established through a collaborative approach involving press clubs, media organizations, and government bodies. This partnership aims to provide journalists with necessary safety equipment and underscore the industry's commitment to their well-being during crises.
- Creating a robust mental health support system tailored to address the unique stresses journalists face while covering crises is imperative. Programs that include counseling services, self-care training, and resources for emotional well-

⁶⁷ Pakistan Press Foundation, "Journalists Registration," 2021, <https://www.pakistanpressfoundation.org/about-ppf/journalists-registration/>.

⁶⁸ Reuters, "Reuters Launches Covid-19 Content Sharing Platform for Publishers," 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN21X3WM>.

being should be developed to sustain journalists' mental health and resilience.

- Collaborative strategies must be formulated to improve information access and overcome hurdles in accessing timely data. Partnerships with institutions can facilitate secure and efficient information flow, ensuring journalists have accurate and up-to-date data. Implementing remote access mechanisms further strengthens their ability to work effectively, even in remote or restricted areas.
- Enhanced legal protections and job security for journalists should be advocated. Efforts should focus on promoting fair remuneration, job stability, and improved social security measures, with a specific emphasis on their roles during crises. These initiatives aim to boost journalists' confidence and reflect the industry's commitment to their well-being.
- Dedicated capacity-building initiatives are essential to prepare journalists for the evolving landscape of crisis reporting. Specialized training programs covering crisis reporting techniques, digital journalism skills, and emergency technology utilization should be developed and implemented. This investment in skill development will empower journalists to navigate challenges effectively while maintaining high-quality reporting.
- Seamless communication channels among media organizations, press clubs, and government bodies should be

fostered to ensure efficient information dissemination and timely responses. Extending these channels to international networks will facilitate the exchange of experiences and best practices, enriching the collective response to crises.

- Introducing comprehensive training programs for health reporting is vital. These programs should equip journalists with in-depth knowledge and understanding of health crises, enabling them to provide accurate and informed coverage. This initiative aims to contribute to a more informed public understanding and promote responsible journalism during health emergencies.

Conclusion

The resilience demonstrated by journalists during crises, particularly throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, highlights the need for an environment that prioritizes their safety, welfare, and effective performance. By addressing the challenges identified and fostering collaboration among diverse stakeholders, the media industry can significantly improve its ability to deliver accurate, timely, and impactful coverage during critical events. This collaborative effort is crucial for enhancing journalism's role in society and ensuring that journalists are well-prepared to handle and report on future global crises.
