

‘No difference between journalism and suicide’: Challenges for journalists covering conflict in Balochistan

Media, War & Conflict

1–20

© The Author(s) 2022

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/17506352221101258

journals.sagepub.com/home/mwc**Sidra Agha** 

Sindh Madressatul Islam University, Karachi, Pakistan

Márton Demeter 

University of Public Service, Budapest, Hungary

Abstract

The safety of journalists reporting from conflict zones is a complex issue as they are exposed to a variety of challenges on a daily basis. This research aims to identify those multi-dimensional challenges that make Balochistan one of the world's riskiest places for journalists. Based on 30 in-depth interviews with journalists working in the area, the authors found that the dynamics of conflict in Balochistan are different from those in other parts of Pakistan. Their findings reveal that different threatening agents – nationalist movements, separatist groups, the international agencies active there and the high level of extremism – all mean that journalists often cannot even identify the exact sources of threats. Moreover, journalists state that they receive no help from their media houses when they are reporting from conflict zones and look to the Pakistani army to protect the interests of the Baloch people while facing such challenges and risks.

Keywords

Balochistan, conflict, extremism, journalists, nationalists, separatist groups, war

Introduction

Journalism is a responsible profession through which journalists contribute to society regardless of all barriers and challenges placed in their way. The relationship between journalists and their news reports plays a central role in shaping public opinion. Normally, serving and informing audiences are the most important duties of journalists (Akhtar and

Corresponding author:

Márton Demeter, University of Public Service, Ludivika Sqr 2, Budapest 1083, Hungary.

Email: Demeter.Marton@uni-nke.hu

Pratt, 2016; Hanitzsch et al., 2010), even in extremely unstable and unsafe circumstances (Høiby and Ottosen, 2017).

In the past two decades, several research papers have offered empirical data suggesting that 21st-century reporters, especially those who work in conflict zones, face increased threats and deaths (Armoudian, 2016; Høiby, 2016; Palmer, 2018). The growing number of crimes and intimidation directed at journalists relates to various agents in the journalistic field (Gohdes and Carey, 2017; Harrison and Pukallus, 2018). Assaults and intimidation occur both in severely conflicted regions (Von der Lippe and Ottosen, 2016) and in relatively peaceful ones with developing democracies (Garcés and Arroyave, 2017). But, while attacks against journalists occur at all times, irrespective of war and peace, it is obvious that conflict zones are more dangerous than more stable parts of the world (Akhtar and Pratt, 2017; Hofstede, 2011).

Challenges of reporting conflicts in Pakistan

According to the ‘White Paper on Global Journalism’ reported by the International Federation of Journalists in 2020, Pakistan was listed in the top five most dangerous countries for the practice of journalism. In 2017, Reporters Without Borders also rated Pakistan among the most dangerous countries for journalistic practices. As released by Press Freedom Network (2020), over just one year 2019–2020, a minimum of 91 cases of violence against journalists was reported in Pakistan, including murder, abuse, censorship, harassment and legal proceedings, indicating a worrying and deteriorating climate of violence and intimidation in the country.

According to Akhtar and Pratt (2017), Pakistan’s journalistic field is riddled with serious challenges that range from a lack of professionalism to ethical violations to physical attacks on media workers. Amnesty International’s (2014) report highlighted several incidents where journalists were threatened in the course of their work and revealed that people in power positions (such as politics and the military) control Pakistani media as they want journalists to be their spokespersons. Free speech has not been experienced in the Pakistani media as regulatory and legislative means have been used by different governments to restrict the media from engaging in political criticism. In Pakistan, the media generally experiences political attacks, intimidation and financial difficulties (Siraj, 2009). The most important factor that limits the freedom of the press in Pakistan is the country’s political system, which creates restrictions on various levels to editorial independence. Government subsidies, unfair advertising distribution, political bias and secret incentives given to pro-government journalists create major hurdles for free media (Ashraf and Shabbir, 2019). Even if Pakistan has constitutional provisions guaranteeing freedom of speech, there is a rising level of violations of these rights in Balochistan, resulting in almost absolute control of media content. Not only in the oppressive regimes of Baloch leaders, but also in a ‘constitutional democracy’, the freedom of the press is under threat.

As discussed by Baloch and Andreson (2020), in Pakistan, local journalists frequently face security challenges in the provinces of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Government and media outlets have failed to protect their rights and interests. On the one

hand, they are subjected to increased censorship by security agencies and, on the other hand, they are threatened by Islamic State (IS) and other extremist groups, such as the Taliban and Baloch radical groups. This certainly affects Balochistan as well, while Pakistan's leading media sources and networks are no longer free to report on many critical topics of national and international concern.

While the constitution ensures the security of all citizens and permits freedom of expression, the enforcement of these laws is ineffective (Suleman, 2018). The government and anti-media powers have waged a relentless war against freedom of speech, and they pressure media groups to follow the official narrative (Dawn, 2020). Building on the considerations of Bläsi's (2004) model of war journalism, the research question of this article examines the challenges faced by journalists covering conflict in Balochistan.

RQ: How do journalists perform their duties under the challenging dynamics of the Balochistan conflict, and how do specific circumstances in Balochistan impact their journalistic practices?

Participation of journalists in the Baloch–Pakistan conflict

Relations between Pakistan and Balochistan have long been problematic, but the more severe clashes between the Pakistan army and Baloch nationalists started in the 1970s when Balochistan's demands for greater provincial autonomy were rejected by the central government (Kundi, 2008).

Reporting conflict in Balochistan has generally been an important duty of regional media (Kundi, 2008). However, journalists are often found killed and can be severely threatened while reporting on the deteriorating situation of Balochistan. Several state and non-state actors have been reported to create obstacles for journalists working in the region (Hussain, 2020). As stated by Ricchiardi (2012), different groups are involved in threatening journalists: anti-nationalist groups, tribal lords, separatist groups, the frontier corps, intelligence agencies, religious armed groups and so on. Reporting against foreign influencers, separatists and sectarian groups, militants and other state-owned actors is especially hard for journalists working in the region (Jamal, 2018). These political actors expect journalists to report for them, while competing groups have the same expectation, all of which creates severe hardship for reporters (Hussain, 2015).

Not only individual journalists, but also media institutions face difficulties in Balochistan, and reporting on human rights violations and corruption is strictly forbidden (Prakash, 2013). In Karachi, for example, three media channels were attacked with explosives and hand grenades. Nobody has been held accountable for those attacks, and the media outlets have not been able to identify them. Khan (2011) compiled a special report regarding the consequences that journalists face while reporting on critical issues.

One example is that of a photojournalist in Balochistan who took a photo of a Baloch leader, Shah Zain Bugti, in 2010 when he was being arrested and dragged away by the police. As soon as the image was published, the police told the journalist that his life was in danger for taking the photo, and he was interrogated by the Frontier Corps¹ for the

same reason. The report further stated that reporters feel that they are trapped, as they have no idea which report will trigger reprisals. Khan also discussed how parties and groups in Balochistan threaten journalists and control their information.

Moreover, journalists are also exposed to threats and killings by Baloch armed groups considered as 'freedom of the press predators'. It was also found that journalists in Pakistan are compelled to work in an environment without safety measures and organizational support and are forced to resort to self-censorship and to rely on their organizations (Rehmat, 2014).

Theoretical framework

This study adopts Bläsi's (2004) model of factors influencing the production of conflict coverage that sheds light on different dimensions that influence journalists reporting on conflicts. In Bläsi's model, six main factors affect conflict coverage which are further discussed along with the hierarchy of influences model by Shoemaker and Reese (1996, 2014). This model identifies five levels of influence (from micro to macro) that can have an impact on the process of news production: individual level, routine practices, organizational structure, extra media affairs and the social system.

Structure

The structure includes types of media and space for a news story in a specific medium. It also focuses on editorial planning. Shoemaker and Reese have discussed the concept of structure in the form of organizational level initiating from editor's desk to media owners. This level points to the organizational policy, professional roles and the overall structure of the media house. Choices by editors and the selection criteria for news in each organization play a crucial role in whether a story is published, and economic aspects are also considered. It is also highlighted that some news channels have the policy of publishing a picture of a news event; otherwise, the story would be rejected.

Meanwhile, some newspapers have limited space, and do not include more detailed coverage of a news story. Shoemaker and Reese also identify that the structure of an organization is further influenced by an extra media level, which is based on ideologies serving special interests. This level includes the involvement of audiences, advertising, public relations and the potential sources that may affect media content. The dependency of media on economic, cultural and political factors shapes structural conditions for journalists.

Situation onsite

Bläsi talks about the magnitude of problems that journalists face while they are on a conflict site. Besides immediate dangers, in some cases, the conflict can be so complicated that it is very hard for a journalist to understand the situation, and to distinguish the positive and negative sides of the conflict.

Personal influence

Bläsi (2004) relates this factor to the individual decisions, choices and preferences of journalists. Their personal preferences, beliefs, ideologies, knowledge and experience about the subject have a significant impact. Similarly, Shoemaker and Reese see this micro level as the personal and professional characteristics of a journalist shaping media content. The analysis of this level considers several factors from personal values and demographic traits to professional skills and education. The first is journalistic competence, whereby a journalist should be able to report on a conflict by having the appropriate ability to investigate the issue properly. A professional journalist must know how to write a compelling news story and how to avoid the pressure exerted by news agencies. Moreover, a capable journalist should report effectively despite time constraints.

The second capability consists of general conflict competencies, meaning that a journalist should have a thorough knowledge of the conflict. Also, the model suggests that journalists must know how to cope with the difficult situation of being in a conflict zone: they should know how to stay safe and how to perform their duty in a complex and possibly dangerous situation.

Finally, specific conflict competencies should also be acquired. Journalists should know the background of a conflict area, as well as the culture, religion and language of the investigated region. In addition, journalists should be aware of the most important groups exercising power in the region, and they should be familiar with the main goals of these agents. Moreover, Shoemaker and Reese point out the level of routine practices of the journalists that may affect more than the personal level. This level recognizes the inherent environment of their work which has evolved over the period.

Political scenario

Each place has a different political scenario that not only affects the practice of news coverage but also has an impact on the production of news. The political environment includes the national and international policies of the countries on the conflict, given their economic interests and historic and cultural affiliations. Shoemaker and Reese relate media to the conventional concepts of society and power and identify it under the level of the social system. This level of influence connects national boundaries with the international forces to influence media.

Lobbying

The coverage of the conflict is not just about the coverage of issues. It is also about reporting on the activities of the parties involved in the conflict, such as state and non-state actors, political parties, different organizations, and agencies who try to influence the media to promote their interests (Shoemaker and Reese, 1991). Bläsi (2009) describes lobbying as the desire of an actor to receive positive coverage by the media, or to distort news production practices in order to serve the actor's own interests. Shoemaker and Reese have not particularly defined lobbying in their model.

General public

Shoemaker and Reese defined audience under the social institutions or extra-media level, saying that besides other factors and forces of influence, audiences also affect the production of media content. On the other hand, Bläsi (2004) posits that audience interest should not directly affect the coverage of political issues, but audiences' expectations and their choices might affect journalists' decisions regarding what to report on and what not. Audience preferences are also affected by the media's selection of issues to cover.

Bläsi's model is based on the process of news production and it provides tools for scrutinizing how the reality of conflict media is completely different from peace journalism (Cornelius, 2001; McGoldrick and Lynch, 2000) or the constructive conflict coverage model (Kempf, 2003). Bläsi (2004) suggests alternative ways of analysing how journalists in conflict zones cover public events while giving attention to the reality of journalistic practice.

First, according to his model, there should be an awareness of the obstacles that journalists face daily and, secondly, strategies should be developed accordingly to tackle these factors so as to enable the implementation of constructive journalism. In regard to the restrictions experienced by journalists, there is a variety of pressures and restrictions that directly relate to the conflict itself and that have an impact on the production of news and the practice of journalism, including the parties involved in the conflict, the issues underlying the conflict, the intensity of the conflict, the social and personal involvement of the journalist, proximity and strategic communication actors involved in the conflict (Bläsi, 2009; Hanitzsch and Hoxha, 2014).

Methodology

Researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 30 national journalists² covering the Balochistan conflict. These journalists come from different regions of Pakistan, especially from the Balochistan province and the capital, Islamabad (see Table 1). A few journalists covering the same conflict from Islamabad were also interviewed; they were working as foreign correspondents for the BBC, Voice of America, NDTV and the Turkish news agency.

In selecting potential participants, journalists who were either working in Balochistan or who reported on Balochi conflicts were contacted, using purposive and snowball sampling. Interviewees for this study were relatively homogeneous in terms of their expertise, background, responsibilities and level of experience. While considering ethical considerations and the safety of journalists, participants were given anonymous identifiers such as J1, J2, J3, and so on. Among the 30 respondents, 29 were male whereas only one female was reporting on the conflict. In Pakistan, only a few female journalists work on conflict stories. Most of them are from major cities such as Islamabad, or have worked under the military embedded policy.

All the journalists were contacted by telephone call and none of them refused to be interviewed. Although they did not name specific risks connected with answering interview questions, a few of them were quite apprehensive about being identified. Of the interviews, 23 were conducted online via Skype video call since it was not easy for the

researchers to visit Balochistan, whereas the remaining 7 interviews were conducted in person in Islamabad at locations chosen by the respondents, such as the Islamabad press club or their city offices. On the other hand, there was no security threat to the researchers while conducting the research and they considered protection of the journalists' privacy as the most essential part of the research. All the interviews were recorded. Data analysis was broken down into six phases: data familiarization, initial code generation, finding themes, reviewing as well as defining themes and producing the content (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Findings and discussion

We interpret and discuss the main findings of the study within the framework of Bläsi's (2004) six-factor model introduced in our theoretical framework. We applied this model as it covers the most important factors that influence journalists' work when reporting from conflict zones, and because it helps to provide structural interpretations on the challenges journalists face. While the factors by which journalists' experiences are described are intersectional, a structural analysis and interpretation are still necessary in order to emphasize the importance of each unique factor.

Structure of media houses

Most of the interviewees indicated that competition among media groups to break the news first and to get advertisements put them in danger. Exclusivity and profit-making have been the prime concern of media organizations, aims for which journalists are pushed to risk their lives, while they are also targeted for the mistakes of their senior colleagues or bosses.

About two or three years back, our channel forced our reporters to cover the bomb blast in Quetta. When they hurried there, another explosion took place and in no time three journalists lost their lives in front of our eyes; the competition between [channels] is putting us in danger. (J20)

J10 talked about their reliance on government advertisements:

We are paid lower salaries because local news outlets in Balochistan depend on the government for their sustenance. To receive government funds, our organizations must follow the instructions and conditions of the government. Here ads are used as an exploitation tool to control the media.

There are no proper checks and balances with regard to who is reporting what and how. As one respondent puts it:

Some channels direct their reporters to include militants' statements so that their paper gets more circulation since we like to hear sensational news; some channels direct their employees to add a military perspective, and some direct us to criticize the government and the state. We

are not doing journalism because we are not free in any way. We are under constant criticism and fear of being threatened. (J26)

When talking about the security protocols, almost all journalists stated that, when they visit an affected area, they are not supported with any protective measures. Only three foreign correspondents said that they are given security protocols before travelling to a conflict site. J5 shared his experience in this regard, 'I was working for the BBC . . . They value your security and safety, whereas local media are not concerned with our safety at all, or maybe they do not want to finance our protection.' Almost all respondents felt that they had been given no physical and financial security. J21 reported that 'material assets such as cameras are protected and valued more than human life. They are insured, but the lives of journalists are not given any worth.'

Also, regarding government funds, a participant (J30) said:

We have received funding of a few crores³ from the government, which is helpful to some extent and, as a result, we have established a welfare fund for journalists. The funding will be granted to journalists who fall sick or die. We support their families with immediate funds for health or funerals. The fund also supports their families, such as their wives, children, or parents. However, a few crores are not enough, and we are trying to increase the funding. This scheme is very important for those journalists who do not earn much, such as those who earn below 50,000 rupees.⁴

In sum, we found that media outlets do not provide an appropriate environment and support for professional journalists. According to our respondents, winning the 'news competition' is more important to the media houses and editors than the safety of journalists. Moreover, media organizations and governmental bodies provide neither the necessary training nor the necessary funding to their employees that would enable them to meet the professional standards that they aim for.

Situation onsite

According to Bläsi (2004), the 'situation onsite' factor covers all environmental circumstances under which media persons work in a particular field of conflict. It entails, first, the conflict area's geography, which often determines whether it is possible to report at all. Moreover, this factor also includes general security issues and accessibility to information, that is, to places and sources.

Access to conflict zone and means of information

All our respondents agreed that gaining access to Balochistan is no easy task due to the great distances between districts. Thus, most of the time, it is not feasible for reporters to access the conflict site as they lack the necessary transportation and communication facilities. J19 stated that 'Telecommunications in Balochistan are very poor. Owing to the communication issue, we cannot verify the news. It takes eight to ten hours if we need to check the news from our sources.' However, journalists added that if it is not

possible to reach conflict areas, they try to collect information from various agents: ‘It can be confirmed from corps, security agencies, district administration, police, hospitals, local journalists and government officials’ (J7).

Interviewees also said that not all potential information sources are appropriate for confirming stories. Specifically, they emphasized that ‘we usually do not verify information based on news that comes from three “suspicious” or potentially biased sources: religious groups, political groups or Baloch insurgents’ (J18). Most respondents said that they did not contact these groups to confirm any news. One of the journalists cited that:

We have no trust in these three groups, and thus we do not like to contact them to verify information, because they are against the state’s system, they have challenged the national security of the country and they have spread terror with their acts. How can we rely on them for any information, if they threaten us so that we release their version of the story? (J18)

In response to a question regarding their access to the conflict area, journalists shared that they are always at risk, even if they have permission from their media houses or the government agencies.

Risk is everywhere. Our media houses can only provide us the permission to go somewhere and report from there, but they cannot protect our lives. They cannot provide us security. We have to go there (the conflict site) alone or with the team. We never know where these militants will appear from to attack us. (J13)

Journalists also shared that government agencies or the military do not try to prevent them from reporting on any issue, as shared by J3:

Even if we feel any hindrance, our organizations provide us with an authority letter. But we don’t feel any fear from the side of the government or military, because they know we are just doing our job. We are terrified of these militants who hinder our accessibility through terror and violence. For us, accessibility does not really mean permission from our organizations or the government, but we believe in safe and secure accessibility.

Risks for journalists

J8 highlighted that ‘In the entire history of journalism in Pakistan, the greatest number of killings have occurred in Balochistan.’ Indeed, as J3 added, ‘Even during the war in Afghanistan, not as many journalists were killed there as are killed in Pakistan, and in Balochistan specifically.’ As another interviewee put it, ‘Journalism in Balochistan is as dangerous as throwing yourself in front of a lion in an open jungle’ (J9). The situation is threatening, chaotic and unpredictable, as J23 expresses:

We have no idea who is behind us and who will hit us, we are simply a trigger away. In Quetta, three journalists were killed in their offices and it took years until these killings were seriously investigated. After a long time, two terrorists from Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) were arrested and it was reported that they were held responsible for those killings.

J15 adds that:

The factors are exceptional as we have a tribal system here; we have armed people here and we have drug traffickers here, too, and the resistance in Balochistan is at its peak. International intervention has taken place in Balochistan. Foreign agents are active here. If we say anything, the nationalists assume that we are supporters of Pakistan, and harass us, then we cannot publish the facts.

Other journalists also discussed that, in certain situations, a headline provided by a news editor or an anchor read is a trigger for journalists. They shared a few stories here:

Dr. Chishti Mujahid, who used to work for Akhbar e Jahan, was a writer who lost his life in a targeted killing. In an article, he wrote nothing wrong, but the sub-editor from Karachi made such a title for the article that became a pretext for his murder. The reader does not know who the editor is and who writes the headlines. Their only focus is the writer. So, because of the editor's mistake, Chishti Mujahid was murdered. (J26)

In Quetta, the Mashriq newspaper published a statement by Lashkar-e-Jhangvi⁵ (LeJ) about the Shia community, calling them non-believers; this aroused hatred in the province. They released this statement because they were under threat of attack from Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), that if they can attack the house of Deputy Inspector General Frontier Corps then they can attack our offices too. Acting *ex officio*, the Balochistan High Court issued a recommendation that media organizations not release any news about restricted organizations, but journalists were determined to release their stories as they believed six months imprisonment is preferable to death. One of the sub-editors, Akhtar Mirza, died of a heart attack owing to this constant pressure from the militants. (J2)

J13 was also threatened several times by the pressure groups:

In the beginning, they threatened me when CM Nawab Aslam Rasani was in government. That was the time when the law-and-order situation was weaker in the province. In those days, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ) detonated a bomb near Hazara, a town of Quetta. Nearly 35 Shiites were killed, and 100 were wounded. The Edhi Foundation arrived there to save them. In response to this loss, people began firing too. Most were wounded and ended up dying. Unfortunately, I was working on this incident. Since LeJ claimed responsibility, I also added the other terrorist attacks of LeJ in my story. As soon as the story was published, they started making disturbing calls to me. They told me they are not after good Muslims like me, but after those who were disbelievers of Islam (Shias). They questioned me as to why I have written against them while calling them terrorists. As I was advised during my training not to argue with such people, I kept calm and composed and I tried to ease the situation. However, they threatened and warned me that if such a thing happened again, I would face serious consequences.

The situation of journalists in the region is considered to be so dangerous that one of our respondents (J17) stated that 'there is no difference between journalism and suicide; opt for either since they are the same.'

Personal influence

Our study found that 11 out of 30 reporters had a degree in journalism, while the other respondents had a different educational background. In a question about media ethics and regulations, 17 journalists did not know the term. 'They (the media providers) do not give us any training; they do not conduct workshops specifically about the conflict terrain' (J11).

About background knowledge on the covered conflicts, all journalists were aware of the situation and the main actors of the Balochi conflict. 'I was born here, how can I not be aware of the issues of this province? It is my home; my land' (J6). Most of the journalists pointed to Baloch nationalism as being the main cause for the conflicts in Balochistan: 'One of the most crucial risk factors in the background of the conflicts in Balochistan is nationalism' (J2). In a question about Baloch nationalism, J2 detailed the causes and structure of nationalism in the province:

Baloch nationalism in Pakistan has been deeply affected by the tribal spheres of social life in Balochistan. Baloch nationalism was motivated by the mechanism of increasing socio-political warfare, associated with the post-Cold War situation, defined by the removal of dictatorial control of the Soviet Union, and the dynamics of globalization. Extreme nationalism has become much more militant, more ethnocentric, more rebellious, and more ideologically dominated. Now they seem more likely to adopt immoral and underhanded means like killing innocent civilians, abduction, hostage, arms smuggling, and even some nationalists, although not explicitly, are benefiting from drug smuggling and gang warfare to achieve their motives.

Journalists were also questioned as to whether their reporting was influenced by their ethnic identity, since most of them identify as Balochi. Almost all journalists believed in professionalism and were committed to the true dissemination of information. They did not believe that their identity had any impact on their news reporting. 'Yes, I am a Balochi, but I am a human being also. I am a Pakistani too' (J14). Another journalist (J2) said:

The glorification of Baloch brothers (the entire Baloch nation) and the glorification of terrorists or extremists are two different things. Yes, I am concerned about my people, my brothers, our families, but I cannot show support to their incorrect activities.

Most journalists believed that to cover the conflict, or to report against militants' activities is their personal choice regardless of being under severe risk. As one respondent stated:

We are not influenced by our poor economic conditions, but yes we are highly influenced by the condition of our homeland (Balochistan). We want to speak out for our rights, about the atrocities we experience, and about the danger every Balochi is in – that is why we have decided to report on this violence. (J21)

Political scenario

As stated by Bläsi (2004), every country has its societal and political influence on the conflicts of other countries with respect to their involvement in policies, interests, economic, historic and cultural relationships. The political scenario is defined by the country's level of involvement, which can vary from high-level political and media involvement of other countries to low-level involvement (no direct or clear influence) of the country concerned. Our respondents believed that international agencies are deeply involved in the Balochi conflict in many ways. J21 thought that 'these groups are financed by Indian agencies.' Another journalist said, 'The USA is very much interested in the Balochistan conflict. It is not a mere conflict for us Balochis or Pakistanis, but Iran, Afghanistan and other countries are also interested in it' (J25). However, it was revealed that the political elite (such as the US) or the mainstream media do not influence the reporting on Balochistan, but the political climate and media culture in Pakistan has an impact on the news coverage of Balochistan. 'On one side, our news organizations (such as Daily Jang) force us to report according to their expectations, and on the other hand, extremist groups pressure us to report their words in the media. We are targeted by both sides' (J17).

It was highlighted by almost all respondents that it is quite hard to speak the truth, as 'nationalists do not let us speak in favour of truth, since they consider us to be sympathizers of Pakistan and they try to harass us in various ways' (J7). Journalists considered themselves to be easy prey for all agencies and groups operating in the province. They grieved while telling stories of their fellow journalists, both for those who were killed and those who had survived.

Lobbying

Bläsi believes that conflict coverage usually deals with the actors involved in the conflict, including individuals, parties and organizations. The subjects of the news reports are usually interested in having the media present them in a favourable light, and this especially holds for the conflicting groups who want to earn public support. One journalist (J2) said:

I have not been threatened or troubled by security forces, but by different groups. Firstly, I was threatened by Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LeJ), then it was separatist groups, and later I received threats from the Government of Balochistan when Aslam Raissani was in government.

J5 added: 'Each pressure group has its own motives, which is why they like to create fear among the masses and promote their ideology.'

On the other hand, J8, praising military actions against these activists, noted:

However, nationalism is the main ideology of all the groups, which they seek to promote as much as they can, even by influencing our reports. NAP (National Action Plan)⁶ and Operation Zarb-e-Azab⁷ have helped us, since many actions were taken against militant groups in this regard.

J28 raised a similar point:

Banned organizations like LeJ and BLA were targeted and now, because of this, they are involved in their own activities. Now they are concerned about their own living. As a result, they rarely keep an eye on us, and we somehow feel protected now. In previous times they used to gather in public to abuse us and threaten us. Now they have changed their ways owing to these operations.

Our respondents also felt that the political affiliations of journalists have ruined the profession. They emphasized that the personal influence or ideology of any affiliated political party may affect the practice of journalism in the wrong direction and that, because of political ties, journalists might stop writing about public issues openly and objectively. Reporting events is affected by partialities to a greater extent, 'because partialities lead to biased reporting' (J14). As J1 clarified, 'I do not consider someone as a journalist if he has partialities, whether political or other.'

Another journalist raised concern that 'affiliation with any party or group harms your integrity, no matter if you keep both of the things apart' (J22). This sentiment was echoed by respondent J28, who emphasized: 'A journalist cannot be impartial when he [sic] has to report some news against the party he is affiliated with; nobody will trust him even if he is in the right.' Thus, according to the respondents, professional journalists should not follow anything that influences them or leads them towards being biased. However, as revealed by one media person (J9), 'Affiliation with political groups is quite common in Balochistan. In my opinion, a journalist should avoid all prejudices, or else he [sic] is merely a spokesperson of the group he follows, he does not deserve to be a journalist.'

General public

Bläsi believes that this factor does not have any direct impact on the media, but that it does affect the job of the media regarding what to report and how. Our results show that our respondents are motivated enough to play their part in society for the respect they have earned there, and that they also want to serve the public. As shared by J6:

We are not compensated, but we have a reputation in our field because of journalism. We are respected by tribal leaders, politicians and other communities, and our problems are often resolved on this basis, as journalists have an impact. Thus, for this reason, several journalists have preferred this path.

J21 also highlighted: 'We want to give priority to issues of public interest because, in Balochistan, issues of the public have no space. You would rarely find content about public issues.'

Most of the respondents said that they are not disturbed by the local people. Only a few said, 'they question us about their problems that we do not give coverage to' (J10, J21, J27). The study found that journalists try to highlight public issues at the local level, but they are under pressure from every side, and thus often cannot highlight general public issues. However, they try to report according to public demand to some extent.

‘We know that we have to see public interest also; we have to write about their issues too, but our (organizations’) policies do not let us give space to the common people’, J9 stressed.

Moreover, regarding the problems and interests of the general population, respondents said that trust should be built among the Baloch people to resolve their problems. ‘Since the Pakistan army has taken this initiative, they have reduced the gap between the masses and the security forces. So, owing to such initiatives, positive results are emerging’ (J6). It was also suggested that the people of Balochistan should have more employment opportunities so that they would not accept circumstances of chaos and violence in which they are being deprived of their employment rights. As one of our respondents summarized: ‘If Balochi people are required to move to cities, get an education, do some respectable work and leave behind their weapons to learn the development system like civilians; there will come the time when journalists feel safe and sound’ (J16).

Conclusion

The situation of the media in Balochistan has been uncompromising and the work of local journalists is extremely hard and dangerous. From tribal and government decrees to militants and military conflicts, every upheaval in the province has brought with it a wave of unique challenges for journalists working there. As this conflict area has been riddled with nationalist movements and insurgencies, working as a journalist in Balochistan raises a number of issues and challenges.

To the question raised in the study as to the challenges faced by journalists while reporting on the Balochistan conflict, a variety of responses were given, from death threats and killings to a lack of support from the media service providers who employ them. Our research discovered that journalists are at risk due to the multi-dimensional state of conflict in Balochistan, such as different militant groups who are drug dealers as well as murderers. Although different groups and agencies are active in Balochistan and the number of incidents is constantly increasing, journalists told us that, even in such an environment, they are committed to reporting news for the public. However, it is very hard for a journalist to report fairly. If their articles raise objections from any of the pressure groups or lobbies object, they are targeted, harassed, forced to leave their homes, or even killed. In Balochistan, there is an all-pervading environment of terror which makes reporting on a conflict-affected area a dangerous task, since murders can be committed with impunity. Within the framework of Bläsi’s (2004) six-factor model of conflict coverage, we provide a structural analysis of the situation of journalists who cover Balochi conflicts. Appendix 1 summarizes the main findings as they are interpreted in Bläsi’s model.


Finally, it must be highlighted that conflict reporting has shifted from control of territory to control of information. This undermines a fundamental function of journalism: to inform society, and to support both political stability and socio-economic development. Given the extreme threats faced by journalists, it is important that this be recognized at the national and international levels as well. As a general conclusion, we cite J26’s summary of an ideal journalistic practice that, while far from reality in Balochistan, is still a goal that journalists in the region strive for:

Quoting statements of people and organizations is not a safe way of reporting. Report your information to the masses without citing the names of persons and organizations involved in the issue. A journalist should practise his [sic] profession sensibly while drawing a circle around him and not crossing it. Besides, journalists should go through the proper procedures of practising this profession. The media council should perform its duty effectively, media persons should be properly appointed to improve their work culture. Also, legal action should be taken in cases where journalists are murdered. The government should take effective measures to end this culture of impunity and make an example out of the case of each victim to have a deterrent effect towards all of these groups and agencies. Furthermore, journalists should be trained to cover conflicts, especially those who are reporting from Balochistan. (J26)

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Sidra Agha  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4923-1881>

Márton Demeter  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9888-9682>

Notes

1. A paramilitary force under military command which is responsible for maintaining law and order in the province.
2. By national journalists, we mean media professionals in Pakistan, of Pakistani nationality, and who are reporting on conflicts across the country.
3. A few 100,000 dollars.
4. Less than 400 dollars.
5. It has been listed as a terrorist organization by the US, UK, Pakistan, Australia, Canada and the UN.
6. The government of Pakistan established nationally an action plan in January 2015 to put an end to terrorism, and to expand anti-terrorism measures in the country, especially in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).
7. A military operation initiated on 15 June 2014 by the Pakistani military against militant groups in North Waziristan.

References

- Akhtar N and Pratt CB (2017) Pakistani Government–news media relationships: How relevant are Western journalistic values? *Journalism Studies* 18(1): 65–85.
- Amnesty International Report (2014) Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/0001/2015/en/>
- Armoudian M (2016) *Reporting from the Danger Zone: Frontline Journalists, Their Jobs, and an Increasingly Perilous Future*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ashraf A and Shabbir G (2019) Impact of political environment on media freedom in Pakistan. *Research Journal of South Asian Studies* 34(1): 251–264.
- Baloch K and Andresen K (2020) Reporting in conflict zones in Pakistan: Risks and challenges for fixers. *Media and Communication* 8(1): 37–46.

- Bläsi B (2004) Peace journalism and the news production process. *Conflict & Communication online* 3(1/2): 1–12.
- Bläsi B (2009) Implementing peace journalism: The role of conflict stages. *Conflict & Communication* 8(2): 1–9.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2): 77–101.
- Cornelius S (2001) Conflict resolution network Australia: Innovative approaches to working with the media. *Interaction* 14(3): 4.
- Dawn (2020) No press freedom, 29 September. Available at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1582208> (accessed 5 May 2022).
- Garcés P and Arroyav CJ (2017) Autonomía profesional y riesgos de seguridad de los periodistas en Colombia. *Perfiles latinoamericanos* 25(49): 35–53.
- Gohdes AR and Carey SC (2017). Canaries in a coal-mine? What the killings of journalists tell us about future repression. *Journal of Peace Research* 54(2): 157–174.
- Hanitzsch T and Hoxha A (2014) News production: Theory and conceptual framework. Generic and conflict influences on the news production process. Available at: <http://www.infocore.eu/wp-content> (accessed 5 May 2022).
- Hanitzsch T et al. (2010) Modeling perceived influences on journalism: Evidence from a cross-national survey of journalists. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 87(1): 5–22.
- Harrison J and Pukallus S (2018) The politics of impunity: A study of journalists' experiential accounts of impunity in Bulgaria, Democratic Republic of Congo, India, Mexico and Pakistan. *Journalism*. DOI: 10.1177/1464884918778248.
- Hofstede G (2011) Culture's continuing consequences. Paper presented at the Asia Service Business Research Institute, Waseda University, Tokyo.
- Høiby MH (2016) Sexual violence against journalists in conflict zones: Gendered practices and cultures in the newsroom. In: von der Lippe B and Ottosen R (eds) *Gendering War and Peace Reporting. Some Insights - some Missing Links*. Gothenburg: Nordicom, pp.75–87.
- Høiby M and Ottosen R (2015) Journalism under pressure: A mapping of editorial policies and practices for journalists covering conflict. HiOA Rapport 6.
- Hussain S (2015) Balochistan: Reaping the benefits of peace journalism. *Conflict & Communication* 14(2).
- Hussain S (2020) Peace journalism for conflict reporting: Insights from Pakistan. *Journalism Practice* 14(1): 1–16.
- Jamal N (2018) Cost cuts in media. *Dawn*, 19 November. Available at: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1446393> (accessed 5 May 2022).
- Khan A (2011) *Press in Stress: Media under Threat in Balochistan*. Islamabad, Pakistan: Intermedia.
- Kempf W (2003) Constructive conflict coverage – A social-psychological research and development program. *Conflict & Communication Online* 2(2): 1–13.
- Kundi MA (2008) The tribal set up and elections in Balochistan. Pakistan: Unresolved issues of state and society. *Vanguard Publications*, 26–37.
- McGoldrick A and Lynch J (2000) Peace journalism – how to do it. Available at: <http://www.transcend.org/> (accessed 5 May 2022).
- Palmer L (2018) *Becoming the Story: War Correspondents since 9/11*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Prakash A (2013) Peace or war journalism: Case study of the Balochistan conflict in Pakistan. *Strategic Analysis* 37(5): 621–636.
- Press Freedom Network (2020) Murders, Harassment and Assault: The Tough Wages of Journalism in Pakistan. Freedom Network Pakistan (FNPk).

- Rehmat A (2014) Reporting under threat: Testimonies of courage in the face of impunity from Pakistani journalists. Civic Action Resources.
- Ricchiardi S (2012) *Challenges for Independent News Media in Pakistan*. Washington, DC: Center for International Media Assistance.
- Shoemaker P and Reese SD (1991) *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Media Content*. Harlow: Longman.
- Shoemaker P and Reese SD (1996) *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content*, 2nd edn. New York, NY: Longman.
- Shoemaker P and Reese SD (2014) *Mediating the Message in the 21st Century: A Media Sociology Perspective*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Siraj SA (2009) Critical analysis of press freedom in Pakistan. *Journal Media and Communication Studies* 1(3): 43–47.
- Suleman M (2018) *A Bleak Outlook for Press Freedom in Balochistan*. The Balochistan Point.
- Von der Lippe B and Ottosen R (2016) *Gendering War and Peace Reporting: Some Insights – Some Missing Links*. Nordicom.

Author biographies

Sidra Agha is a lecturer at the Sindh Madressatul Islam University and a PhD student at the University of Public Service, Hungary. Her main research focus is embedded journalism with a focus on Pakistan. Address: Sindh Madressatul Islam University, Aiwan e Tijarat Road Karachi Karachi, PK-SD Sindh 74200, Pakistan.

Márton Demeter is an associate professor at the University of Public Service, Hungary where he is head of the department for Science Strategy. His main area of research is science strategy and the sociology of science, but he also publishes in journalism and public service media.

Appendix I. A structural description of Balochi conflict journalists in Blási's (2004) conflict coverage framework.

Blási's main category		Empirical findings for Balochistan	
STRUCTURE	Structural aspects of news organizations. Encompasses several factors that may influence news production such as the type and format of media, its policies, strategies and expectations, its news value criteria, and its overall economic potential.	FINDING	News organizations are working on their economic agenda; their policies are demanding towards journalists whereas their expectations from them are high.
SITUATION ON SITE	This factor refers to the exposure of a journalist to the overall situation and circumstances in an affected area or region, including its geography, and accessibility of places and sources, available transportation and communication technologies, security conditions, the accessibility of sources, along with their credibility even if they are easily accessible.	FINDING	Conflict reporting in Balochistan is dangerous not only because it is home to some of the world's most notorious terrorist groups, but also because journalists' lives and livelihoods are at constant risk, even in their home regions.
PERSONAL INFLUENCE	News production is also influenced by the personal and professional values of journalists, their ideology and motives, personal and social perspectives about the conflict, and their professional competence and experience.	FINDING	Journalists are neither influenced by their ethnicity or language when reporting against Baloch nationalists, nor do they believe in the glorification of extremists; they prefer to follow their professional ethics.
		EXAMPLE	'About two or three years back, our channel forced our reporters to cover the bomb blast in Quetta. When they hurried there, another explosion took place and in no time three journalists lost their lives in front of our eyes; the competition between [channels] is putting us in danger.' (J20)
		EXAMPLE	'In Balochistan, there are 32 districts, and in almost 20, or more than 20 districts, there is an extreme situation. There is a worsening state of social order because of separatists who are involved in terrorist activities. When social order is disrupted, criminals and offenders become stronger here. It is a conflict-affected region, where a journalist is threatened by both sides when different tensions take place, and every group tries to use journalists for their purposes as a runway or forum. I learned this a few years ago, when we were under tremendous stress due to religious and separatist groups. A journalist is the first one to face a vulnerable situation in a conflict region. If law enforcement or military personnel are fighting for people here, then we are fighting with the pen as well. We are local people, we speak the culture and know all the stuff about this place, but there were still 24 journalists who were slaughtered. These incidents are all terrifying and distinct from other parts of Pakistan.' (J4)
		EXAMPLE	'We (media persons) are fighting against them (pressure groups) to protect our professionalism.' (J21)

(Continued)

Appendix I. (Continued)

Blási's main category	Empirical findings for Balochistan	
POLITICAL SCENARIO	FINDING	EXAMPLE
This includes external politics (of other countries) and internal politics (one's own country), along with public attention, the degree of diverse opinions and opposition, coverage and possible measures regarding the conflict.	In Balochistan, there is a political culture that starts in the newsroom and extends to the government and security forces, making it difficult for journalists to disseminate the real information.	'On one side, our news organizations force us to report according to their expectations and, on the other hand, extremist groups pressure us to report their words in the media. We are targeted by both sides.' (J17)
LOBBYING	FINDING	EXAMPLE
Lobbying also plays a crucial role in influencing news production. The main parties to the conflict usually have a profound interest in getting favourable coverage. From democracies to dictators and terrorist organizations, all of them seek to influence conflict reporting to have their say in the media.	Personal connections with political parties and other groups influence conflict reporting in a manner that journalists try to avoid, because these affiliations create a personal bias in one's reporting even with regards to straightforward incidents.	'Affiliation with political groups is quite common in Balochistan. In my opinion, a journalist should avoid all prejudices, or else he [sic] is merely a spokesperson of the group he follows, he does not deserve to be a journalist.' (J9)
GENERAL PUBLIC	FINDING	EXAMPLE
The success of media products depends on what journalists provide to the public and on what their public demands or expects from them. Audience interest has been given considerable significance: audience research is conducted to identify public demands and perceptions. Even though the public has no direct effect on conflict reporting, the selection of topics, the amount of coverage devoted to them, and the overall format and style of news reporting is influenced by public needs.	As they are motivated to play their positive role in society, journalists believe in informing the masses in a professional manner. However, it is difficult to do so, given the policies and expectations of their employers.	'We know that we have to see public interest also; we have to write about their issues too, but our (organizations') policies do not let us give space to the common people.' J9