



## COMMUNICATION ECOLOGY DURING PANDEMIC COVID-19: CHALLENGES AND THEIR MITIGATION OF JOURNALISTS FROM GILGIT BALTISTAN

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### Abstract

*The COVID-19 pandemic has wracked the globe with fear and confusion and posed great threats to health system all over the world. A wave of misinformation, rumours, fakes news and hoaxes have also flooded through various media platforms, creating fear and confusion in general public. Global communication was drastically altered by the COVID-19 epidemic, which presented journalists with hitherto unheard-of difficulties, especially in isolated and underdeveloped areas like Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan. The misinformation about COVID-19 makes vulnerable people of rural and remote communities like Gilgit-Baltistan even more vulnerable due to poor healthcare facilities and less or no reliable information about precautionary measures owing to poor internet connectivity and electronic media coverage. With an emphasis on how journalists in Gilgit-Baltistan managed the disturbed information landscape, this study investigates the idea of communication ecology during the pandemic. During disasters and health emergencies, local journalists play a vital role in communicating to general public regarding emergency situation, so this study will evaluate perception of local journalists in Gilgit-Baltistan regarding reporting practices adopted during Pandemic COVID-19 and how they conceptualize and covers news about corona virus and face challenges in reporting and covering health emergency. The study highlights the main obstacles that journalists must overcome, such as a lack of trustworthy information, inadequate internet infrastructure, governmental regulations, and psychological strain. Furthermore this study aims to examine the mitigation of challenges which local journalists from Gilgit Baltistan has been faced during pandemic.*

**Keywords:** Corona Virus, Crisis Communication, COVID-19 Communication Ecology, Disaster Communication.

### Introduction

In case of any particular public health emergency, journalists are the only source to connect the world through their authentic and reliable information. In such circumstances all eyes are on Journalists for the reason that they are not only kept the world update, they are also spreading awareness about the disease (Shah, 2018). All the media houses and especially news organizations are usually part of communication ecology, during pandemic all the organizations were well aware that they are working in COVID-19 communication ecology while balancing personal challenges of the health crisis. Within limited resources journalists have to manage stay healthy, attentive and maintain responsibility to connect with public in a threat where people assuming the threat is not that much of bigger but media and government are creating sensationalism (Broad et al., 2013).

The idea of communication ecology looks at how different channels, practices and contexts for communicating interact relative to a specific environment. Instead, it highlights the links between various



communication practices and behaviourism; as well you will see how these are connected to human relations and interconnected with transitioning. Communication patterns and the resources are quite different in crisis situation as compared to use in normal days of life, this approach is basically to understand that how an individual communicate with the world and how he or she gain information. For example during COVID-19 for journalists may impossible to conduct face to face interviews but by using online video call they mitigate the challenge (Perreault et al., 2014).

It is important to take into account the environmental context in which communication occurs, before critically examining its processes. Information about crisis and disaster is a component of ecology in which journalism affects, and is affected by the atmosphere. So understand what communication ecologies are made up of, researchers tend to focus on certain practices and how they linked back onto the other processes or datasets. The dynamic nature of social media, rate-of-change in information and need to fact-check risks, health conditions or emergencies therefore offers a context for discussion about communication; so the big ideas happen this way through discussing communication ecologies (Weaver & Willnat, 2016). The boundaries of newer journalistic practices (data journalism, social media analysis and predictive journalism or relocated data among them) can be difficult for traditional resource-strapped journalists in these circumstances. Gathering and dissemination of news in disaster or crisis partly reflects the overlapping of public, different organizations and journalists through digital media (Houston et al., 2015).

Corona virus pandemic was the lightning rod for fast changes in communication channels. TV and newspapers continued to be important sources of news, with daily developments from these media as well as expert views. The appearance of digital media, however introduced a new way in which information was shared and consumed. In the meantime, social media continued providing an important outlet for live-news updates and community support from Twitter to Facebook to Instagram, directly echoing testimony at every level. This variety of channels opened the door to a wider array of voices, but it also added complexity for information. Fake news was rife, often drowning out the few good reports that managed to emerge. Rapidity bogus advice unfolded, proven the critical requirement for public media proficiency while giving to illustrate how fuzzy navigating often merchandise Corona virus communication ecology.

Though playing a central role journalists have been blamed several times by health officials for twisting facts and creating sensationalism during emergency situations, journalists have been accused for writing deceptive and unreliable news stories with lacking of context (Maron, 2008). In such situation of crisis, it has been more critical for journalist to be credible source of information. COVID-19 pandemic is an exceptional situation for journalists across the world. Pandemic has affects everyone's life, persistent news sequence, relentless flow of misinformation, challenges of survival, unemployment and while multitude number of people are bound to work from home on half of their salaries. While journalists who have no other choice to keep world update about recent happenings, they have to head towards studios, newsrooms and out to the field for reporting in this serious situation of health crisis (Brussels, 2020). Journalists and all media community around the world are fighting on multiple fronts, from gathering information to keeping themselves safe, Coverage of pandemics, natural disasters, wars and others humanitarian catastrophe has always had exclusive consequences both at the victim and reporters ends (Committee to protect journalists, 2019). During the current health crisis, globally 1994 journalists had lost their lives by March 2022 due to COVID-19, majority are struggling with emotional and psychological pressure (Press Emblem Campaign, 2022). This article aims to investigate the challenges faced by journalists during pandemic COVID-19 and the mitigation of those challenges as well.

### ***Significance of the Study***

Communication ecology research during the COVID-19 epidemic is crucial, especially for journalists working in socio-politically and geographically vulnerable areas like Gilgit-Baltistan (GB). This study fills a critical knowledge gap about how information eco system work in times of crisis and how journalists who are the main actors in these eco systems, deal with issues pertaining to information access, dissemination, and credibility.



Gilgit-Baltistan offers a distinct communication environment because of its remote location, inadequate infrastructure, and complicated political situation. Because of a lack of resources, low digital penetration, and government-imposed restrictions, journalists in Great Britain faced additional difficulties during the pandemic, when timely and accurate information was essential. This study is relatable for comparative studies in media resilience, health communication, and crisis journalism because it broadens the scholarly discourse that has frequently been dominated by urban or global-north perspectives.

### ***Objectives of the Study***

- To investigate the difficulties journalists in Gilgit-Baltistan encountered in communicating during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- To investigate the mitigation techniques and adaptive tactics used by journalists to get past obstacles to communication and keep sharing reliable information.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Journalism during Pandemic***

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered global communication practices, to establish new communication ecology where numerous channels and messages are intertwined with varying degrees of audience engagement. This complex system of information sharing had a profound impact on shaping public perceptions surrounding the virus, affecting behaviour changes and public health responses. In this essay, we discuss facilities of communication ecology in a pandemic highlighting imminent trial fronts and lessons learnt during periods unmatched by irony. Journalist faced one of the prime barricades of misinformation and disinformation during this health emergency, misinformation is basically a term used to describe any piece of information that is not true but the intention behind the information was not harmful towards anyone. In other case disinformation is a term used for a situation where the dissemination of false information is deliberate with the intention of misleading someone (Niblock, 2020). Approximately four in every five journalists reported disinformation on weekly basis, and moreover their source of disinformation was forty six percent of dignified politicians and highly elected officials.

At the same time in this period of isolation where social media connected the whole world but in the result of propagation of disinformation on social media trust of the content formed by journalists has declined (Posetti, 2022). Furthermore the financial downfall of media organizations preventing the capability of investing more funds to improve the quality of journalism they produced in pandemic (Shah, 2021). Due to shortage of finance around 3500 media workers had lost their jobs and many news organizations have laid off their staff globally, Media houses were also not capable and reluctant to take care of journalist's safety (Posetti, 2022). A part from this entire COVID crisis has made a transition of old traditional journalism into digital journalism. Journalists focused on mobile journalism through new technology and learning new skills, demand of constant content from the public changed the whole landscape of media industry, traditional television reporters turned into walking cameras. Where a traditional media constrained by logistical issues social media platforms became an essential tool for journalists and at the same time for general public to stay informed (Prata, 2021).

#### ***Journalism in Pakistan***

Though worldwide journalist community share common professional values but the national, regional, religious and economic beliefs and uniqueness of identities dominate the universal professional norms (Deuze, 2005). Journalists facing pressure and threats due to different ongoing regional and national conflicts in countries like Pakistan, but yet they defend their journalistic ethics and norms and maintain their professionalism in divergence of local political, religious and cultural identities (Committee to Protect Journalists 2018, 2019).

In a country like Pakistan, journalism is a complicated, risky and unsafe job, frequently reporters have to face challenges and restrictions to reach the information they required. Journalists are facing serious complications while performing their jobs, life threats and hostility from different authorities restricted their access to the sources, they are risking their lives to uncover the truth for public. Journalism or media experiences



political attacks, pressures for different groups and financial difficulties (Agha & Demeter, 2022)

In west quite a lot of organizations and institutes for example Dart Center of journalism afford the resources for journalists to facilitate them in crisis for accurate reporting while taking care of themselves both mentally and physically. However in such countries like Pakistan journalists are not only be deficient in a structural support they even faced safety issues as well, most of the time they even arrested for not following the government's guideline while reporting in a sensitive situation (Wahl-Jorgensen et al., 2020). Journalists reporting from peripheries like Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Gilgit Baltistan and Azad Jammu & Kashmir are not only updating about current happenings but they are opinion leaders in their communities. Though they have to deal with exceptional issues such as safety, societal, financial and political, country like Pakistan considered one of the most dangerous places for journalists in a world, Pakistan ranked 145th position out of 180 countries in 2021 world press index report (Reporters without Borders 2021), moreover Pakistan has also ranked among the top ten countries of the world with the highest level of exemption from punishment of culprits against journalists (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2018). Journalists in Pakistan received physical threats and attacks from state and non-state actors, financial obstacles, online trolling and threats from digital criminals, Since 2000 more than 140 journalists have been lost their lives and none of the culprit of these assassinations has been convicted (International Federation of Journalists, 2022).

Financial issues are another challenge for journalist community in Pakistan, no job security, no health and life insurance and low salaries from the media houses, even some of the journalists from peripheries do not get any salary at all they are working as a freelancer (Jamil, 2017). Maintaining balance between professional responsibilities and personal financial concerns made their life stress full (Ashraf, 2021). Challenges of journalists in Pakistan more intensify during COVID-19, almost 40 percent journalists lost their jobs during pandemic (International Federation of Journalists, 2022). Safety issues of journalists are one of the most intense challenge in media organizations because some media organizations did not follow the SOP's of COVID-19 and did not maintain social distance in news rooms, moreover media organizations instructed their journalists to cover COVID-19 related stories from field without providing them any safety kit, this resulted 27 journalists lost their lives due to COVID-19 (Press Emblem Campaign, 2022).

During pandemic reporting become a unsafe and risky assignment, how helpless the media is, journalists and media workers especially those who are in the field and updating the world from frontline remain helpless to keep themselves safe from COVID-19. A senior health reporter Imran Ayub said: "Health reporters and journalists trying to cover the pandemic and its impacts are facing a lot of problems", he further added that "Protection is a word which sounds amazingly strange when it comes to reporting in Pakistan. This country has suffered more than a decade of terrorism after 9/11 and those journalists who covered that bloodshed had never experienced anything like protection, many were killed and several others were left injured and paralyzed for life" (Khan, 2020).

### ***Health Care Condition, COVID-19 and Journalism in Gilgit Baltistan***

Gilgit Baltistan now holding the status of an autonomous territory of Pakistan, situated in the north of Pakistan sharing borders with India, China and Afghanistan, famous for K2 the second world's highest peak. People of GB who are living amongst the three largest mountains ranges of the world (Karakoram, Himalayas and Hindu Kush) are immaculate example of survival against challenges. Estimated 1.3 million population of a region which is combination of diverse Islamic sect's lives together is a beautiful example of harmony, the main ethnic groups of GB are Balti, Shina, Khowar and Burushaski speakers. Gilgit- Baltistan which is previously known as Northern Areas blessed with a rich cultural heritage, traditional dance, music and handicraft. Economy of this region is based on agriculture, tourism and remittances from abroad, tourism sector plays significant role, and attracting visitors from all over the world (Nigar, 2018).

Basically GB is an administrative unit with in Pakistan; this region plays an important role linking the connection through Karakorum highway between Pakistan and China. There are three administrative divisions





Gilgit, Baltistan and Diamer which are further divided in to ten districts (Idrees, 2022). Five district head quarter hospitals, 27 civil hospitals, 15 basic health units and 2 rural health centres are in a region. As compared to the ratio of a population of the region availability of trained and fully professional doctors are disproportionate, lack of neurologist, medical specialist and psychiatrist in a public sector of GB region. Generally mental health disorders is unchecked domain of health care in Pakistan and particularly in Gilgit Baltistan, this is state responsibility to make accessible quality healthcare services to the public. Moreover challenging situation for midwives and new born in harsh weather condition in GB, due to heavy snowfall access to health care centres are impossible which heightened the risks of maternal infections (Asif, 2017).

Unfortunately there is a wide range of health issues in GB including lack of doctors, laboratory technicians, equipments, and paramedical staffs, people of this region have to visit big cities like Skardu and Gilgit for treatment purpose. Moreover standard operating system is also unavailable in hospitals, shortage of water supply, laundry segregation, waste management, maintenance of hygiene and cleanliness issues are quite serious. Due to lack of accountability and professionalism over and over it is claimed that due to insufficient funds for health care management and health department is helpless. World Health Organization (WHO) realized the health needs of local people of Gilgit-Baltistan and they opened their sub office in GB to provide the technical health support to the provincial health ministry, main office is in Islamabad and four provinces as well to support Pakistan towards universal health (WHO, 2021).

COVID-19 has drastically impacted the socio economic welfare of people living in mountains, foremost financial unsteadiness and low income, uncertainty of jobs and shortage of food. First confirmed case of COVID-19 from Gilgit Baltistan reported at 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2020. A large number of pilgrims returned from Iran and government failed to detain the pilgrims in quarantine centres because initially public were in denial situation they were not ready to comply. During pandemic COVID-19 health department of Gilgit Baltistan has combating the challenges with insufficient facilities (Waris, 2020). Challenges included shortage of medical staff, lack of essential equipment and testing kits, personal protective kits, insufficient number of Labourites and inadequate number of quarantine centres in a region.

Journalists combating the fragile job of maintaining balance of insistent chase of news stories regarding in pandemic with the risk of virus transmission. South Asian countries like Pakistan and when it comes to the mountain areas like GB journalists encountered the dynamic aspects of covid-19, factors like cultural and linguistic barriers, poor infrastructure, limited resources, shortage of trained working journalists make situation more worst. Regardless of all the challenges of pandemic journalists has emphasize the nature of their job and providing timely and accurate information to the public (Salam, 2020). This study aimed to examine the unique challenges faced by journalists of Gilgit Baltistan during the COVID-19 along with how those challenges shaped their journalistic practices and alleviation of challenges during this health crisis.

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: What kind of constraints and challenges journalists in Gilgit-Baltistan face in reporting health crisis?

RQ2: What kind of innovative strategies and techniques journalists are adopting in reporting news related to COVID-19

### **Methodology**

Qualitative form of methodology has been applied on this study, interviews were conducted of five working journalists who participated COVID-19 pandemic reporting via purposive sampling method. Data collected through in depth interviews via Zoom meeting and discussions were moderated with open end questions. All the protocols were strictly followed during discussions with participants; interviews were recorded and securely stored in computer system. This study formulated the recommendations, which seeks to address the versatile challenges faced by the journalists during pandemic and improve their working conditions and professional development.



## Results

Answering Research Questions, journalists discursively located themselves vulnerable and in peril within the COVID-19 pandemic. In interviews, the journalists said that they felt a responsibility to disseminate information that could save lives of others. For one journalist based in Gilgit, the struggles of getting news out there in a pandemic were directly about how to best cover a community that had never been under the spotlight before yet, that they had no experience of doing so in a crisis. He shared some personal worries he had and being a journalist responsibility towards community affects his reporting. He further said, “The biggest lesson I’ve learned from covering the pandemic is how essential it is to be a versatile reporter”, especially when you were stripped of the ability to interact with people, mobility restrictors and due to panic situation chances of misinformation and disinformation also increased. Usually when we go somewhere for coverage our cameramen accompany us and editors are present in the offices for editing, but in COVID-19 we had to be reporters, cameraman and editors as well, I learned a lot of new things during those days like mobile journalism and how to use latest technology trends in such situations to alleviate the issues of mobility and human resources. We have become more dependent on social media and technology than ever before, initially we were struggling for facts so we resorted to WhatsApp and were constantly in touch with our journalist community to exchange of information and for authenticity of news with each other because we were unable to rely on our sources.

Mr. Faheem Akhtar expressed their feelings, they said overall duration of pandemic had two phases, in first phase people were not ready to believe it that there is a deadly disease like Corona Virus, which has claimed many lives in the world. People were taking this as a joke some people were calling it conspiracy of America and some people were saying it was the government who is doing this, we as journalists and responsible citizens of a country were unable to understand how to educate people about this disease. Suddenly when the number of cases increased, we faced a different dilemma, we did not have any confirmed reports on the actual number of cases moreover neither was any representative appointed by the ministry of health from whom we could get verified information and report it to the channels. This was the situation where things like misinformation and disinformation were born. While in the first phase people were thinking it is joke, in the second phase they were embarrassed to talk about disease, particularly infected people were not ready to talk. To mitigate this situation first we talked to the doctors who were on duties at quarantine centres, doctor’s first talk to the patients and took them into the confidence after that we journalists talk to them and reported to the channels.

Staff Reporter Ms. Kiran spoken about that how far the isolation centres were and due to mobility restrictions it was difficult for her to reach there, many times she had to take the help of her fellow journalists to reach there. Moreover she didn’t have any safety kit as well; continuously she was struggling with stress of being infected. She further said being a member of print media journalist’s community “I realized that during the pandemic period, we print media people were more inclined towards digital media. What we were using earlier for entertainment, we are now using this technology for work”. She further expressed her feelings that we are far behind as compared to the western media. Journalists are fully guided and trained there but here we are not told how to deal with a disaster until a disaster strikes.

One of them said; “I couldn’t sleep for many nights because of anxiety, I have not suffered such mental pressure before, it seemed very difficult to deal with this mental stress. Here in Pakistan journalists get neither health insurance nor life insurance from their organizations, so in a such situation like every other common citizen we were also worried that if something happened to us, what would happen to our family after us”. He further said when government announced the lockdown, transportation was completely banned, going out and talking to people, gathering information and reporting was difficult for us. Many of our colleagues got this virus because we could not sit at home. On other hand we were being pressurized by channels and getting late salaries, gathering of facts and figures while keeping ourselves safe, worrying about the health and finance of our families was a very bad situation because we had never seen such thing on this level before, not at all. At the same time we lacked the safety kits to carry out our journalistic responsibilities while protecting ourselves from this deadly



disease. Because we had never faced such situations before, we did not know how to control nerves and how to do disaster reporting; even we never had such trainings from our home organizations or not from any nongovernmental organizations. If we had taken such trainings, we could have faced these situations much better.

### **Conclusion**

COVID is still not over, whole country is in situation of smart lockdown and journalists are carrying out their duties on a daily basis, effects of pandemic do not seem to be abating. Journalists always provide timely and reliable information; perception of journalists as facilitators is not new. The results of the study indicate that journalists from Gilgit-Baltistan are facing serious problems in obtaining information and after that verification of sources as well during initial stages of COVID-19. They were combating with misinformation, mobility issues and psychological and self-safety issues which definitely affect their working ability. Currently smart lockdown let them allow to reaching people and cover different stories from different areas of a region. Journalist community is in a vulnerable position; pandemic creates a gap between journalistic understandings and journalistic practices. Local journalists could have faced this situation in far better manners if they had such disasters reporting trainings in past. Journalists serve an imperative function in crisis situation, disaster communication ecology requires journalists to maintain consistency and at the same time adapt to changing public expectations.

This study emphasizes that although the journalists' response was praiseworthy, structural flaws still exist. These include insufficient institutional structures for media during emergencies, a lack of crisis communication training, and insufficient government help. A multifaceted strategy including policy reform, digital infrastructure investment, capacity building, and improved cooperation between journalists, public health organizations, and civil society is needed to address these problems.

In such crisis many times journalists have to do many things undermining journalistic values, but it is important for journalists to control their mental crisis and keep the values of their field. In the end, the results highlight how critical it is to improve the communication ecosystem in outlying areas in order to guarantee information resilience in the event of future emergencies. In addition to enhancing crisis reporting, assisting journalists through structural and policy-level reforms would make communities in Gilgit-Baltistan and elsewhere better informed, resilient, and interconnected. In the end, the results highlight how critical it is to improve the communication ecosystem in outlying areas in order to guarantee information resilience in the event of future emergencies. In addition to enhancing crisis reporting, assisting journalists through structural and policy-level reforms would make communities in Gilgit-Baltistan and elsewhere better informed, resilient, and interconnected.

### **Limitations of the Study**

- The study's exclusive emphasis on Gilgit-Baltistan, a geographically isolated and distinctive territory, may restrict the findings' applicability to other places with distinct socio-political and infrastructure environments.
- A smaller sample size for interviews resulted from the pandemic's travel limitations and safety concerns, which limited access to a larger pool of journalists.
- Real-time communication was hampered in certain places by inconsistent internet connectivity, which may have had an impact on the thoroughness and precision of some responses.
- Findings may be time-bound or less applicable after the pandemic because the COVID-19 situation was changing quickly and the difficulties and coping mechanisms that were found may have changed over time.

### **Recommendations**

- Enhance Gilgit-Baltistan's internet connectivity and availability of digital tools to help journalists do their jobs more efficiently, particularly in times of crisis when physical movement is restricted.
- To improve journalists' readiness for upcoming crises, schedule frequent training sessions on digital journalism, crisis communication, fact-checking, and mental health awareness.



- Promote cooperation between civil society, health organizations, and local media sources to establish reliable, neighbourhood-based information-sharing networks that can operate in times of emergency.
- To enable the free flow of accurate information while preserving public safety, policymakers should set clear and transparent norms for media activities during public health emergencies.
- Journalists who operate in hazardous and stressful environments, particularly in distant locations, should receive financial and psychological support from media organizations and authorities.
- Start public awareness-raising media literacy initiatives to curb the spread of false information and foster confidence in reputable news sources.

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