



WALKING THE TIGHTROPE OF JOURNALISM IN PAKISTAN

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Growing up in Pakistan, a land where the daily back-drop involves navigating through chaos and encountering injustice at every turn, my youth was shaped by these omnipresent challenges. These were not just distant issues discussed in the news; they were realities that unfolded in the streets around me, in the lives of people I knew.

This early exposure to societal disparities didn't just ignite a spark of activism within me; it compelled me to channel my energy into writing. Writing wasn't just a way to express my growing angst but it became my protest, a means to connect with, understand, and bring to light the stories and complexities of the world I lived in.

RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF RATINGS

When I entered the field of digital media at the age of 21, filled with idealistic visions of what journalism was and could be, I was quickly acquainted with a different reality. I found myself amidst a dichotomy that split the newsroom: those who upheld the tenets of journalism on one side and those who would willingly bend them for monetary gains on the other. As time passed, I watched the group of idealists diminish as they were either outnumbered or overwhelmed by the financial imperatives of the industry.

This shift was symptomatic of a broader trend in Pakistani media, where the battle for ratings often overshadows the quest for truth. With more than a hundred channels competing for the audience's attention, the essence of journalism—informing the public and safeguarding democracy—began to erode. The once revered pillars of our profession were now being undercut by a system that prioritised sensationalism and controversy over substantive reporting.

FROM WATCHDOGS TO MOUTHPIECES

Today's media landscape often favours spectacle over substance. The once sacred space of news broadcasting has been invaded by theatrical displays of political confrontation. The formula is straightforward: two opposing politicians, a live broadcast, a contentious issue, and an anchor to fan the flames. The ensuing debate is seldom about reaching a constructive conclusion; instead, it's a performance where the loudest and most provocative soundbites win the day.

Such broadcasts, though lucrative for the channels, do little to advance public understanding or contribute to meaningful discourse. They serve to entertain rather than educate, to provoke rather than inform. As a journalist, reporting on these exchanges felt redundant, as the same talking points and arguments were recycled in a seemingly endless loop, devoid of any real insight or progress.

MORE CHANNELS, FEWER FUNDS

In an environment where new channels emerge with the regularity of the seasons, the economic pressures on existing media houses intensify. Shrinking budgets mean that corners are cut, and one of the first casualties is often the quality and depth of journalism. Investigative reporting, with its demands for time, resources, and expertise, becomes a luxury few can afford.

The resulting shift in content is stark. We've moved from journalism that probes, questions, and enlightens to one that settles for the expedient and the economical. Yet, whilst it may be cheaper to produce, this brand of journalism comes at a significant cost to society. The real, pressing stories—those of the common man, the struggles of the marginalised, the

tales of triumph and tragedy that form the fabric of our nation—are increasingly eclipsed by facile content designed for easy consumption and quick returns.

OBJECTIVITY IS A THING OF THE PAST

In this climate, the traditional journalistic pursuit of objectivity is often called into question. Can journalists truly remain neutral arbiters in the face of social and political upheaval? Is it possible to detach from one's own perspectives and prejudices when reporting on issues that are deeply intertwined with the fabric of our society?

Amongst the younger generation of journalists, there's a discernible shift in attitude. Objectivity is seen not just as unattainable but also potentially harmful, a guise of fairness that can obscure truth and perpetuate inequality. The growing consensus is that perhaps we need to redefine what it means to be a journalist in Pakistan. Instead of striving for an impersonal detachment, we might aim for a journalism that is rooted in honesty about our viewpoints and is forthright about the positions from which we report.

In grappling with these challenges, it's clear that the answer doesn't lie in discarding the principles of our profession but in adapting them to the realities of our times. This adaptation doesn't mean surrendering to subjectivity or allowing our personal biases to dominate our reporting. Rather, it calls for a more nuanced approach to journalism—one that recognises the impossibility of absolute neutrality and seeks instead to provide context, understanding, and a multiplicity of perspectives.

CROSSING INVISIBLE LINES

In the years I've spent in Pakistani newsrooms, I've felt the pulse of press freedom, its ebbs and flows, its palpitations and pauses. There were instances that stood out, moments when the autonomy of journalism seemed less like a right and more like a concession, granted or retracted at someone else's whim. I've seen the invisible red lines drawn by unseen hands, and the cautionary tales of those who dared to cross them. I've witnessed the quiet editing of stories, the softening of headlines, and the selective silences that speak volumes of the stories left on the cutting room floor.

Censorship in Pakistan often wears a cloak of subtlety. It rarely needs to raise its voice when a whisper will suffice. Despite not having worked in the industry as long as many of my colleagues, I remember being gently nudged away from topics that were too sensitive,

or finding that certain angles on a story were discouraged. There was always this undercurrent of understanding that to play it safe was to keep the peace, to ensure the continuation of one's work, albeit within confines that were never formally outlined but always keenly felt.

My experiences are not isolated; they form part of a collective narrative of restraint that many Pakistani journalists know all too well. The restraint isn't just about what gets reported, but also about what doesn't. It's the interviews that are never aired, the investigative pieces that are indefinitely 'pending approval', and the news segments that are abruptly pulled off the air. The reason given is often 'editorial discretion', a phrase that has become all too familiar, a mask for the underlying pressures that guide such decisions.

There's an economic undertow to this censorship, too. Like many of my colleagues, I've seen how financial imperatives can also lead to compromises in coverage. Media outlets reliant on advertising by certain powerful figures must navigate the tricky waters between reporting the truth and maintaining a revenue stream. It's a balancing act that often tips in favour of economic survival over editorial independence.

The true challenge before us is not the abandonment of journalistic tenets but their evolution to suit the era we live in. This evolution isn't about yielding to biases or compromising the accuracy of our narratives. It's about embracing a journalism that appreciates the complexity of our world, a journalism that's not shackled by the illusion of perfect neutrality but is instead anchored in the rich soil of context and diverse viewpoints.

In our pursuit, we must forge a media landscape that prioritises substance over spectacle, champions the stories that dive deep into the essence of Pakistan, and treats its audience with intellectual respect. We must hold up a mirror to society that does not flinch from the reflection it shows, one that portrays the multitude of colours and contrasts that define us.

This is our mandate: to build anew the trust that has been eroded between the public and the press. It is only with this trust that our democracy can thrive. As members of the Pakistani media, we carry the weight of this responsibility. It is a weight we must bear with honour and a steadfast commitment to the truth, for it is the truth that will ultimately set us free.

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