**Islamabad Literature Festival 2021**

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The Islamabad Literature Festival (ILF) was held last weekend, the 8th in a row, with an impressive programme. Unfortunately, it was mainly online and virtual, or digital, as the organisers, the Oxford University Press, Pakistan (OUPP), called it. I am not sure the term ‘festival’ can be used when physical events are hardly there. But digital events are good for those who live outside the city and those who want to keep a distance from people and mosquitoes, because of corona, dengue, or other things. For others, though, it would have been good to have some more real events, perhaps with people sitting outside or in large halls, safely away from strangers. Digital events are easier for the organisers, but not as good for the participants. We must not reach a stage that events are rather advertising events than substantive events, where the audiences can really benefit and participate. Sometimes, institutes, think-thanks, NGOs and others are more concerned about visibility and their own agendas than what the recipients actually get.

[Sneak peak into the star-studded 2nd Annual Pakistan International Screen Awards (PISA) 2021](https://nation.com.pk/07-Nov-2021/sneak-peak-into-the-star-studded-2nd-annual-pakistan-international-screen-awards-pisa-2021)

Next year, I hope that the corona and dengue diseases have become history, or close to it, and that no new and more contagious diseases have come to replace them; some say that we shouldn’t wait for corona to go but rather learn how to live with it. Then the broader audiences can celebrate many events, including ILF, not just the select few on-site and the rest virtually.

On the other hand, there are additional advantages of recorded material, as a backup and library memory, for in-depth listening and to check the topics that were discussed and opinions shared. I also thought that perhaps OUPP could cooperate with one or more of the many TV channels that Pakistan has. They might help give the viewers and listeners a more professional ‘digital festival’. I think that having a panel of several speakers doesn’t work as well in digital sessions as in real sessions; it shouldn’t just be filming a real festival. Instead, for example, I believe writers could be interviewed and talk about their works and themselves, and they could also present well-prepared speeches and lectures, with a few questions at the end. Also, poets and fiction writers could read from their books, or write something new for the occasion; sometimes actors could read for them.

[T20 World Cup: Unbeatable Pakistan thrashes Scotland with 72 runs](https://nation.com.pk/07-Nov-2021/t20-world-cup-unbeatable-pakistan-thrashes-scotland-with-72-runs)

Let me mention the impressive weekly 1-hour literary magazine, ‘Babel’, on SVT, Sweden, as a model for how to present literary content. Jessica Gedin, the programme host, is much admired at home and abroad. OUPP could prepare some national events like those programmes, in cooperation with one or two local or foreign TV channels. That would be great advertising for OUPP and Pakistan’s literature including textbooks, too, the cornerstone of most countries’ publishing industry.

When we read books, or listen to e-books, we do it alone. That means there is room for digital events, e-books and more—not only on-site festivals. But in addition to consuming alone, we want to discuss what we have read, or should read, as the social beings we are, and can we see a few of our favourite authors, that would make the day. This time, there were no less than some 130 speakers, famous and less famous, specialists and amateurs, and a mixture of it.

This time at ILF and other such events, some speakers get a bit too much time and space, such as ambassador and journalist Maleeha Lodhi, writer and social scientist Harris Khalique and the UK journalist and academic Owen Bennett-Jones, inter alia, a former BBC reporter in Pakistan. They spoke well, and perhaps too easily, so language and words would sometimes become more impressive than content. Lodhi is indeed a master of the English language, of saying a lot without saying much; that can be a diplomat’s strength, but an analyst must rather do the opposite, speak some knowledge-based truth. Kahlique tries to do that, but then a social scientist must also be careful and be sure to have facts or empirical data, as it is called, to build on when explaining issues and drawing conclusions. Scientists and journalists must always be cautious and not pretend they (we) know when we don’t. Then we must ask questions and make sure that the readers or listeners understand that we are doing that. To select good questions is often as essential as giving answers. I believe Bennett-Jones was clearest on this methodological aspect, knowing the difference between having an agenda and giving opinions, and asking questions in order to try to understand a bit more—yes, just a bit more, because we never know ‘everything’.

[Pakistan strongly condemns cowardly attack on residence of Iraqi PM](https://nation.com.pk/07-Nov-2021/pakistan-strongly-condemns-cowardly-attack-on-residence-of-iraqi-pm)

Journalist Ahmed Rashid, an Afghanistan and Pakistan analytical journalist does that. Well, he explains situations and draws tentative conclusions with several scenarios and ‘ways out’, if he might be wrong. I remember, when he had written his impressive book ‘The Taliban’ in 2000 (and several more later), a friend said that he doesn’t always have the data; he makes stories more like a fiction writer, and through the combination of facts and fiction, the reader gets wiser and understands more of the situation. If he had only done one of the two, his books would have been less informative and engaging. But again, a writer should always say who they are, what they have of solid facts, what they know fairly well, and also, what they want to tell us, including their own values and agendas.

When my country woman Åsne Seierstad wrote her bestselling book, ‘The Bookseller of Kabul’ (which came in Norwegian in 2002 and in English in 2003), she deliberately forgot to do explain if she was a journalist, fiction writer or NGO-spokesperson; she didn’t say she was a women’s activist, and also did not say why she ridiculed Afghan men’s same-sex relations, as she narrated, creating a stir afterward since some of her characters could actually be identified. She is a good fiction writer, yet, with her own agendas, and not always telling the readers about it.

[Pakistan, Iran to revive talks for free trade agreement](https://nation.com.pk/07-Nov-2021/pakistan-iran-to-revive-talks-for-free-trade-agreement)

Now I have written quite a bit about social-science issues, and being critical, too, and I have focused on pedagogical issues related to the ILF 2021. Let me end my article by saying positive things. This year’s Islamabad Literature Festival was an important event, giving attention to contemporary Pakistan, organising a dozen or so book launches, presenting less observed literary genres, notably Nigar Nazar’s cartoons, ‘not a laughing matter’, Ilona Yusuf’s and Muneeza Shamsie’ poetry and prose in English, and much more. Textbook issue, e-learning, and the new single national curriculum were discussed, liked by OUPP and disliked by many private schools. But I believe it was high time schools tied Pakistan together through learning the same content, across class, geography, and more. We should thank OUPP’s sympathetic chief since 2018, Arshad Saeed Hussain, and the former long-term chief, Ameena Saiyid, for having made the Karachi, Islamabad and other literature festivals new and lasting traditions of Pakistan. Through them we learn more about the people and country, institutions and organisations, taboos and aspirations, and more. We are encouraged to read and debate, see and think, engage in courses and formulate opinions—enjoy and feel good.