[**Dumbing up journalism**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1692406/dumbing-up-journalism)

[Arifa Noor](https://www.dawn.com/authors/57/arifa-noor)

May 31, 2022

The writer is a journalist.

UNLIKE many others last week who mourned Talat Aslam, senior editor of The News, I have to admit I didn’t know him much. Our paths crossed perhaps a handful of times, most of them in the four years or so I spent in Karachi over a decade ago. But he never felt like a stranger — perhaps for the countless stories I heard of his years at the Herald from all those I crossed paths with, from Idrees Sahib, to Tannaz Minwala (the head of the design team) to those running the press to the inimitable Farooq Memon, the secretary of Herald’s editors. The stories ranged from late-night editing marathons, the election issues and run-ins with irate government officials as well as the food from the Khairabad restaurant next door. Later, in Islamabad, meeting Zahid Hussain and Sherry Rehman, both of whom worked with ‘Tito’ ensured the stories didn’t end.

But it was just not the six degrees of separation with Talat Aslam which made his loss seem personal. It was because of what he along with his contemporaries represent for me, as a journalist. Having joined the profession in the late 1990s, the path before us was already clear and well-worn thanks to this generation’s journalism.

By the late 1980s, the oppressive censorship set in place during the Zia regime was easing, and a number of new publications were reaping the benefits; and this new generation of journalists were breaking the rules and setting new ones. In Karachi, it began with Star and Herald. One an evening newspaper, which included Imran Aslam, Zohra Yusuf, Saneeya Husain and others who still don’t tire of telling stories of the Star where they were gathered by Hameed Haroon. The other was Herald, a monthly magazine, which under Razia Bhatti, became a serious political monthly and a name to be reckoned with. Journalists and activists, on women rights and the environment and so many other issues which we now take for granted as staple for our profession, were first shaped into newspaper material by this intrepid lot.

In Lahore, their contemporaries and their ‘brave’ journalism found a home in the Frontier Post, helmed initially in Peshawar by Aziz Siddiqi, who worked for the smallest and most unknown of enterprises, and made them household names, be it the FP or the HRCP. In those days of innocence, journalists had enough power and integrity that their owners’ business could not sully their name or their product. And so, it was with Siddiqi sahib and those who came later, such as Khaled Ahmed, Beena Sarwar, Farah Zia and so many others.

It was just not the six degrees of separation with Talat Aslam which made his loss seem personal.

In Islamabad, it was the Muslim, where Mushahid Husain, Nusrat Javeed, Mariana Babar, became household names or dare I say, Constitution Avenue names. They and Pakistan’s burgeoning democracy travelled together in those days.

It was in this environment that Talat Aslam began his innings, when he joined the Herald and continued there, once Razia Bhatti and others left to found Newsline. He was accompanied by Sherry Rehman and so many others such as Idrees Bakhtiar and Hasan Zaidi who were known by their bylines rather than their faces at a time when journalists were lots of things but rarely celebrities.

Between these two magazines, we were to know the best of investigative journalism and long form writing in those heady days. Working at the Herald in the mid-noughties, the best part of the month were the quiet days when I would devour old issues — cover stories explaining how governments were sacked or back-room deals worked out with Nawaz Sharif or BB or the detailed reporting on the operations in Karachi. No book can ever provide a comparable history lesson.

But, now when I look back, it was not just the political stories that defined this post-Zia journalism, if it can be called that. For myself, what defined these magazines and FP and perhaps even the News in its early days was the reporting on society, fashion and culture, with an emphasis on layouts and visuals. Herald and Newsline brought fashion shoots into our homes; Tapu Javeri and Arif Mehmood became familiar names as did fashion designers at a time when their field was not an industry; and human rights, health, travel and music became issues in their own right. To borrow a phrase from a British journalist, it was a dumbing up, and a welcome one.

I still have vague memories of a Herald issue with a poster of Nazia and Zoheb Hassan and the first time I saw the colourful features section of FP. Those visual delights are a memory I still hold on to, even though I remember little else. At that time, there was little understanding of the genius of people who had a great command of both politics and culture, despite the bleak times they lived in. It was years later that I realised the mine of information that Talat Aslam was — when randomly I chanced upon a small piece of his where he linked the popularity of Esakhelvi to the burgeoning trucking industry with drivers from Mianwali, who listened to the singer on their long road trips, if I remember it correctly. From that short snippet I learnt more about Talat Aslam’s interests than I had ever learnt from all his colleagues and all the stories I had heard.

These times were not just about good journalism but also the idealism that went with it. Many of those named here joined a badly paid profession with little recognition and even less pay only because of the belief that what they did could make a difference; and it did. They were also brave enough to take risks, which the more staid and established publications of those years were perhaps not in a position to. Investigative reporting, critical commentary, exploring state and society, it was all there. Since then, television has brought the industry much fame and money but at far too high a price. In Talat Aslam’s passing, as I did with Idrees Bakhtiar’s death, I mourn the loss of this world and an important chapter of journalism’s history — where the sum was far greater than its parts.

*The writer is a journalist.*

*Published in Dawn, May 31st, 2022*