**Ethical reporting needed in Gilgit-Baltistan**

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The global pandemic has hit the media industry hard, especially from a business standpoint. Yet the fallout is not uniform. In Gilgit-Baltistan, for example, journalism is still in its infancy. Residents rely on national television channels as a primary news source. Print media lags behind given logistical issues related to distance and cost. Digital media is dead in the water and and social media is hampered by internet connectivity issues.

The media represents one of the fourth pillars of society. Unfortunately, Pakistan is now widely recognised as a red zone for journalists, who fall victim to gross human rights violations just for doing their job. It is, nevertheless, imperative that the media not be blind to the country’s prevailing cultural context, including the plight of minorities and the broader socio-political environment.

Journalists have a responsibility to report, in a fair and objective manner, matters of public interest. In Gilgit-Baltistan, the problem is that colonial intellectualism, abetted by the state apparatus, has trampled on independence of thought as well as the free exchange of information. That said, GB enjoys geo-strategic importance. It is also a hub for future economic activity which will benefit the whole of Pakistan. Yet official discourse, including that promoted by the media, focuses on the area’s natural beauty, linking this to developments and tourism; cultural uniqueness; education and women empowerment. Therefore, whether local or national, Urdu or English, media coverage of GB remains one-dimensional. The end result is a set of predictable narratives.

Following the Naltar Valley shooting, social media users immediately began viewing the incident through the prism of sectarian conflict. Even worse, electronic media followed suit. All ahead of a police investigation

In reality, the situation on the ground in GB is far more complex and deserves impartial and comprehensive reporting. On the one hand, the region is home to a fragile ecosystem and, as such, is prone to natural disasters. On the other, the local population, still reeling from the effects of prolonged economic and political marginalisation, is vulnerable to conflict across multiple fault-lines. Journalists, for their part, have been unable to provide much transparency regarding development projects, including those falling under the CPEC (China Pakistan Economic Corridor) banner. This is unfortunate since these initiatives are meant to benefit those who live in the area.

Elsewhere, the lack of reporting on the challenges faced by GB residents has resulted in these being de-hyphenated CPEC. This is a misstep. Take, for example, last month’s shooting in Naltar Valley. Almost immediately, social media users began viewing the incident through the prism of sectarian conflict. Even worse, electronic media followed suit. All this happened before the police were able to launch an official investigation. This seemingly exclusive focus on ethnic strife gives way to lazy reporting and lack of accountability.

The people of Gilgit-Baltistan have, unsurprisingly, little trust in the country’s fourth estate. Before 2010, people had accepted that national news outlets would never give the area due attention. Then, at the turn of the last decade, several factors came into play to put GB under the spotlight. Among them, the Abbottabad fiasco, the rise of local grassroots activism, the advent of social media, increased tourism and, of course, CPEC. However, interest soon waned and we saw return to a reductive reporting lens. When one considers how the current age of “fake news” is already undermining news credibility everywhere, this appears somewhat of a media own goal. In addition, this does a great disservice to the people of GB.

It has therefore become a matter of urgency for journalists and media platforms alike to review practices of free and fair reporting. If, that is, they are to regain public trust. As a first step, journalists based in Gilgit-Baltistan must include factual data sources in their stories, something that is necessary across the board in Pakistan.

There is still a long way to go for ethical journalism to take root in GB. The situation remains tricky given local infrastructure considerations, including lack of investment and, perhaps more importantly, the absence of media freedoms. Nevertheless, there is vast room for improvement. The priority is for professional journalists to regain credibility, so that local populations take interest in media development. This is essential for existing platforms since young people from the region, as well as throughout Pakistan, are employing both digital and offline entrepreneurial methods to build new spaces that will render the former obsolete. It is up to mainstream media to decide if it wants to remain in the game.

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