[**Rahimullah Yusufzai: journalism as war**](https://www.dawn.com/news/1648719/rahimullah-yusufzai-journalism-as-war)

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The writer teaches journalism at Peshawar University. His book The Dark Side of News Fixing: The Culture and Political Economy of News in Pakistan and Afghanistan will be launched next month.

WITH the passing away of Rahimullah Yusufzai ends an important phase in the reporting of imperialist wars in Afghanistan and the adjacent Pakhtun tribal areas. Despite his painful cancer treatment for well over a year, he continued to share his encyclopedic knowledge of the situation in the region. After his burial in his ancestral village in Mardan, the outpouring of condolences reminded us of the cult figure he was. But equally important is the era of which Yusufzai was an outcome.

I briefly worked with him and interviewed him for my doctoral research. He was thorough and could shrewdly assess people, places and circumstances. “I have been offered an attractive position in a TV channel,” he said, asking me if he should accept the offer. But without waiting for my response, he added, “I don’t think I am a good fit.” More than his incompatibility with the medium, he did not want to leave Peshawar whose strategic location — 40 kilometres from the Afghan border — contributed substantially to his career.

In the early 1970s, after his initial education in Peshawar, Yusufzai left for Karachi. Enrolling himself in college, he joined a newspaper as a proofreader. Later he moved to Lahore and then Islamabad where he joined TheMuslim, the capital’s only English-language newspaper then. He also worked as a security analyst in a think tank before returning to Peshawar to rejoin TheMuslim’s bureau. In those days, national dailies would send their senior staff from Karachi and Lahore to head their bureaus in Peshawar. “The non-local bureau chief was reluctant to relinquish the bureau’s charge,” said Yusufzai, who claimed to be the first Pakhtun to become a bureau chief of any mainstream national daily in Peshawar.

Soviet tanks had rolled into Afghanistan in 1979, leading to the inflow of millions of Afghan refugees to Peshawar. Part of an ambitious plan, the Zia regime, with the help of the US and Saudi Arabia, started a proxy war against the Soviets in Afgha­nistan in the name of ‘Afghan jihad’. Islamists were selected from different countries to settle in Pesha­war where they were allowed to marry local women and fight against the Soviets in Afghanistan. But how to put a human face on this expanding war theatre? The planners had the answer: media coverage was vital to paint a soft image of the jihadists. This was how local reporters could fill space with war stories in the shadow of Cold War politics.

Just as an imperialist war brings its own culture and economy, so too does it create its own journalism.

Reporting was not competitive then. In his interview with me, Yusufzai described the local journalism as “weak”. Reporting on the proxy war was either based on press releases issued by the Afghan Commissionerate — covering refugees’ rehabilitation — or press conferences by warlords of the seven Afghan jihadi parties. Because non-Pakhtun reporters in Peshawar lacked cultural and linguistic affinity, Yusufzai encouraged his fellow Pakhtun journalists to do solid legwork.

Establishing ties with the Afghans leaders and mujahideen warriors, Yusufzai and his colleagues began to visit the front line on embedded trips. A jihadi brand of journalism emerged to reinforce the state’s militarist designs in Afghanistan. Since then, Pakhtun journalists serve as an engine for the regional economy of front-line news, marking the emergence of the first generation of self-trained local war journalists.

Peshawar became a media flashpoint in the mid-1980s; a parallel development was the launch of The Frontier Post, a Peshawar-based newspaper launched by a tribal Pakhtun nationalist. It covered the Afghan jihad through the lens of the local and national conflict — the (mis)use of Pakhtun land by the state and the lack of local voices in the distribution of national power. This approach portrayed the jihad as an extension of the power politics in the country, and unlike jihadi journalism, was not ready to project the war in Afghanistan on its own. The FP published stories as sensitive as drug trafficking in official vehicles and the establishment’s extra-legal methods during and after the jihad. This watchdog role led to FP’s liquidation and a death sentence (commuted to life imprisonment) for the owner on drug dealing charges.

The end of FP’s investigative journalism cleared the way for jihadi reporting to become the only popular news-making practice, projecting dreaded jihadist characters through mythical anecdotes. Whenever Osama bin Laden or Taliban leaders felt the need to threaten the world, Peshawar became the place to invite journalists for coverage with easy access to the border. News stories focusing on the jihadists’ guns, lifestyle and profiles brought some reporters close to adopting militant ideologies. In a report, ‘profuse fragrance’ at the site of a jihadist’s death was seen as a sign of divine blessing.

These reporters brought back half-baked stories to sell to the highest foreign bidder in Islamabad. Over four decades, the war in Afghanistan grew into a lucrative news economy in Pakistan. In the post-9/11 context, this jihadi form of war reporting became a function of the 24/7 news cycles, glorifying militants as heroes at the cost of Afghanistan and its people.

Despite being a part of this news economy, Yusufzai’s grace remained intact. His ties with the jihadists, cultivated during the 1980s, grew after the Taliban came into power in the mid-1990s. Because Yusufzai had interviewed Mullah Omar and Bin Laden multiple times, he always shared his somewhat embellished experiences with militants. However, he also faced criticism from those who believe in the media’s watchdog role. In a public meeting, a Pakhtun politician mocked him as the Afghan Taliban’s foreign minister.

Just as an imperialist war brings its own culture and economy, so too does it create its own journalism. Yusufzai led the first generation of Pakhtun reporters. In his last call to me in 2018, he asked about my offer to assist him in writing his memoirs. I reiterated my willingness, but never heard back. May his soul rest in peace.

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