**The empathy files**

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WHEN I first began working in journalism, I would help compile the `Death File` pages at Newsline. It was 1995; violence was a part of Karachi`s fabric; we had to scour a few newspapers to look for that information.

Every day I would count the bodies shot, tortured to death,foundin sacks,killedin disputes, extra-judicial killings, road accidents, etc which were spread over roughly four pages. We did this for record purposes; to advocate for the dead, to remind the authorities it was happening on their watch but I thought the compilation itself was grunt work.

As I progressed in my career, this indirect exposure to violence became an invisible tattoo on the mind. When I heard about a violent incident in the city in the late 1990s, early 2000s my immediate thought was how it would impact my route home, or to work, to social gatherings etc. I did not think how violence impacted the community because I guess I thought (resigned myself to think?) such things were always happening to someone else.

When I look back at the particularly gruesome times, I believe I reacted this way by which I mean no reaction as a coping mechanism. Or I was, like all Karachiites, resilient the ubiquitous adjective to describe us. I also see how that non-reaction impacted the journalism I was doing. I had sympathy but no empathy in covering the communities the violence was impacting the most. Empathy, ie putting yourself in someone else`s shoes, enables journalists to be better listeners which allows them to tell better stories which are representative of the city, country etc. This kind of journalism also fosters trust between the media and its consumers.

At present, the political polarisation around the world is clear but perhaps what`s not so clear is how strongly associated that polarisation is with less trust in journalists.

This is according to a poll by Gallup in December 2019 which studied the degree with which the public trusts journalists across 144 countries. `As political division grows, the news media and journalists willingly or unwillingly become participants in the political fray. Reporting on contentious topics and attempts to hold powerful interests accountable can lead to accusations of media bias,` they wrote.

How did we get here? Here`s what we journalists/editors ultimately ended up doing by not reporting on vulnerable communities. We blacked them out, relegating their issues to talking heads or `experts` on op-ed pages, or fancy data sets X per cent below poverty line or X per cent killed in drone attacks and so forth.

And here`s how it`s played out: today, wehave to think about how to publish a story on the anti-Shia rallies under the enormous constraints of what can and can`t be said, because over the years, we did not adequately tell the story about how the discrimination impacted Shias. Ask yourselves how/what you`ve read about them outside news of their deaths, or the realm of op-eds or male anchors shouting on TV screens.

(Kudos to the young journalists publishing blogs/vlogs on what it`s like to be Shia in Pakistan.) Some issues in journalism are black and white, but increasingly, the world is grey and empathy can help reflect the complexities of the issue. Letting vulnerable communities tell their stories so that audiences can better understand where they`re coming from can mal(e a powerful impact. Admittedly, it is harder to get these stories told there are economic pressures, news cycles to follow, news managers to please, owners to butter up, etc. And, there are simply too many players now who don`t want stories to be told.

News organisations are catering to meetthe needs of the folks who can af ford to buy papers, cable licences etc, leaving the less affluent to get their informational needs elsewhere. The less affluent have all been abandoned by news organisations and the affluent only hear about the lessaffluent when something happens to this group. There`s no `Death File`, well because there`s no Newsline but the commitment to hold the powerful accountable has also waned.

Can empathy be a valuable tool in the newsroom? Research suggests so. According to psychologists Melanie C. Green and TimothyC.BrockinTheRoleofTransportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives `the more transported you feel, the more likely you`ll be to change your opinions and beliefs about the real world`.

The lesson for editors across platforms is to asl( how to bring the underrepresented back to the fold (no pun intended), not because they`re potential customers they aren`t but because it is anti-democratic not to cover them. Underrepresented communities deserve better from journalists; they are not just an audience; they are people with issues that mirror realities in this country. To ignore them is to ignore those realities. And that is not the role journalists should ever sign up for. The writer teaches joumalism at IBA in Karachi.