

Freelance Journalism in the 21st Century: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract: Freelance journalism is rapidly gaining popularity worldwide, including in Pakistan, as a professional path for young mass communication and journalism students. Despite its growing significance, there has been limited research on the challenges and opportunities faced by freelance journalists, leaving their concerns largely unaddressed. This study, grounded in Grounded Theory, aims to explore the potential and future of freelance journalism. Structured interviews were conducted with freelance journalists, academics, and media professionals, and the data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that freelance journalism is increasingly recognized by professionals and academics for its potential. However, several challenges persist, including a lack of work opportunities and infrastructure, low wages, absence of professional bodies, and limited recognition in both the professional sector and society. Despite these obstacles, the study suggests that if freelance journalists can improve the quality of their content, they may become viable and cost-effective alternatives for media houses, which currently prefer traditional reporters due to their training and systematic approach. The research offers valuable insights for stakeholders to develop policies supporting freelance journalism and provides recommendations for future research in this emerging field.

Keywords: Freelance Journalism, Challenges and Opportunities, Journalism in Pakistan, Media in the 21st Century

Introduction

Journalism functions as one of the fundamental blocks of any modern democratic society, allowing the stabilization of the endlessly industrialized social systems existing around us. Having an organized, institutionalized, and disciplined can be vital to the free and equal flow of information for all the citizens of the community while also promoting the existence of a market for the generation and adoption of distinct ideas (Qamar et al., 2020, p. 3). Journalism has also provided governments with the necessary tools to communicate with the masses and to regulate their conduct by the means of disseminating information, making it a necessity of current times (McQuail, 2013; Rafiq et al., 2024).

Interestingly, most Pakistanis deem journalists to be unprofessional and untrustworthy, often thinking of them as money grabbers who would sell their pen and skills to the highest bidder without any

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value and worth. The rapid expansion of media has led to a drastic increase in the number of journalists but has created multiple instances where the value of journalists has significantly decreased in the eyes of the public. Despite serving as a mouthpiece for the public, it has also remained riddled with controversy and public distrust in Pakistan, suggesting an evolving nature (Shameer, [2018](#)).

Pakistani media is still in a phase of constant development and growth, slowly taking shape through various stages. One of these stages is the proliferation of freelance journalists, fueled by convenient access to the internet and the emerging use of social media. All types of journalism, whether conventional or freelance, constitute a form of discourse that is aimed to inform about political and social issues happening in the community, helping people understand what is happening around them.

At the same time, news channels have begun to realize that it is better and more economical to rely upon freelance writers and journalists as well, a trend that is evident in Pakistan as well (Stearns, [2013](#)). Freelance journalism, despite being a relatively newer phenomenon, has structured itself into mainstream media and is playing an important role in the news industry (Randerson et al., [2015](#)). Journalistic discourse stemming from both freelancing and conventional media persons has aided the public's understanding of social and political realities surrounding our lives, and all types of journalism are assisting the community in understanding how its fundamentals are working (Haynes et al., [2016](#)).

There is also a decrease in the standards of professional and work life, with the news industry experiencing similar difficulties, forcing journalists to face low wages, unpaid salaries, lack of provision, and little to no compensation in case of workplace incidents, particularly for those journalists who are working in conflict zones. Hence, despite being a reputable professional, the decreasing quality of workplace conditions is putting journalists under constant pressure, leading them to either adopt different professions after giving up on their passions or withstand poor working conditions (Sheikh, [2024](#)).

Similarly, many undergraduates of mass communication and journalism in Pakistan who are fresh out of their institutors also start their careers as freelance journalists, leading to a greater influx into the world of freelance journalism. To them, journalism has become a special commodity within their discipline, often acting it out as a public duty role rather than mere monotonous reporting of news over the course of an event (Obermaier & Koch, [2015](#)).

Research Objectives

The objectives of the study at hand are:

1. To explore the current trends and overall scope of freelance journalism in Pakistan
2. To understand how freelance journalists in Pakistan are reacting to the challenges created by the ever-changing circumstances across all domains of media.
3. To identify key challenges and opportunities faced by freelance journalists and propose recommendations to assist them in remaining competitive and successful.

Research Questions

The research deals with the following research questions:

1. What are the present and future scope of freelance journalism in the news media industry?

2. What is the scope of freelance journalism in print, electronic, and digital media in Pakistan?
3. What measures should academia take to produce the required human resources regarding freelance journalism in Pakistan?
4. What challenges and opportunities exist for freelance journalists based within the Pakistani news industry?
5. What skillset is ideal for a freelance journalist to remain competitive and successful?

Literature Review

Freelance journalists are widely different from conventional journalists as they are not regular employees of any media organization. At the same time, they can work for multiple organizations or maybe generate stories of their own for their audience, dealing in a currency of ideas and words. Rudin and Ibbotson (2013) observed that freelance journalism can encompass three different categories of journalists. The first one is the journalists who can operate across multiple media and may specialize in one or multiple forms of media reporting. The second type involves journalists who are enlisted for long-term work for all forms of media industry jobs, such as editing or reporting. Thirdly, there is the part-time- freelance journalist who is confined to a specific subject or region and only commits himself to assignments. Hence, we can see that the definition of a freelance journalist demands to be construed properly in the context of Pakistan to truly understand their impact and challenges (Rudin & Ibbotson, 2013).

It must be understood that freelance journalists have remained under-researched, and limited research exists to ascertain the realities that are being faced by freelance journalists in the professional fields. It has been observed that most statistical studies done on journalism have remained confined to statistical information, including the likes of earnings and rankings, but have remained oblivious to how freelance journalists are reacting to their circumstances and what opportunities and challenges they may be facing beyond their earnings (Cohen, 2012). For such a diverse and evolving field as freelance journalism, constant research is required to ensure that there is adequate information available regarding future career options and other related challenges. At the same time, they are one of the most dynamically affected fields in the ever-changing media environment due to the nature of their services, forcing them to evolve rapidly along with media organizations to stay relevant and competitive in the market (Rafiq et al., 2022).

The media industry's reliance on freelancers is increasing every day, as seen with a growing trend around the world to reduce staff and spending on permanent journalists instead of using freelancing options to provide services (Stearns, 2013). It has been observed that freelance journalism has started to constitute a major part of the future of journalism, helping to swiftly influence the generation of news discourse. After discussion with freelance journalists, Stearns (2013) observed that freelance journalists often lacked the necessary training and equipment that most full-time journalists possess, along with many job benefits such as health insurance, helmets, and other related items that facilitate journalism, particularly for conflicted or dangerous regions. Likewise, it was also seen that as the price of content drops due to proliferation, freelance journalists would have to face many difficulties due to the economically dismal circumstances being expected for them shortly.

The skills to craft their introductions, a strong personal image, authentic and credible research, transparency, and excellent communication and engagement with their audiences are vital for freelance journalists to be considered as experts (Holton & Molyneux, [2017](#)).

Most industrialized societies are rapidly undergoing a change in their media industry and journalism, with researchers stating that the current age, facilitated by a constant up-gradation in technology and global communication, is one of the most intensive phases of transformation yet (Hanusch, 2015). While most studies have been closely addressing these transformations within the media industry, there have been a limited number of researches that have addressed how journalists have reacted and faced these transformative times, leaving their subjective perceptions unexplored. Hanusch ([2015](#)) observed that technological innovations in the last decade have changed various aspects of their work, especially those concerned with audience interactions. It was also noted that there is an alarming drop in the values and credibility of journalists, leading to less trust being placed in contemporary media sources by the public in many countries.

Over the recent years, particularly in the Western world, the number of freelance journalists has steadily increased amidst an unpredictable media crisis that has made it even more difficult to retain permanent employment in the media industry. As media organizations clamp down on permanent employees to reduce their expenditures, freelancers have emerged as both entrepreneurs and idealists in unforeseen circumstances (Mathisen, [2019](#)). Amidst all these developments, it was also observed that freelancers are being offered exposure or experience instead of actual payment for their work, a practice common for most apprentice-level journalists or those who have just begun their careers, leaving them with less stable options for financial opportunities (Fast et al., [2016](#)). As the number of journalists working as freelancers continues to increase, capsulized work is leading to the generation of contemporary news discourse. As journalists tend to construct realities based on the information that is available to them, the circumstances that freelance journalists go through can greatly influence the final discourse their actions are generating. Several factors can influence freelance journalism, including earning capacities, personal and professional connections, self-censorship, and media legislation (Hayes & Silke, [2019](#)). At the same time, the social and economic circumstances of most media organizations around the globe remain unexplored as well, even though the number of freelance journalists continues to increase (Shameer, [2018](#)). Due to the subjectivity and diversity of opinions on the topic at hand, qualitative interviews followed by the thematic analysis were observed to be a mutual trend among researchers in the field, and hence, similar techniques would be adopted by the researcher as well (Mathisen, [2019](#)).

Methodology

The methodology of our research is quantitative in nature; hence, we have employed the "structured interview" method for the collection of data. The interview included a list of questions that were to be asked to find and extract specific information from a certain group of people. The research population at hand is comprised of media professionals, academics, and freelance journalists selected from Lahore, Pakistan. The total number of interviews was 15, consisting of 5 interviews from each academic, media professional, and freelance journalist. The interviewees were selected using purposive sampling. Table 1 shows the distribution of the research sample size.

Table 1

Sample size distribution

Interviewee	Location	Number
Academics	Lahore	5
Freelance Journalists	Lahore	5
Media Professionals	Lahore	5
Total		15

Thematic Analysis

A quantitative method was used, and structured interviews were conducted to analyze the challenges and opportunities faced by freelance journalists in the 21st Century in Pakistan. The data that was collected was analyzed using thematic analysis. In this analysis, summaries of the interviews were discussed to analyze the different perceptions of interviewees about the challenges and opportunities of freelance journalism.

Quantitative Analysis of Interviews

The data that was gathered from the interviewees was arranged quantitatively in the following sequence.

Table 2

Quantitative analysis of interviews

Observation	Agreed	Disagreed	Neutral
The situation of Freelance Journalism in Pakistan is improving	87%	13%	0%
Academia is focusing on freelance journalism	13%	87%	0%
Quality of Content by Freelance Journalists is at par with regular ones	40%	45%	15%
Is Pakistan moving towards overcoming existing problems for freelance journalism?	70%	25%	5%

From the results, it can be seen that a significant number of interviewees agree that the situation of freelance journalism in Pakistan is improving, a total of 87%. At the same time, only 13% of the interviewees disagreed with the statement, suggesting that there were elements within the media climate that believed that freelance journalists still needed to improve to a considerable extent. When it came to the focus on freelance journalism by academics, it was observed that most of the interviewees, almost 87%, believed that academics were not paying adequate attention to the prospect and notion of freelance journalists, leading to a divide between practicing journalists and academicians. However, 13% of the interviewees expressed that there was a substantial focus on freelance journalism by the academicians. Thirdly, when it came to the quality of content by freelance journalists and whether it was at par with the regular ones, there was a similarity in the opinions. 40% of the interviewees expressed that freelance journalists were producing acceptable and competitive content, while 45% of the interviewees expressed that they did not believe that freelance academicians could produce the required content at par with traditional journalists. In the same, 15% of them were neutral and expressed that both of the journalists were capable of producing similar publishable content.

Lastly, when it came to the prospects of freelance journalism in the context of Pakistan and whether the media industry can overcome the existing problems for freelance journalism, 70% of the interviewees thought that Pakistan and its media climate will overcome the existing problem, where 25% of them disagreed and suggested that further efforts are required. In the same question, 5% of them did not express a clear opinion and remained neutral.

Thematic Analysis of Freelance Journalists

The data that was gathered from the freelance journalists was arranged following defined themes and was then analyzed using thematic analysis in the following sequence.

Table 3

Thematic analysis of freelance journalists

Name of Interviewee	Opportunities	Challenges
Freelance Journalist 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving scope 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fewer chances of stable work Lack of journalist bodies for Freelance Journalists Lack of Equal Recognition High competition from both traditional and freelance journalists
Freelance Journalist 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving scope and circumstances in the Future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of Adequate Wages/Payments Lack of journalist bodies for Freelance Journalists
Freelance Journalist 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rapid Improvement in Circumstances Huge Scope in the Future 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resistance from Conventional Media Lack of Professional Organizations and Bodies
Freelance Journalist 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital Future might lead to better job prospects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of Proper Structure to Work Lack of Acceptance in the Society Little to no scope in Pakistan
Freelance Journalist 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Satisfactory Conditions right now Increasing Work Opportunities in the Future Better financial prospects than regular workers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of resources Lack of recognition High competition

Thematic Analysis of Academicians

The data that was gathered from the academicians was arranged in accordance with defined themes and was then analyzed using thematic analysis in the following sequence.

Table 4

Thematic analysis of academicians

Name of Interviewee	Opportunities	Challenges
Academic 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Academia is focusing on the needs of freelance journalists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The idea is vaguely understood without professional considerations The bridge between academics and practicing journalists
Academic 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Freelance Journalism is competing and can overcome traditional journalism Academics are focusing on the needs of freelance journalists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of clear guidance
Academic 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Growing scope and improving circumstances If content improves, scope multiplies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of Attention by Academics Resistance and Opposition by Government
Academic 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Freelance Journalism is competing and can overcome traditional journalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of training and academic attention Intense competition
Academic 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Satisfactory working conditions Academics paying considerable attention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of defined course content

Thematic Analysis of Director/Controller News

The data that was gathered from the Director/Controller News was arranged by defined themes and was then analyzed using thematic analysis in the following sequence.

Table 5

Thematic analysis of director/controller news

Name of Interviewee	Opportunities	Challenges
Director/Controller News 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rapid growth in the number of freelance journalists It can be considered viable if good content is produced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of adequate payment Lack of attention by academics High competition
Director/Controller News 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will have a lucrative future with better work prospects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of Adequate Wages/Payments Lack of attention by academics

Name of Interviewee	Opportunities	Challenges
Director/Controller News 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfactory working conditions as of now • Huge Scope in the Future • Viability of producing good content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of attention by academics
Director/Controller News 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Digital Future might lead to better opportunities • Viable for news channels due to affordable costs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unpredictable circumstances • Lack of attention by academics
Director/Controller News 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital Future might lead to better job prospects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of work opportunities • Lack of attention by academics

Interpretation and Conclusion

Pakistani media is still in a phase of constant development and growth, slowly taking shape through various stages. One of these stages is the proliferation of freelance journalists in the media climate, fueled by convenient access to the internet and the emerging use of social media. In the modern era, a person with just a simple mobile device and access to an internet connection can serve as a reporter and a journalist for even reputed media houses all over the world. All types of journalism, whether conventional or freelance, constitute a form of discourse that is aimed to inform about political and social issues happening in the community, helping people understand what is happening around them. At the same time, news channels have begun to realize that it is better and more economical to rely upon freelance writers and journalists as well, a trend that is evident in Pakistan as well (Stearns, 2013). Due to recent budget cuts and economic challenges being faced by the media houses, it has become strenuous to keep a stronger force of journalists employed, especially for localized issues where the reporters have to reach out to a locality themselves to gain better opinions.

Freelance journalism, despite being a relatively newer phenomenon, has structured itself into mainstream media and is playing an important role in the news industry, especially due to its potential for remote work (Randerson et al., 2015). Journalistic discourse stemming from both freelancing and conventional media persons has aided the public's understanding of social and political realities surrounding our lives, and all types of journalism assist the community in understanding how its fundamentals work. However, the current literature on journalism fails to effectively identify the roles freelance journalists have performing in the news industry and what challenges they face as they try to maintain their careers in an intensely unpredictable and ever-changing industry in Pakistan (Rafiq et al., 2024). It was during these circumstances that the current study was held, aiming to understand the opportunities and challenges that exist for freelance journalists in the context of Pakistan as it has been left unexplored by contemporary research in the country. Using the grounded theory to approach the conceptual and theoretical background for the study, several freelance journalists, academics, and media professionals were extensively interviewed and the data obtained were used to assess the opportunities and challenges that exist for freelance journalism in 21st-century Pakistan (Rafiq et al., 2024). After the research had been collected, it was subjected to thorough thematic analysis, from which the researcher

made conclusive remarks. It was observed that a multitude of challenges was present for freelance journalists, as well as several opportunities that were unique and distinct to them. The researcher made certain themes that were interconnected within the statements of the respondents regarding the research topic and discussed the results with insights from the literature review instead of laying out quantitative details in chronological order. As the amount of data that had been collected was massive, the researcher only used the most relevant data to structure the subsequent themes.

Firstly, the current situation of freelance journalism was discussed in the context of Pakistan, where respondents agreed that the situation for freelance journalism is improving rapidly and will be drastically different in the coming five to ten years. Discussions revealed that it was due to the following of international trends and conventions by the Pakistani media industry and the economic strains that are leading media houses to rely upon independent journalists instead of keeping regular employees who require consistent training and access to resources. The interviews also revealed that freelancers who were entering the increasingly competitive field were expected to be creative enough to give rise to a better situation for freelance journalism as the general quality of their content increases.

Secondly, the respondents were asked about the qualities that were required by freelance journalists working in Pakistan, and it was observed that research, technical skills, and quality content were deemed as the three most important traits that a freelance journalist must possess to be successful in their career. The respondents generally agreed that competency is a prerequisite to every field, especially for journalism, where the skills are presented before the public and are judged by them to influence their perceptions.

Thirdly, the attention on freelance journalism in academia was discussed with the respondents where a majority was of the opinion that academia is overlooking the potential of freelance journalism and is not carrying out proper efforts to inculcate the professional skills and ethics required by freelance journalists in the students of journalism, leaving much to be desired. Simply put, a huge gap was observed between academia and the industry that needed to be bridged to improve the quality of journalism in Pakistan. Respondents even go on to state that academics, despite knowing the potential of the emerging field of freelance journalism, are reluctant to do anything about it.

Fourthly, the challenges that are present for freelance journalists in the Pakistani media climate were discussed, and it was agreed by most respondents that there exist the following challenges for journalists: lack of work, low salary, no professional bodies, and a lack of recognition by professionals and the society (Rafiq et al., 2022). In essence, it was observed that freelancers face several challenges that can threaten their entries and journeys into their freelancing career, many of which cannot be handled by them alone on their end but must be regulated by professional industries and governments to ensure seamless operations for all stakeholders.

Fifthly, the quality of content being produced by freelance journalists was discussed, and it was seen that most of the respondents thought that regular employees who have been systematically trained and have been a part of a due process of selection and editing could produce better content contrary to freelancers where there is little to no supervision or a second opinion regarding the content the freelance

journalist is producing. It was suggested that there should be training and assistance programs to help freelance journalists improve the quality of their work.

Lastly, the pathway for the future was discussed with respondents, urging them to share their opinions regarding the future of freelance journalism. It was seen that the respondents were hopeful and generally optimistic about the future of freelance journalism in Pakistan, considering the developing circumstances where media houses are taking on international trends and conventions due to ensuing economic challenges. At the same time, they also discussed the potential of freelance journalism, considering their current status and, for the future, whether they are properly trained by their academic institutes and training programs.

Recommendations for Future Research

The study proposes certain suggestions for future research in the domain of understanding the challenges and opportunities for freelance journalists.

1. Adopting a quantitative approach to understand the opportunities and challenges that exist for freelance journalists as they have been left unexplored by most
2. Due to the pandemic, the interviews were limited to the city of Lahore and the academics and media professionals present there. Further research could explore the phenomenon in other regions and the entirety of Pakistan to get a better opinion.
3. It could be impactful in categorizing the freelance journalists, professionals, and academics being observed on the basis of their respective domains, specializations and media houses as challenges and opportunities can be subjective to the individual's workplace, region, and area of expertise.

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