Learning in Times of COVID: Journalism Education in Kashmir, India

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Abstract

Our in-depth qualitative interviews with journalism graduate students and professors, from Kashmir, India, show that unlike the rest of India, the region experienced extremely low internet connectivity, and this combined with a lack of access to technology nearly brought classes to a standstill. But students and teachers, used to social disruptions, used the COVID-19 pandemic to learn and practice journalism that was deeply bound to the community and they created "circles of trust" that helped them overcome internet and other technical issues. Ramifications for journalism education in situations of low connectivity and poor technology resources are discussed.

Keywords

Kashmir, journalism, internet, students, trust

Introduction

As the *TIME Magazine* recently reported, Kashmir, India, was just coming out of the ". . . World's Longest Lockdown" (Khan & Perrigo, 2020) when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Kashmir is no stranger to strikes and communication blackouts. Since August 2019, the Indian government stripped Kashmir of its special status (in terms of autonomy and its ability to formulate laws for the state's permanent residents) and brought it under the direct rule of the center. This arbitrary transition, done without popular mandate, saw

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soldiers patrolling streets with schools shut down indefinitely. Cutting off communication by switching off internet and telephone lines, criticized as "digital apartheid" (Kashmir Group Calls India's Internet Ban 'Digital Apartheid, 2020), is a usual characteristic of the central government's censorship of voices in the State.

Unlike August 2019, the pandemic lockdown since March 2020 did not lead to phone and internet shutdowns but while the rest of India had access to 3G and 4G connections, Kashmir had access to only 2G internet. This made accessing Zoom and Google classroom, technology used by educational institutes, painfully slow and at times impossible to connect to (Press Trust of India, 2020). Internet speed was restricted, ostensibly, to prevent militants from planning attacks (Anand, 2020). For the students in Kashmir, many of whom attended only 2 weeks of school last year (Shah, 2020), the pandemic lockdown was, once again, an extension of days without access to school.

Inspired by the work of Pain et al. (2016) that looked at how a nationally significant event could be used to teach students the nuances of multimedia journalism, this study uses the team-based learning (TBL) theory (Han & Newell, 2014) and an experiential learning approach (Brandon, 2002; Kolb, 1984) to examine how the pandemic was used by students and teachers to learn and teach journalism in Kashmir, India. Our qualitative in-depth interviews with 15 student graduate students and 10 professors of journalism show that in various universities teaching journalism and mass media, students and teachers came together to use the technology at hand to revamp journalism education and learning. As our respondents, said, the pandemic provided an opportunity to let students immerse, no matter how unwillingly, in a globally significant event that let them work in teams and combine their efforts to successfully complete different journalistic exercises.

Kashmir is among the most understudied regions in the world, especially in terms of media and education, and this study aims to fulfill, to an extent, this lacuna. Teaching and learning journalism through practical hands on assignments in journalism and media studies is common but our aim was to understand the different approaches to remote and online education that faculty and students in this conflict afflicted area adopted while also exploring the implications for journalism education in situations of poor technical reserves. The rich data generated yielded certain themes that were interpreted through the lens of TBL theory. In the area of journalism and mass media education, TBL (Han & Newell, 2014) is considered a key teaching orientation as teamwork is central to most professional media environments and thus is an important objective in media programs (Han & Newell, 2014). Experiential learning approaches and TBL are deeply connected (Han & Newell, 2014; Hoag et al., 2003). As students learn through experience, using concepts to approach issues, their dependence on small-group interaction increases more than any other commonly used strategy (Michaelsen & Sweet, 2008a).

Literature Review and Theoretical Background

Media and Media Education in Kashmir

The Kashmir dispute has been considered the "core of one of the most intractable conflicts in modern history" (Ganguly et al., 2019). Economic growth from 2004–2005 to

2013–2014 was 12% per annum, at least 2 percentage points lower than the national average; 10% of the population live below the poverty line (Bhandari, 2015; Government of India, 2011). This strife has also deeply affected education in the state (Loo, 2013). Kashmir is the only state in India with free education in government institutes for all citizens, at all levels but literacy rates are still lower than the rest of the country (Ganie & Din, 2015). Strikes and lockdowns regularly impede students from going to school. For example, in 2016, when militant commander Burhan Wani was killed, schools and colleges remained shut for 8 months as protests rocked the Valley (Sidiq, 2020a). Since August 2019, a year after India revoked the autonomous region's special status that protects the demographic status of the Jammu and Kashmir state in its prescribed constitutional form, more than 13,600 public and private schools remain closed (Wallen, 2020) and it has been reported that "Education has perhaps been worst casualty of events . . ." (Shah, 2020). Exacerbating the issue is the deep gender bias that has impeded the education of Kashmiri women whose literacy and education rates are far lower than women at the national level (Gul & Khan, 2014).

Regular communication including internet outages prevent effective online education despite the National Education Policy that recommended a focus on technology (Chopra, 2019). Deeply frustrated by government apathy, the International Federation of Journalists, and the South Asia Media Solidarity Network, had launched a 4-day-long social media campaign to highlight Kashmir's ongoing internet controls amid the COVID-19 pandemic (Sidiq, 2020b) but this had little impact. Journalists may have led the fight for better technical resources but the situation for journalists in the state is dire.

The International Press Institute says media freedom in India-administered Kashmir is under threat (Journalism in Kashmir in 'State of Repression, 2020). Many journalists have lost lives reporting from Kashmir (Kuchay, 2020). National media rarely presents Kashmir's point of view (Khalid, 2016); adopting, instead, contesting political discourse that seeks to further alienate the state (Nadaf, 2020).

As the District Census (Government of India, 2011) records, despite insurmountable challenges which include skirmishes and terrorist attacks, Kashmir has about 95 institutes of higher education including 12-degree colleges for women (Bhat, 2017). Kashmir has a rich history of journalism and journalism education. Besides private colleges, government institutes offer robust media and journalism education. Media in Jammu and Kashmir comprise a mix of radio, television, and online channels with organizations like DD Kashir (state television broadcaster), Greater Kashmir, Rising Kashmir, Kashmir News Bureau (KNB), and radio stations such as AIR Srinagar, AIR Jammu, Radio Mirchi 98.3 FM, Red FM 93.5, and Radio Sharda. Recently, three photographers from the Associated Press (AP), Dar Yasin, Mukhtar Khan, and Channi Anand, were awarded the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography for their coverage of Kashmir in 2019 when the Indian government stripped the region of its autonomy (The Pulitzer Prizes, 2020). Like Malala Yousafzai, voices of young Kashmiri students find space in media like *Al Jazeera* (Ahmad, 2020). The social and media situation in Kashmir provides journalism students and educators various opportunities to apply "real-life" situations to concepts and theories (Bobbitt et al., 2000) and learn

from the "emphasis upon situation and context" provided (Lynch et al., 2006), thus emphasizing the value of experiential learning techniques.

Learning From Experience

Kolb (1984) defines experiential learning as a "process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (p. 38). Experiential learning techniques shift the focus to the process of learning from the perspective of the students themselves, centering attention on how students respond to such learning experiences, what they gain, and what they found most challenging. Educators use the team approach for stimulating creativity and solving problems (Michaelsen & Sweet, 2008b), especially in media education. Like the experiential learning technique, TBL theory moves the spotlight away from instructor led learning to student led learning and contemplation (Michaelsen & Sweet, 2008b). The experiential learning technique also increases student's dependency on teams to get projects done as they learn from situations and adapt to contexts (Han & Newell, 2014; Hoag et al., 2003).

The pandemic lockdown in Kashmir affected teaching and learning that was already reeling from the deep brunt of social unrest and school closures. But the availability of communication, no matter how inadequate, did make this situation different from other lockdowns. Using the experiential learning approach (Brandon, 2002; Kolb, 1984) and through the lens of TBL theory, this article qualitatively investigates from the perspective of students and teachers:

> **Research Question 1:** How did the pandemic, a globally significant news event, influence learning and teaching journalism in Kashmir, India?

Method

Using a snowball sample (Browne, 2005) that allowed access to participants without organizational intervention or influence on responses, this study draws on 25 semi-structured in-depth face-to-face and online interviews with 15 student graduate students and 10 professors of journalism from various universities teaching journalism in Kashmir, India. The students ranged in age from 20 to 24 years of age with very basic professional media experience of about a few months to a year. The journalism professors interviewed had an average teaching experience of 7 years in several areas like media production, narrative storytelling, reporting and writing and digital media. A qualitative method was deemed the most suitable approach since our purpose was to explore "'social reality in subjects' perceptions of their environment" (Bryman, 1988, p. 70).

The interviews ranged from 25 minutes to an hour. Since the main research question that this article seeks to investigate focused on understanding how the pandemic, a globally significant news event, influenced learning and teaching journalism in a situation where communications infrastructure was less than robust, our questions focused on asking how students and teachers perceived the changes, the alterations

this brought to classes, the changes in team work and assignments and how was teaching and learning managed in situations where students lacked computers or phones. Follow-up question depending on responses were asked as well. McCracken's (1988, p. 85) long interview technique, which allows researchers to "step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves," was used and our respondents were asked to explain and describe the situations they referred in detail for our understanding. Participants granted permission to audio-record interviews and all identifying information has been removed as per IRB requirements. All the interviews were conducted using a combination of Hindi, English, and Urdu; languages that the authors are fluent in. Our theoretical framework and research questions guided the classification of the data which were coded into categories by grouping together and comparing interrelated ideas (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), and reviewed multiple times, by the authors, for critical understanding and to find latent and manifest meaning. Quotes, representative of most of the responses, have been used below to facilitate a critical understanding of the categories and data interpretation.

Results

Various themes emerge from the interview data analysis. Each theme addresses the various areas and aspects of learning and teaching journalism that that were affected and the changes that were introduced to add to our broader understanding of how the pandemic, a globally significant news event, influenced learning and teaching journalism in Kashmir, India. In the process, we also discuss the implications for journalism education in situations of inadequate technical capital.

Technique Over Technology

When the lockdown as announced, students and teachers had very little time to adapt. As our respondents, both teachers and students, reiterated the university promised students who did not have smart phones or laptops technical help, but little was done. As one student participant said, "We were given pen drives to download lectures and lessons but that was all." Teachers were not all well versed in technology and delivering lectures online. Most universities did not buy Zoom for classroom use so while schools in the rest of India had access to online classes, students in Kashmir had access to a free version that allowed 45 live minutes. As our participant professors emphasized, the students were amid a pandemic and they were going through an experience that was "a mixture of health, politics, and community." As professors tried to reduce "online fatigue," they also realized that the pandemic provided new angles for students to explore. The pandemic was a "new experience" and could be effectively used "as a sort of learning resource" (Personal Interview, 2020). Students understood that interviews that were at the core of journalism education and training and the face-to-face conversations that that had taken for granted now had to be remodeled.

Professors revamped their syllabus to return to the core values of journalism which they defined as "telling a story, highlighting the voices of the poor and powerless."

Assignments that required students to go out and film, requiring a certain number of sources, were changed to collecting oral histories of people in their locality. As one professor said:

> Media in Kashmir only covers how people have been inconvenienced during strikes and lockdowns. But people here have been living with lockdowns since times immemorial. They have developed methods of coping that are unique to Kashmir. (Personal Interview, 2020)

Assignments were developed to ensure that students learnt ways to report on and cover stories keeping the pandemic in context. For example, students were taught about digital reporting through exploring stories on social media. As one professor said, "Students found stories related to Kashmir and COVID and verified if it was true. We learnt about the importance of factual reporting and did stories to refute the untrue ones" (Personal Interview, 2020).

Professors did not want to compromise on the importance of working of teams and wanted students to capture the resilience of the people in Kashmir who were experiencing almost a year-long lockdown. In one assignment a team of students were set to interview the families of other team members, especially their grandparents, to understand how life in Kashmir has dealt with such curfews earlier through simple telephone interviews. As the professors interviewed said, the idea was to emphasize "technique over technology" and "learn from experiences." Grading schemes no longer required a certain number of sources. Rather the focus shifted to the depth of detail and richness of storytelling. Traditional assessment schemes were revisited to let students work on in depth stories. In the process, such assignments also ensured that the voices of the aged that rarely find space in the media found acknowledgment. As the students said, they are now more aware of the valuable repository of culture that the state has to offer.

Improvising and Flexibility

As the students said, the pandemic showed them certain truths that they had not paid attention to earlier. As they started using telephones to call sources rather than speaking to them face to face, they improved their interviews skills. As one student said, "Our time now was limited to speaking to our sources for a set period. Our questions therefore had to be more pointed and precise." Most of our student respondents said that they had to learn to speak up and speak more concisely since they are using phones more than ever. As one student respondent said, her team had to find sources with the locality. This was a breach from previous times when they would find people online to interview and she realized:

> Our immediate communities have so much to offer. Phones lines were often clogged with static and that meant fact checking what a source said more precisely rather than just taking it for granted. (Personal Interview, 2020)

Students had to learn to be flexible with equipment and find new ways to add detail to stories. Creating audio programs with interviews recoded on phones was a challenge. Students improvised by finding software they could use to improve audio quality. As one student said:

> I realized that the high ceilings of my mosque improved the playback quality of my audio. The priest let me since no one was coming any way. I also found a great story in my priest whose families have been looking after the mosque for generations. (Personal Interview, 2020)

For the professors, going online showed then new ways that classes could be continued despite shutdowns downs and this they felt, "showed us a better way to keep classes alive" (Personal Interview, 2020). Technical problems notwithstanding, they now have more hope that usual strikes will no longer negatively affect classes since they have had a chance to explore online teaching.

Community Focused Journalism

Since students could not travel and contact was restricted, they had to delve deep into family and community records to find stories worth reporting on. Our respondents said that they found excellent sources, interesting histories and stories that needed to be told right "on their doorstep." One student, for example, did a story on a group of ladies who were the oldest inhabitants of her area, and had been there since the last two world wars. As our respondents emphasized, as they searched for stories they realized, as one student, said:

> . . . that journalism is not just geared to helping and highlighting community voices but as a profession, it is about creating strong communities among ourselves, where our work is to truly help different voices find space and help each other in increasing our reach . . . (Personal Interview, 2020)

Going online certainly changed the way students learned. As one professor said, "Students were used to a very passive style of learning before. Going online made that more self-directed" (Personal Interview, 2020). Students, who would earlier only focus on stories of national importance, realized the value of local communities and the importance of community journalism. Professors too shifted away from social media and other technical aspects of reporting to discovering the value of reporting on communities, generally, underrepresented in media in Kashmir. As one student participant said, "Surprisingly, at a time when the world was going online, we realized the value of the offline world."

Journalism of Cooperation

As the lock down continued and classes shifted online, professors and students were forced to acknowledge the deep digital divides that existed. As one student said, "At

university, it wasn't a big deal whether you had a smart phone or not as long as you were reachable."

With classes shifting online, students, especially those from remote areas, like Rajouri, Rakhmuthi and Devipur villages of district Jammu were very negatively affected. Most lacked computers and had to connect from phones. "It was very hard for some families to suddenly bear the cost of smart phones," said one professor. Educators found it hard to connect classes online. WhatsApp emerged as the platform of choice and as our respondents said, they would form groups of their classes and upload lecture slides so that students could download them. Social media was unhelpful and as our participants said, it was "full of fake news and shrill misinformation that only worried us" (Personal Interview, 2020).

For the students this lockdown was brought home certain hard truths that were not clear during other shutdowns. Along with the flexibility they learnt trying to complete assignments, they also realized that this was a time when sharing of resources was necessary. Students with laptops and stronger connections would often record lectures. Lectures, recordings, and instructions were often collected in drives and given to those who had no internet connections. One hugely positive fallout, as some student participants said, was that with most workshops and journalism related lectures moving online, they had greater access to attend different seminars. They often found information about such seminars on Facebook and would register to attend. Information from these workshops were also shared with class lectures through Google drives.

Already fragile internet connections were often overloaded, especially, during certain times of the days. Students from remote regions often would find it very difficult to connect and they had to be given study materials in drives. As one participant said, "This increased trust among us. It was no longer about topping the class but rather about learning. We could feel the shift in priorities." Traditional teamwork was not possible but as the students interviewed said, they had never felt more a part of team. Students living closer to groups who needed materials delivered created routines and worked in shifts to ensure that classmates did fall behind. These associations developed naturally and as one participant said, everyone benefited. In ensuring access, students created "circles of trust" where they could rely on each other to learn. As one student participant said, "We learnt to trust each other and realized that journalism is a profession of trust where we are all working to serve our audiences the best."

Traditional Gender Bias

While students did find ways to cope and keep classes going, certain traditional norms, especially those related to gender, proved problematic. The women students interviewed said that their education once they were restricted to their homes were clearly not a priority. As one student said, "We had one laptop. I had to beg my brother to share" (Personal Interview, 2020). Women students reported that sources would often not speak with them but would be more cooperative with their male classmates. Women professors were expected to focus on families and homes once schools closed. This lockdown brought out the ugliness of traditional gender norms like no other

because as participants said, "School moved home . . . where women's education is not a priority." With limited internet and laptop connections, women's education was negatively affected.

Discussion and Conclusion

Analyzing the impact of the pandemic on journalism education in Kashmir, through concepts of experiential learning and TBL theory, we see that while Kashmir may have had weak internet connectivity and students may have lacked access to basic technology, students and teachers used the pandemic to return to core tenets of journalism, focusing on education and learning "technique rather than technology." Kashmir provides a unique example of examining journalism education because as a state it must deal with ongoing conflict, extremely tense atmospheres for professional journalism and politically biased decisions that ensure a lack of resources like strong internet connectivity. The pandemic served to create an experiential learning experience "whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). The process of learning became more self-directed and students were encouraged to focus on the community and report on local experiences. The experiential learning technique ensured that students learn to work in teams, broadening boundaries of teamwork, as they adapted to this lockdown (Han & Newell, 2014; Hoag et al., 2003). Theoretically, teamwork is used by educators to encourage creativity and solve problems and TBL theory here threw the spotlight on how students use team work to learn more effectively (Michaelsen & Sweet, 2008b). In Kashmir teamwork was paramount but this was also teamwork with a difference because it was no longer about finishing assignments but rather succeeding together. As the students said, it was the lack of technology during the pandemic that helped them understand the community orientation of journalism and value the offline world. They created "circles of trust" through which they could rely on each other to ensure that those without access to technology could have access to class material. Competition was no longer paramount bur rather through these circuits of faith, they also learnt that journalism is about communities and creating relations of trust with audiences. This has important implications for education in low technology areas where, perhaps, group knowledge sharing can help overcome technical barriers.

For educators, this shift to online learning is promising for now they may have a chance to ensure that even if schools are closed, students can at least continue classes. The impediments to teaching were many and they can be overcome with stronger political will and schools who need to do more in terms of proving technical help and training teachers to teach online. But, as our interviews show, for now, teachers have an option, that can be considered viable.

Clearly, the influence of the pandemic did bring out certain positive aspects to journalism education in Kashmir, but it also highlighted the deep gender bias that has hampered women's education in the state (Gul & Khan, 2014). Women students and educators found online classes and working from home difficult. Technology was obviously not a reasonable solution for systemic issues that continue to plague social

development in Kashmir. This analysis does not explore the issue of prejudices related to gender and this is an acknowledged shortcoming. Our sample while varied also is not enough to ensure a generalization of results and leaves critical gaps in our understanding of the transformative potential of technology on education in the understudied region of Kashmir. We, therefore, invite researchers to explore such issues in greater depth to shed more light on its complex nuances.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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