

Conflict Journalism in Pakistan: The Interplay of Safety, Censorship, and Gatekeeping in the Tribal Regions

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Journalism in Pakistan's conflict and crisis zones, particularly the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), presents significant risks to media professionals. Despite playing a crucial role in information dissemination, journalists working in these high-risk environments face severe threats, including targeted violence, abductions, censorship, low wages, and psychological trauma. This study examines the various challenges that affect the gatekeeping role of journalists operating in Pakistan's tribal areas. Using a qualitative research design, the study is based on in-depth interviews with fifteen (n=15) male journalists who have reported from conflict-prone regions. It investigates how factors such as physical insecurity, coercion by state and non-state actors, economic vulnerabilities, and editorial constraints impact journalists' professional responsibilities and ethical decision-making. The findings highlight that journalists work under constant fear, often self-censoring or complying with dominant narratives to avoid harm. Many lack proper training, insurance, or institutional support, which compounds the risks they face daily. The study contributes to the literature on conflict journalism and gatekeeping theory by examining the micro-level realities of journalists in high-risk environments. It provides insights into how various factors impact media content, particularly in marginalised and conflict-affected regions. Recommendations include enhanced safety training, legal protection, better financial support, and the development of trauma-informed journalism practices. The research highlights the pressing need for policy interventions and institutional support mechanisms to safeguard journalists and promote independent reporting in Pakistan's most volatile regions.

Keywords: Conflict, Media, Tribal area, Pakistan, Gatekeeping

Introduction

Journalism in Pakistan, particularly in its crisis-affected and conflict-prone tribal regions, has evolved into one of the most perilous professions. While media in the country have expanded dramatically over the past two decades due to technological growth and deregulation, this progress has come at a high cost. Journalists operating in Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), now merged with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, have faced intimidation, harassment, censorship, and in many cases, death (Ullah, 2024). The journalistic practice in conflict-affected areas is characterised by political instability, militant violence, coercion from multiple actors, and a lack of institutional support.

According to Shah et al. (2024), the hazards faced by media professionals have increased over the years. A growing number of journalists have been killed, abducted, or threatened while performing their duties. In a 2016 report by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Pakistan was identified as the fourth most dangerous country in

the world for journalists, behind Mexico, the Philippines, and Iraq, with over 115 fatalities since 1990 (Dawn, 2016). Many of these casualties occurred in Pakistan's conflict-ridden tribal zones. Journalists reporting from tribal areas operate under constant pressure from both state and non-state actors. On one hand, militants seek favorable coverage; on the other, security forces attempt to restrict independent reporting and promote narratives aligned with their interests (Jehangir, 2021). In this dual-threat environment, journalists must navigate complex ethical and personal dilemmas, often sacrificing impartiality to survive. According to (Ullah, 2024), reporting from these areas is virtually impossible without facing coercion, threats, and the risk of violence.

The legal framework further exacerbates these challenges. Until recently, tribal areas were governed under the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) of 1901, which gave unchecked powers to the political administration and imposed significant restrictions on freedom of expression. Even after the

merger of FATA with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in 2018, the area remains underdeveloped in terms of media infrastructure, legal protections, and press freedom. Veteran journalist Rahimullah Yusufzai noted that at least 13 tribal journalists had been killed since 9/11, while *The Express Tribune* placed this number at 14 as of January 2016 (Mureeb, 2016). These deaths occurred not only during active conflict but also in periods of relative calm, often while covering crime, corruption, or civil rights issues. Shah et al. (2020) emphasized that in such conditions, journalists operate with limited institutional and physical security, leading to psychological distress and occupational burnout.

The local journalists still cover the news about the conflict, displacement and socio-political processes which usually cover the gap left by the international and national media. Nevertheless, they have low wages, no insurance, and no safety training, and are subject to editorial intrusion, which reduces their professional freedom and puts their lives at risk (Kashmir et al., 2019). All these factors contribute significantly to determining how well they perform their gatekeeping, job responsibly and ethically.

Statement of the Problem

The primary role of journalists is to act as gatekeepers of information in complex and dangerous conflict zones. Threats issued by militants, coercion by the state, financial insecurity and self-restrictions by the editors undermine this role in the tribal belt of Pakistan. Although many studies already focused on media freedom in the macro perspective, there is paucity in the investigation of how the regular, mundane level of media freedom (safety consideration, economic vulnerability, coercion, and editorial policies) influences the professional status of journalists or the way they make professional and ethical decisions in conflict prone regions. It is essential to understand how tribal journalists fulfil their roles in the face of these limitations and how their gatekeeping responsibilities are affected in such high-risk situations. This paper aims to bridge this gap through an investigation into the life experiences of journalists in these areas.

Research Questions

RQ 1. What are the key challenges faced by journalists reporting from Pakistan's tribal/conflict zones?

RQ2. In what ways do journalists ensure personal safety while maintaining professional integrity in conflict-effect areas?

Objectives of the Study

1. Explore the main challenges faced by journalists reporting from tribal and conflict-affected areas in Pakistan.
2. Analyze how these challenges influence the gatekeeping function of journalists.
3. Examine the coping mechanisms used by journalists in conflict zones to ensure personal safety and professional integrity.
4. Understand the psychological, ethical, and occupational implications of working in high-risk environments.

Significance of the Study

This study offers critical insights into the complex interplay between media practices and conflict dynamics in Pakistan. It advances journalism research by providing an empirical account of how journalism is conducted in under-explored, high-risk areas. It enhances our understanding of routine gatekeeping under pressure. It informs media organisations, human rights groups, and policymakers about the vulnerabilities faced by journalists in tribal regions. It offers practical strategies to enhance journalist safety, ethical resilience, and policy frameworks that promote press freedom.

Literature Review

War reporting is perhaps one of the most dangerous professions in the world. A large number of reporters and journalists dare to enter conflict zones to bring the latest information about armed conflicts to the world. Journalists play a crucial role in keeping the world informed about the facts unfolding on the battlefields. Due to its significant importance in society, the media is regarded as the fourth estate in modern society (Baber & Ullah, 2020; Ullah & Jan, 2021; Ullah et al., 2025).

Mohiuddin (2023) highlights that, despite their vital societal role, the number of journalists who are missing, threatened, arrested, mistreated, or killed continues to grow. Their lives are constantly at risk during military actions, and they often become collateral damage or targeted individuals (Ullah, 2025). As they serve as watchdogs, witness humanitarian crises, and spread news and images, they become easy targets for parties involved in conflicts. Zubascu (2013) notes that journalists working in high-risk environments face significant external threats and influence. The international community must reassess and improve journalists' safety during armed conflicts to reduce casualties in the future (Ullah & Iqbal, 2025).

Reporting in war Zones is highly profitable but comes with significant risks, especially in fragile regions (Penney, 2017). Oledzki (1998) highlighted

that skilled journalists are responsible for carefully delivering crucial information, particularly regarding law and order or security threats. Journalists must also select appropriate newsworthy information and report on key issues to assist readers (Ullah et al., 2025). Objectivity and neutral reporting remain essential qualities of good journalism. Additionally, literature indicates that journalism has been increasingly recognised as a prestigious and rewarding profession (Waisbord, 2013).

Shah et al. (2019) emphasises that violence against journalists is a serious problem that needs urgent attention. Lisosky and Henrichsen (2009) have observed a strong link between protecting journalists and preserving freedom of expression, as reported in various studies. There are also numerous instances of journalists being imprisoned in different countries. The number of journalists who have been killed, imprisoned, or wounded in crossfire and conflicts continues to rise. According to Committee to Protect Journalists (2019) in its report "Attacks on the Press," attacks on journalists are increasing worldwide, with growing dangers and difficulties. The report also states that 35 percent of all journalists killed were during war reporting or related conflicts. In armed conflicts, the media's role becomes even more crucial because, in chaotic times, other civil society elements are often silenced (Ashraf & Brooten, 2017).

The task assigned to journalists and reporters is increasingly becoming difficult due to government control of the media. The demand for up-to-date and firsthand news from the battlefield increases pressure on journalists to take extra risks to perform their jobs more efficiently and productively. There are also conflicting interests among the different groups involved. It is challenging for journalists to maintain a balance among the conflicting interests. There is another aspect of the issue: the legal protections available for journalists working in war zones. Oxford University Press (2008) stated that while adequate laws exist to safeguard journalists in these areas, implementation remains a challenge. The Geneva Convention (1949) analysed this issue and found that numerous documents at both national and international levels address it. However, many governments tend to overlook these protections during times of war. The Geneva Conventions aim to ensure that journalists receive sufficient protection, and there is a call for specific laws to prevent attacks on them. The existence of these conventions provides journalists with greater safety

and independence while reporting in conflict zones. The Scholars, Baber and Ullah (2020); Shah et al. (2024); Ullah (2024); Ullah and Jan (2021); Ullah et al. (2025) highlights the need to establish a special status and facilitate identification for journalists to protect them in war zones. Lisosky & Henrichsen (2009) examined arrangements for journalists, along with skills and training programs designed to reduce their vulnerabilities and educate them, thereby lowering their risks in conflicts. They advocate for a conclusive debate to ensure that journalists receive appropriate and legal protections during armed conflicts (Lisosky & Henrichsen, 2011). The International Humanitarian Law reports (2008, 2010) have explored war reporting and analysed whether current international legal measures sufficiently protect journalists. These reports also offer practical suggestions for journalist protection, along with methods and skills enhancement programmes.

Theoretical Framework

The researcher employs gatekeeping theory as the foundation for the theoretical framework. The terms gatekeeping and communication first appeared in the unfinished document of Kurt Lewin, "Frontiers in Group Dynamics", which was posthumously published in 1947.

History and core assumptions of Gatekeeping theory

In mass communication research, gatekeeping is one of the oldest and most well-established theory. Kurt Lewin, a psychologist, first proposed the gatekeeping process in his research conducted post-World War II on social change. Initially, this research was not applied to the mass communication study, but Lewin opined that his theory suggested how "Items" passing through "channels" are selected or rejected could be applied to news flow and in 1950 David Manning, a communication scholar, quickly picked up the gatekeeping idea in his case study on the selection news of the day by a wire service editor of a newspaper (Shoemaker et al., 2001).

Some forces and gates facilitate or restrain the transmission of news to the social system. The research study by Shabir et al. (2015) found that, in the context of gatekeeping theory, certain levels are maintained in the media gatekeeping process. The first one is the individual level in which the journalists alone decide the selection of news. At the routine practices level, the journalists make decisions regarding the selection of news in light of the news organizations generalized and pre-

established set of practices, ethics, and policies. At the level of social institutions, external forces such as advertisers, the government, and regulators determine the selection of information. At the ideological level, social values, pressure groups, culture, and ethnicity influence the news selection criteria.

The relation between Gatekeeping and self-censorship

There are filters on media organizations' external and internal levels that serve as gatekeepers. These gatekeepers have a check on the work of the journalists while performing their duties in the media organizations. The policies of the media organizations also serve as gatekeepers. Journalists need some personal security to remain on the safe side, for which they avoid reporting things that might harm them. Other forces like government, advertisers, security and threats, media organizations, etc., also serve as gatekeepers and contribute to self-censorship. Hence, there is a relationship between the gatekeeping theory and self-censorship. The different forces (gates), including government, pressure groups, etc., compel journalists to observe censorship through coercive policies. As a result, the journalists practice self-censorship.

On the other side, the nature of media ownership in Pakistan encourages gatekeeping to serve their interests. Here different filters or gates work inside the media outlets, right from the reporters, the gatherers of the news, to the top management and owners. The external gates influence the media organisations' owners, editors, and reporters to self-censor. These gates control the news and decide which kind of news and aspect of a news story should be disseminated to the masses. Therefore, in light of the debate above, the gatekeeping theory is a suitable theoretical framework for this research study.

Methodology

The research methodology employed to explore the challenges faced by professional journalists working in the southern districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. The study adopts a qualitative research design, focusing on in-depth, narrative-based insights derived through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The research was conducted in the southern districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. These areas were selected due to their socio-political volatility, history of conflict, and underrepresentation in national media discourses.

The study participants were working journalists with

a minimum of five years of professional experience in print, electronic, or digital media. A purposive sampling technique was used to select participants. A total of (n=15) male journalists were interviewed, ensuring diversity in terms of media platforms, geographic location within the region.

Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted between October 2024 and December 2024. This method provided a flexible yet focused structure, allowing the researcher to delve deeper into relevant issues while also giving participants the freedom to share their personal experiences and insights.

Each interview lasted between 35 to 60 minutes and was conducted in the local language, Pashto, to facilitate comfort, authenticity, and open communication. The interviews were audio recorded (with participants' consent) and later transcribed and translated into English for thematic analysis.

The interview guide covered key areas including:

- Safety and self-security challenges during field reporting;
- Access to training and skill development opportunities;
- Experiences with editorial censorship or pressure;
- Regional cultural barriers and institutional support;
- Financial and salary-related concerns;
- Educational background and views on journalism education.

Data Analysis

The collected qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis, following the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2014). This approach allowed the researcher to identify, analyze, and report recurring themes and patterns within the dataset. Thematic analysis is particularly useful for exploring the depth and complexity of participant experiences in a structured yet flexible manner.

Thematic Analysis of Journalists' Challenges in Pakistan

The data presents an in-depth thematic analysis of qualitative information collected from journalists across Pakistan. The study uncovers six key themes: self-security during reporting, lack of professional training, financial insecurity, cultural differences in journalistic practice, dangers of live reporting, and issues related to education. These themes collectively highlight a deeply constrained and often hazardous working environment for journalists in

Pakistan.

Theme 1: Self-Security During Reporting

One of the most pressing concerns raised by journalists is the personal safety they face during reporting. Participants consistently expressed fear due to threats from both state and non-state actors.

Participant 3 added

“Journalists in Pakistan practice self-censorship to remain on the safe side. Journalists don’t feel secure in the field and even in the country’s capital, Islamabad, where journalists have been kidnapped in broad daylight.”

Such statements reflect a widespread perception of insecurity even in the nation’s most protected zones. The normalization of threats ranging from harassment to abduction has led many journalists to adopt self-censorship as a survival strategy (Amnesty International, 2021; Reporters Without Borders [RSF], 2024). Participant 7 has the opinion that

“Many journalists were threatened, disappeared, and kidnapped during the last few months, but there was no reaction from the government against it.”

Journalists also voiced concern for their families, indicating that intimidation often extends beyond the individual. Participant 2 added that “The journalists have fear about their lives and their families as some organizations and influential individuals could harm them.”

Pakistan ranks consistently among the most dangerous countries for journalists, with increasing reports of surveillance, legal harassment, and physical violence (CPJ, 2023). Participant 14 also added that “Many journalists had to leave their areas and migrate to other places because of threats to them and their families’ lives.”

Theme 2: Lack of Training and Professional Development

Another recurring theme was the severe deficiency in professional training for journalists, especially those from rural backgrounds. The participant 14 added that “Many Karachi-based journalists do not have proper training in their fields. A majority of the journalists are not professionally qualified.”

The majority of the respondents highlighted that media organizations prioritize commercial interests over professional development. Participant 11 added more that.

“Journalists disclosed that they are called to their media organizations for training in collecting advertisements rather than professional grooming.”

This commodification of journalism devalues professional integrity and undermines journalistic standards (IMS, 2022). Participant 2 has the opinion that “There is no structured on-the-job training available for journalists in Pakistan.”

Most journalists enter the profession with degrees unrelated to journalism, contributing to an unskilled workforce that is particularly vulnerable to manipulation or editorial control (UNESCO, 2021). Participant 15 further added, “The government and media organisations have failed to take steps for the professional training of journalists, especially those in rural areas.”

Theme 3: No Salary and Job Insecurity

Financial insecurity emerged as a powerful force undermining journalists’ independence and ethical standards. Participant 5 added that “Many journalists in the Southern District of KP work as correspondents without salaries. Some are paid less than regular laborers, forcing them to take on multiple jobs.”

These economic hardships not only discourage talented individuals from entering journalism but also compromise existing journalists’ commitment to truth (Freedom Network Pakistan, 2023), Participant 10 also have the opinion that

“Most journalists are not paid on time, leading to financial insecurity and self-censorship.”

The economic vulnerability has been worsened by government decisions to reduce advertisements a major source of media revenue (Digital Rights Foundation [DRF], 2023). Participant 1 added that “The current government has reduced media advertisements, causing financial strain on media organizations and affecting journalists’ wages.”

Theme 4: Cultural and Regional Variations in Journalism

The study revealed significant differences in journalistic cultures between cities such as Lahore and Islamabad. Participant 3 has highlighted that “The journalistic culture in Lahore is more politically inclined, whereas in Islamabad, the media is more influenced by state institutions.”

The majority of the Respondents described Islamabad as having a high-risk environment for journalists, particularly when covering state affairs. Participant 14 further pointed out that.

“Journalists in Islamabad face higher security risks, especially when covering sensitive topics.”

Access to information and political affiliations vary by region, influencing media behaviour. The

participant 2 added more that.

“Lahore-based journalists have better access to government sources compared to those in smaller cities.”

Ethnic and linguistic diversity also shapes media practice in Pakistan (Shah & Yasir, 2022). Participant 8 added that “Ethnic and linguistic diversity also plays a role in shaping reporting styles in different cities.”

Theme 5: Life-Threatening Nature of Live and Breaking News

The threat to life is most acute during live and breaking news coverage. Participant 6 added that “Live reporting in conflict zones has resulted in several journalists being caught in crossfire.”

The majority of journalists face the high-stakes nature of breaking news and the pressure to deliver fast content, often without protection. Participant 1 further added, “One journalist is killed every 58 days in Pakistan.”

This figure corresponds to long-standing trends documented by CPJ (2023) and RSF (2024). State institutions often exert pressure on journalists to shape narratives in their favor. Participant 9 highlighted that.

“The government and powerful institutions threaten journalists to ensure they report in their favor.”

Refusing to comply can result in abduction or death, participant 2 added more that “Journalists who refuse to follow the government's directives face abduction, torture, or even murder.”

Theme 6: Education and Academic Preparedness

The final theme highlights the underdeveloped state of journalism education in Pakistan. Participant 6 pointed out, “There is no standardised journalism curriculum in many universities, making formal training inconsistent.”

Due to limited access to quality education, many journalists enter the profession with degrees in unrelated disciplines, participant 7 highlighted that. *“Many journalists in Pakistan have studied subjects unrelated to journalism, such as English, history, and political science.”*

These educational limitations increase the risk of misinformation and compromise ethical reporting practices (UNESCO, 2021). Participant 8 added that “Journalism degrees in Pakistan lack practical exposure, making graduates less prepared for the field.”

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the significant professional, cultural, and safety-related challenges encountered by working journalists in the southern districts of

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan. Using a qualitative approach and Gatekeeping Theory as a guiding framework, the study aimed to explore how journalists navigate issues such as self-censorship, a lack of institutional support, and the harsh realities of their profession. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with (n=15) experienced journalists (all male) from conflict-prone areas, including Dera Ismail Khan, Bannu, Lakki Marwat, Tank, and Kohat.

The findings highlighted that safety concerns significantly impact journalists' daily work. Most participants admitted they often choose not to report sensitive issues like corruption, militancy, or government failures due to fear of threats, harassment, or even death. This pattern reflects a classic case of self-censorship arising from external gatekeeping forces. According to Shoemaker and Vos (2009), gatekeeping includes not only institutional decisions but also the constraints placed on journalists by power structures. In Pakistan, these power structures include state agencies, militant groups, and local influential individuals who indirectly control media narratives through fear.

This aligns with the idea presented by Lewin Lewin (1943) that various “forces”, positive or negative, either allow or block information through media channels. Here, fear works as an opposing **force**, effectively stopping critical news from being reported. Journalists are not just reporting less they are actively filtering their own stories before they even reach the editor, especially in rural and conflict-hit zones.

Journalists shared that media houses often prioritize advertisement collection over skill-building, showing a shift from journalism as a public service to journalism as a business. As Bourdieu (1998) points out, commercial interests often dominate media logic, pushing aside the traditional role of journalism in informing the public. This deficiency in training not only limits the journalists' personal growth but also weakens their ability to resist pressures for censorship.

Financial insecurity is another strong theme that supports the theoretical model. Journalists complained about irregular or no salaries, delayed payments, and a lack of job security. These economic struggles become a gate that indirectly forces journalists to self-censor. If a journalist speaks against an influential figure or institution, they may lose their job or face financial punishment. This reflects institutional-level gatekeeping, where external actors, such as owners and advertisers, shape what is reported and what is not (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013).

Gatekeeping theory explains how economic conditions can function like gates by filtering out stories that might risk the financial survival of the journalist or the media organization itself. The government's cutback on advertisements, a major income source for many media houses, also reduces their ability to pay reporters, further weakening editorial independence (Freedom Network, 2023). Journalists in the southern KP districts also reported significant cultural and societal limitations, particularly regarding gender, religious topics, or tribal customs. This shows the role of ideological gatekeeping, where shared beliefs and social norms act as powerful filters. Journalists explained that even if they feel a story is important, they might avoid publishing it because it goes against the "accepted" cultural values of their region. The dangers of live coverage were another concern, especially during protests, bombings, or conflict events. Many journalists said they lacked safety gear or training, putting them at high risk. This problem reflects both **individual-level and routine-level gates**, where decisions made in the newsroom or by journalists themselves are influenced by the lack of institutional safety protocols. In this context, journalists often become their own gatekeepers, making risky decisions without backup, support, or training. The result is a profession that demands courage but offers little protection. The study also revealed major concerns regarding journalism education. Many reporters said they

learned reporting by doing the job, not through a university education. Others said journalism departments in their region don't prepare students for the real-world challenges of reporting in a conflict zone. This long-term structural deficiency continues to feed into the cycle of untrained journalists and poor reporting standards. Gatekeeping theory helps explain this gap as part of systemic filters where education policy, institutional neglect, and underinvestment in rural regions combine to weaken the pipeline of well-trained journalists. Without quality education, future journalists are more vulnerable to manipulation, censorship, and burnout.

Integration with Gatekeeping Theory

This study validates and extends the gatekeeping theory by showing how multiple layers of individual, routine, institutional, and ideological factors shape journalists' daily experiences in conflict-prone areas of Pakistan. From personal safety to structural and cultural forces, each layer acts as a filter that restricts the flow of independent news. In particular, self-censorship is shown to be a survival mechanism that results from fear, financial instability, and institutional weakness. These findings align with the works of Shoemaker and Vos (2009) and Shabir et al. (2015), who argue that gatekeeping extends beyond newsroom editors to encompass a complex web of social, political, and economic factors.

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