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HEALTH JOURNALISM IN FLUX: UNRAVELING CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Health information is widely disseminated through the media. This study explores the experiences of Pakistani journalists in covering health-related topics to understand their duties, news selection criteria, sources, and problems. This is because reliable health news reporting is crucial and because there is a national demand for professionalism in health journalism. The results show different coverage frequencies, highlighting the importance of health reporting. Obtaining trustworthy data, conflicting studies, a lack of resources, and complex communication are all problems. Journalists depend on reliable sources and specialized interviews. While finding professionals can be demanding, some have solid networks. Assessment of the quality of health reporting is primarily negative and highlights issues with its standard. Accuracy, clarity, expert insights, images, and real-world examples are essential for better reporting. According to the research, journalists are eager to get training to improve their health reporting abilities, demonstrating their commitment to meaningful journalism. It emphasizes how critical it is to support health reporters through training to improve public health communication and guarantee the spread of accurate information. To sum up, this study clarifies the nuances of health reporting among Pakistani journalists. The results highlight the necessity of addressing issues, incorporating crucial reporting elements, and offering training to advance health journalism.

Key words: medical journalism, health reporting, challenges, training program, professional development

INTRODUCTION

Health journalism involves the communication of medical and health-related information through various media channels. It encompasses diverse areas, such as reporting on health news, medical research and its findings, as well as health policies, programs, and critiques. Both print and digital media platforms are utilized to disseminate this information. Not only does health journalism have a significant impact on individuals' health-related activities, but it also has a significant impact on the state of global public health. However, as incomplete or false information can seriously jeopardize public health, it is imperative to guarantee accurate and thorough reporting.

Political, economic, cultural, and security factors, in addition to an abundance of health information sources, can lead to erroneous reporting that might endanger public health and result in detrimental health policy. According to a survey of journalists in Midwestern U.S. states, over one-third of them said they had trouble comprehending the nuances of health-related topics and evaluating health data (Voss, 2002). Another 2014 study of journalists in Europe brought to light a number of obstacles to covering health news, such as the unwillingness of health authorities to communicate with the media or offer information, the difficulty of interpreting statistical data, and the reporters' lack of medical trainings (Veloudaki, et al., 2014). The purpose of this study is to highlight the important difficulties that Pakistani health journalism faces.

PROBLEM STATMENT

In Pakistan, a sizable section of the populace lacks access to quality healthcare, which increases the risk of underreporting illnesses and ailments, especially in underprivileged and disadvantaged areas. Studies reveal that journalists are essential in producing health-related news for the media; nevertheless, their stories frequently incorporate subjective conjectures and interpretations, resulting in erroneous and deceptive content. An evaluation of the standard of American health news found that between 62 and 77% of the stories did not sufficiently address important topics such as cost, advantages, downsides, and the quality of treatment (Larsson, Oxman, Carling, & Herrin, 2003).

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This study involves conducting surveys among Pakistani journalists to investigate their firsthand experiences in covering health-related matters. The research aims to understand their perceptions of their roles as journalists, their criteria for determining newsworthy stories and sources in the context of

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health, and the various challenges they face while reporting on health issues.

HYPOTHESIS:

H1: In Pakistan reporters sporadically covers health related topic.

H2: Very few reporters feel confident in their ability to accurately interpret and communicate health-related research findings to their audience.

H3: Most of the reporters faced difficulties in accessing experts or healthcare professionals for interviews or comments on health topics.

H4: Most of the reporters think that the quality of health reporting in the media industry is not satisfactory.

H5: Majority of the reporters are interested in receiving additional training or resources to improve their health reporting skills.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS:

RQ1: What are the most significant challenges reporters face when reporting on health-related issues?

RQ2: How reporters stay updated with the latest developments in the field of health and medicine?

RQ3: According to reporters, what are the key elements necessary for effective health reporting?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Health news is a highly prominent category, yet the production processes behind the health stories we encounter daily remain largely unknown. Understanding these processes is vital to foster a vibrant public sphere for health-related information. Journalists covering the medical industry encounter a significant dilemma as the boundary between news reporting and marketing can easily become unclear, demanding careful handling. Jacobs T identified three common practices that pose potential conflicts of interest for reporters and editors: accepting industry-sponsored awards, participating in industry-sponsored educational programs, and relying excessively on industry-supplied sources (Jacobs, 2023).

Media coverage of health issues has been proven to impact the priorities of the general public and stimulate policy actions at the governmental level (YANOVITZKY & STRYKER, 2001). The news media has a significant role in determining which health issues are given priority and in sharing the latest research discoveries with the public (Donohue & Tichenor, 1980).

Some studies have supported the idea that newspapers contribute to health disparities by examining the content they publish. For example, Taylor-Clark and colleagues conducted a study that revealed an increase in coverage of African American healthcare disparities from 1994 to 2004 (Taylor-Clark, Mebane, Steelfisher, & Blendon, 2007). However, they found that later articles tended to attribute the disparities more to patient-related factors, like inadequate healthcare-seeking behavior or not following medical advice, rather than systemic causes like healthcare discrimination or limited access to quality care (Taylor-Clark, Mebane, Steelfisher, & Blendon, 2007). The authors suggested that this framing of causal factors might lessen support for policy interventions among policymakers and the public (Taylor-Clark, Mebane, Steelfisher, & Blendon, 2007).

The study findings imply that journalists may change a fundamental part of branding by doing away with the conventional separation between their identity and content in favor of a collaborative strategy that involves sharing content production and exchange with their peers and audience (Molyneux & Holton, 2014).

Journalists noted that their individual use of online health resources has significantly changed how they formulate health story concepts and investigate health subjects, even though the study's findings show that the full potential of new media platforms for disseminating local TV news health content is not realized (Tanner, Friedman, & Zheng, 2015).

A report documented that Health is a commonly featured subject in various news formats, including print, radio, and television. Certain newspapers dedicate special pages or magazine sections to regularly cover health and science topics, such as 'Horizon' in the 'Daily Nation' (Schanne & Spurk, 2009).

Additionally, health is prominently addressed in special broadcast formats like talk shows and call-in programs on radio and TV. These programs may focus solely on health-related issues, such as discussing the quality of condoms, or include health as one of several sub-topics within a broader theme. Educational radio programs also play a role in disseminating health information to the public. The overall impression is that health receives minimal attention in the media context, with only a small amount of time or space dedicated to covering health-related topics (Schanne & Spurk, 2009).

The recent 25% decrease in cancer deaths in the U.S., which can be considered evidence-based news, indicating progress in cancer treatment, received limited attention in the media (American Society of Clinical Oncology, 2017). This lack of coverage could be attributed to the significant political changes happening in January 2017, including discussions about the potential repeal of the Affordable Care Act and the impact of the travel ban on doctors. With newsrooms facing resource constraints and the need to prioritize stories that attract online clicks, in-depth reporting on cancer research, drugs, and clinical advancements may have been overlooked (American Society of Clinical Oncology, 2017).

In September 1974, both First Lady Betty Ford and Happy Rockefeller, the wife of Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, underwent mastectomies for breast cancer. Betty Ford's surgery occurred a few weeks before Happy Rockefeller's. The news coverage of Betty Ford and Happy Rockefeller's mastectomies and their breast cancer diagnoses led to a notable increase in mammography screenings. A study published in Public Health Reports in 1978 observed a clear, though temporary, pattern of heightened participation in the Health Insurance Plan screening program during the period when public attention to breast cancer was at its peak (Fink, RJ, W, L, & M, 1978). This increased interest in mammography lasted for several months following the high-profile cases.

In their 2014 study, (Veloudaki, et al., 2014) identified key barriers to reporting health news, including the reluctance of health authorities to share information or engage with the press, bureaucratic hurdles and limited cooperation from health authorities, time constraints, lack of access to up-to-date statistics, challenges in interpreting statistics, and a general lack of medical expertise among reporters.

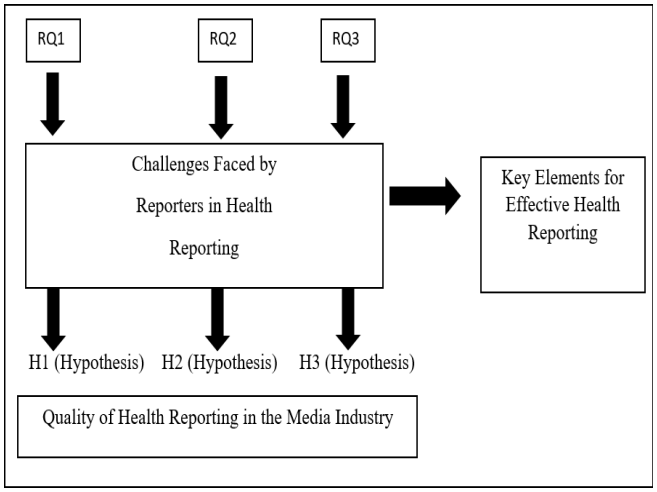
In a study conducted in Korea by You and Ju, it was observed that even though cancer was the leading cause of mortality in the country, it and other well-known chronic diseases did not receive as much media coverage as the emerging diseases did (You & Ju, 2010).

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The main goals of this study were to evaluate the characteristics of health journalists, analyze the state of health reporting today, and pinpoint the challenges associated with providing reliable and accurate health news. The goal of the study was to examine the vital role that health journalists play in supplying the public with trustworthy information on health-related issues and to highlight the significance of accurately and timely health news dissemination.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY:



Note: Arrows represent potential relationships between variables. The mediating variables (RQ1, RQ2, RQ3) may influence the dependent variable (Quality of Health Reporting in the Media Industry) through the independent variables (H1, H2, H3, H4, H5). The direction and strength of these relationships can be explored in the research analysis.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Researches on public agenda-setting theory indicates that the public's perception of the most significant issues is heavily influenced by the exposure to and content presented by the media (Nah & Armstrong, 2011). Consequently, the media play a crucial role in societal control by shaping the priorities of citizens, community leaders, and policymakers through their influence on agendas (Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001). Newer research has shed light on how the media influences agenda-setting in various areas, including scientific and risk communication, healthcare topics, health promotion, chronic kidney disease, and emergency preparedness (Kozel, et al., 2006).

At the core of media agenda-setting is the concept of news frames, which strongly influence how the audience perceives the importance of various issues. A news frame acts as a central organizing principle, bringing together diverse symbols and ideas to shape the public's views on a particular topic (Bennett & Entman, 2001). The way news frames are chosen by media professionals' results in a biased interpretation that presents causal narratives about issues and possible fixes, swaying readers, viewers, and listeners.

(Entman, 1993)Entman proposes four functions of news frames: (1) defining problems by highlighting causal agents, actions, costs, and benefits in line with common cultural values; (2) diagnosing causes by identifying the forces behind the problems; (3) making moral judgments by evaluating the impact of causal agents; and (4) suggesting remedies by providing and justifying potential solutions for the identified problems and predicting their likely effects.

Regarding health disparities, applying these news framing functions can not only shape crucial messages about health inequalities but also complement other efforts aimed at addressing these disparities by garnering additional support for change.

According to Dorfman, Wallack, and Woodruff, framing extends beyond just crafting a message. Equally crucial is understanding the specific changes needed to advance public health interests and the necessary steps to implement those changes successfully. The way the health related message is framed can either build or strengthen support for change or reinforce opposition to it (Dorfman, Wallack, & Woodruff, 2005) .

At the core of this perspective is a fundamental inquiry: Why do certain issues gain widespread recognition and become public problems, commanding attention from policymakers and the general public, while others fail to attain the same status? (Best, 1995)Best contends that the answer lies in the art of "frame construction," wherein an issue must be presented and framed in a manner that convinces people it qualifies as a pressing social problem.

Essentially, the success of an issue in the public and policy agenda depends on how well it is framed and perceived. This framing objective is crucial to capture the attention of influential opinion leaders, policymakers, and the broader public, generating momentum for action (Guttman, 2000).

Moreover, the outcomes of this frame construction process extend beyond mere attention. The way an issue is framed significantly impacts its chances of making it onto the policy agenda. Furthermore, it shapes the range of policy solutions that are considered natural or fitting to address the identified problem.

The news media is essential to this complex process. Policymakers and the public's priorities are defined and rearranged in part by the media, which has the ability to focus attention and frame problems. The media has a significant impact on public perception of some issues by drawing attention to them and presenting them in an engaging manner. This can motivate people to take immediate action.

This research will determine the challenges that Pakistan's health beat reporter's face in presenting and drawing attention to issues about health inequalities in local news outlets. Empirical studies on media agenda-setting have revealed that powerful and well-resourced sources possess the capacity to mold and sway the topics that the media prioritizes (Kosicki, 1993).

METHODOLOGY:

This descriptive cross-sectional study employed a consensus sampling approach and targeted all health news reporters in Pakistan, totaling 30 journalists in the year 2023. Data was collected through a researcher-designed questionnaire. To ensure content validity, a qualitative method was used, incorporating the input of two experts. The data analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics and content analysis of responses to open-ended questions.

RESULTS & FINDINGS:

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Table 1: Frequency of how frequently journalists covers health-related topics:

TIME FRAME	RESPONSEOF REPORTERS
Daily	04
Weekly	06
Monthly	04
Occasionally	08
Rarely	01

Based on the above data, it is evident that health-related topics receive varying levels of coverage from journalists. The largest group of respondents (11) reported covering health-related topics on a monthly basis, indicating that a significant portion of journalists prioritize health news at least once a month. This highlights the importance of health reporting in the media landscape. Following the monthly coverage, six respondents reported covering health topics weekly, demonstrating a dedicated group of journalists consistently providing health updates. Daily coverage received four responses, showcasing a smaller but committed group of reporters who prioritize health information on a daily basis. Eight respondents reported covering health topics occasionally, indicating that some journalists recognize the relevance of health news but do not regularly include it in their reporting. Only one respondent mentioned rare coverage of health-related topics, suggesting that the vast majority of journalists consider health news to be important and relevant, leading to more frequent reporting on the subject.

Table 2: Frequency of the most significant challenges reporters face when reporting on health-related issues

TYPES OF CHALLENGES	FREQUENCY
Access to reliable and accurate information	07
Balancing scientific accuracy with engaging storytelling	00
Time constraints and deadlines	01
Dealing with conflicting or contradictory research findings	04
Lack of resources or support from the media organization	10
Communicating complex medical jargon to a general audience	08
Addressing ethical considerations and ensuring patient privacy	00

The above data shows that according to health beat reporters in Pakistan what are most significant challenges they face when reporting health related issues. Most of the respondents (10) believes that Lack of resources or support from the media organization is the biggest challenge they face while reporting. Furthermore, 8 reporters responded communicating complex medical jargon to a general audience is the second most difficult task due to the literacy rate and understanding of Pakistan's majority population. Seven reporters also highlighted the inaccessibility to reliable and accurate information which becomes hurdle to guarantee accurate and responsible health reporting. Four respondents acknowledged the existence of conflicting or contradictory study findings, highlighting the importance of critical examination and impartial reporting. Time constraints and deadlines were reported by only one respondent, suggesting that this aspect may not be a significant challenge for most journalists in this field.

Table 3: Frequency of Sources reporters used to update their health related information

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VARIABLE	SCALE	FREQUENCY
Sources to update health related information	Attending conferences and seminars	03
	Reading scientific journals and research papers	00
	Following reputable health news sources or organizations	14
	Interviewing experts and healthcare professionals	08
	Participating in specialized training or workshops	05

The above data represents health reporters opt for which sources to update their health related information. 14 reporters rely on reputable health news sources like hospital's public relation department and other government and non-government organization. This highlights how crucial reliable, well-established health news sources are for giving journalists accurate, current information. Eight respondents indicated that having routinely meet up with experts and medical professionals, underline the importance of getting firsthand knowledge from knowledgeable people. Five reporter answered that participating in specialized health related trainings and workshops helps them to update their health related knowledge. Three reporters also mentioned that they go to seminars and conferences to keep up with the latest information on health trends. On the other hand, none of the respondents reported reading research papers or scientific publications, indicating that the journalists polled do not frequently employ this strategy.

Table 4: Confidence Levels of reporters in Interpreting and Communicating Health-related Research Findings

VARIABLE	SCALE	FREQUENCY
Confidence level	Yes, very confident	03
	Somewhat confident	07
	Neutral	09
	Not very confident	11
	Not at all confident	00

The question about the confidence that reporters feel while interpreting and communicating health related research findings depicts how reporter grade their own ability while doing the specialized beat reporting. The data above is interesting to note that none of the respondents indicated they were "not at all confident," indicating that all journalists likely have some degree of confidence in this area. Eleven, the majority of respondents , who stated that they were "not very confident" in their capacity to interpret that lack of training Pakistan's journalist have to explain health research, suggested that many journalists could struggle to understand complicated medical information and present it in a way that the general public might understand. Moreover, nine respondents had a "neutral" degree of confidence, meaning they weren't very confident in their capacity to interpret the findings of health studies. Seven reporters claimed to feel "somewhat confident," but only three respondents indicated they were "very confident" about this. These findings highlight in Pakistan it is needed for more assistance, education, and resources to boost health beat reporters' competence in correctly understanding and successfully disseminating health-related research findings, empowering them to give the public accurate and easily available health information.

Table 5: Reporters' Responses on Difficulties in Accessing Experts or Healthcare Professionals for Health Topic Interviews or Comments

VARIABLE	SCALE	FREQUENCY
Difficulties in Accessing	Yes, frequently	15
	Yes, occasionally	05
	No, not usually	09
	No, never	01

The information clarifies the challenges journalists have when attempting to speak with or interview experts or medical professionals about health-related issues. acquiring direct insights from competent sources is a chronic problem for many journalists, as indicated by the majority of respondents (15) who cited regular difficulties in acquiring access to specialists. Five other participants reported experiencing sporadic challenges, emphasizing the persistent barriers in obtaining interviews or feedback from medical experts. Notably, nine respondents claimed they usually had no problem locating experts, suggesting that certain journalists could have established reliable networks of contacts or sources. It appears that just a tiny portion of respondents always had access to specialists, since only one respondent stated they had never experienced issues. The findings highlight how important it is to get beyond the obstacles journalists have when reaching out to experts since completing thus could have an impact on the standard and precision of health reporting. Better support, more accessible expert communication, and the development of strong

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networks are a few strategies that could help increase access to vital data and raise the bar for health journalism.

Table 6: Journalists' Responses to the Standards of Healthcare Reporting within the Media Sector

VARIABLE	SCALE	FREQUENCY
Quality of Health Reporting	Excellent	01
	Good	02
	Average	09
	Poor	11
	Very poor	07

The information shows how journalists feel about the standard of health reporting in the media. Most respondents (11) gave the quality a "poor" rating, suggesting serious worry about how health reporting is done. Additionally, seven respondents gave even worse feedback, rating the quality as "very poor," highlighting the severity of the issue. Nine respondents rated the quality as "average," which shows that the media does not consistently produce outstanding coverage of health-related problems. Additionally, only three respondents rated the quality as "good" or "excellent," suggesting there aren't many instances of exceptional health reporting. These findings point to a need for development in the sector and raise serious questions regarding the general level of health reporting.

Table 7: Reporters' Responses on Required Key Elements for Effective Health Reporting

VARIABLE	SCALE	FREQUENCY
Required key elements for effective health reporting	Accurate and evidence-based information	09
	Clear and understandable language	07
	Expert perspectives and analysis	05
	Real-life examples and case studies	02
	Balanced coverage of different viewpoints	01
	Visual aids and graphics to enhance understanding	06

On the survey question from health journalist that what are the most important element foe effective health health reporting, nine journalists answered that "accurate and evidence-based information." This depicts how crucial it is to present accurate and comprehensive information in health reporting. After that, seven journalists underlined the need for "clear and understandable language," which is the most basic requirement for health reporting because report have to convert medical language into layman language while reporting.

Five journalists stressed the importance of incorporating "expert perspectives and analysis" to increase the credibility of health reports. Additionally, six respondents pointed out the value of "visual aids and graphics" that makes health news more understandable. While only two journalists mentioned "real-life examples and case studies," just one highlighted the importance of "balanced coverage of diverse opinions," suggesting these aspects are less prioritized in current health reporting.

Table 8: Reporters' Responses on Interest in Additional Training to Improve Health Reporting Skills

VARIABLE	SCALE	FREQUENCY
Interest in Additional Training	Yes, definitely	26
	Maybe, depending on the opportunity	04
	No, not at this time.	00

The gathered information reveals how interested reporters are, in receiving training to enhance their skills in health reporting. A significant majority of participants (26) showed a desire for training indicating their keenness towards professional growth and improvement in health journalism. Additionally four respondents expressed openness to the idea of training depending on the opportunities reflecting an inclination towards enhancing their skills. Surprisingly none of the participants reported a lack of interest in training at this point in time. The overwhelming interest displayed by journalists to pursue education and skill development emphasizes their dedication to delivering impactful health reporting. This data emphasizes the importance of providing journalists in the field of health reporting with opportunities, for training and support as it can contribute to raising the quality of health journalism and ultimately benefitting the public by providing them with informed health information.

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DISCUSSION:

The results and data analysis suggests that the claim "H1: In Pakistan, reporters sporadically cover health-related topics" is not entirely supported by the facts. According to the research, Pakistani journalists have varied degrees of dedication and regularity when it comes to reporting health-related issues. According to the study, many journalists report about health-related subjects monthly, showing that health reporting is not sporadic but occurs frequently. The evidence supports the statement "H2: Very few reporters feel confident in their ability to accurately interpret and communicate health-related research findings to their audience" based on the findings and data analysis presented.

The evidence is consistent with the hypothesis "H3: Most journalists had trouble getting access to experts or healthcare professionals for interviews or comments on health topics." The data analysis findings support the claim that most journalists find speaking with experts or medical professionals for interviews or comments on health-related topics challenging. The significance of this issue in the context of health journalism is highlighted by the large number of respondents who reported difficulties. Limited access to experts may impact the quality, accuracy, and thoroughness of health reporting. (Veloudaki, et al., 2014) Their study stated that reporters face the same issue as Pakistan in different countries of Europe.

H4: The majority of reporters believe that the quality of health reporting in the media industry is not sufficient, according to the findings and data analysis presented, is supported by the evidence. The findings support the hypothesis that most reporters believe the quality of health reporting in the media industry is unsatisfactory. The prevalence of negative ratings, including "poor" and "very poor," emphasizes the seriousness of the concern regarding the overall standard of health reporting. In a country like India, with widespread mass media consumption and little health literacy, the analysis emphasizes the need to improve health journalism to raise its quality, dependability, and importance (Sharma, et al., 2020).

The evidence substantially supports the following hypothesis: "H5: The majority of the reporters are interested in receiving additional training or resources to improve their skills in health reporting," based on the findings and data analysis presented. According to the research, journalists have a definite and overwhelming desire to acquire more training or tools to help them improve their reporting abilities in health.

In order to finding out the answer of RQ1 the research exposes considerable obstacles to accurate and meaningful health journalism standards, including the need for credible sources, a lack of resources, and the ability to effectively communicate complicated material. Furthermore, for RQ2 the research emphasizes that journalists primarily rely on reputable health news sources and expert interviews, highlighting the significance of reliability and direct information for sound practices in health reporting. While investigating RQ3the statistics emphasizes credibility and audience understanding as a key elements necessary for effective health reporting. Health communicators need to understand how to work with the media. To do this, one must become familiar with the daily routines of journalists, be accessible, provide the appropriate materials, and build relationships with knowledgeable health reporters (Leask, Hooker , & King , 2010).

CONCLUSION & LIMITATIONS:

The results of this study provide insight into the different challenges that health journalists face in performing their crucial job. Lack of resources or support from the media organization is a significant obstacle to properly teaching the public about health issues among these difficulties. In Pakistan the time race to present news is jeopardizing the accuracy and depth of their reporting.

The research also mentions the unwillingness of health authorities to work with media as a significant barrier. Because of the lack of cooperation, journalists may have limited access to timely and reliable information, which makes it challenging to report health issues in-depth and comprehensively. Journalists' capacity to deliver accurate information is hampered by the lack of open lines of communication with health authorities, which erodes the public's confidence in the media as a dependable source of health news.

This research also disclose the weakness in the education that health journalists get. The Journalists must be aware of medical knowledge and terminology because the healthcare industry is continually expanding. Whereas, insufficient training can result in misunderstandings, errors, and the spread of false information. In order to improve the general standard of health reporting, a more organized approach to training is required, designed to give health journalists the knowledge and skills they need.

The study concludes that to raise the standard of health reporting in Pakistan a multifarious strategy is required to overcome the difficulties caused by time restrictions, a lack of cooperation, and insufficient training. This give rise to conduct rigorous needs analyses, implementing thorough training, and encouraging cooperative partnerships among all stakeholders. By doing this, the standard of health reporting can be raised, resulting in better-informed people and increased public awareness of health issues.

No work is without Limitations. Only 30 journalists from all around Pakistan answered the survey questions. This should not be generalized to all health beat journalists in Pakistan. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, this study has important practical and theoretical implications for Pakistan’s health journalism. More investigation is necessary to determine the findings' broader implications for producing and disseminating health news material.

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