

NEWS BEHIND THE BARBED WIRE Kashmir's Information Blockade

"When life is at stake, credibility takes a back seat."



Key findings : Curbs on the media and its implications

- Surveillance, informal 'investigations' and harassment of journalists who publish reports considered adverse to the government or security force
- Blockade of verifiable information from the ground
- Restrictions on mobility in select areas including hospitals
- Controls on facilities available for print publication
- Three journalists reporting for international and credible national media who have been allotted government quarters, received verbal directions to vacate
- Restrictions despite no official curfew, no official notification for the shutdown

- Landlines are working only in certain areas but not in the press enclave, which houses most of the newspaper offices
- The inability to respond to playbacks and queries from editors on email and phone, especially regarding fact-checks, has meant that stories cannot be carried in the national media
- A clear 'unofficial' directive regarding what is permissible content.
- Absence of the editorial voice in major newspapers in Kashmir; instead, editorials on 'soft' subjects such as vitamin consumption
- Lack of safety for women journalists
- The throttling of independent media, endangering both media freedom as well as impacting employment of working journalists
- Government control of the narrative of normalcy and proclamations over the creation of a 'Naya Kashmir'
- Silencing and invisibilisation of the voices from Kashmir expressing anger over perceived breach of trust, alienation and disillusionment.

Introduction

A month after the 5 August abrogation of Article 370 of the Constitution of India, which granted special status to Jammu and Kashmir, the continuing shutdown of communication in the Kashmir valley has resulted in the throttling of independent media. As journalists continue to face severe restrictions in all the processes of news-gathering, verification and dissemination, the free flow of information has been blocked, leaving in its wake a troubled silence that bodes ill for freedom of expression and media freedom.

In this, the latest and most intense phase in the ongoing conflict on Kashmir, the government of India has pulled out all the stops - political, legislative, militaristic and punitive. It has detained and arrested scores of people, including leaders of mainstream political parties. No other democratic government has attempted a communication blockade of this scale in Kashmir.

In an effort to determine the impact of the severe crackdown on communication on the media in Kashmir, a two-member team from the Network of Women in Media, India ([NWMI](#)) and the Free Speech Collective ([FSC](#)) spent five days in the Valley between 30 August and 3 September. The team spoke* to more than 70 journalists, correspondents and editors of newspapers and news-sites in Srinagar and South Kashmir, members of the local administration and citizens.

Our examination revealed a grim and despairing picture of the media in Kashmir, fighting for survival against the most incredible of odds, as it works in the shadow of security forces in one of the most highly militarised zones of the world. Amid restrictions and a myriad government controls, the media is valiantly trying to report the situation on the ground, the serious and long-term implications of the communications blockade on health, education, trade and the economy.

The team observed surveillance, informal 'investigations' and even arrest of journalists who publish reports considered adverse to the government or

security forces; controls on the facilities available for print publication; government advertising limited to select publications; restrictions on mobility in select areas (including hospitals) and the most crippling communications shutdown of all time. Significantly, there is no official curfew, no official notification for the shutdown.

In the absence of reportage from the ground, the government's influence of the narrative of normalcy is near total. Its official proclamations of the creation of a 'Naya Kashmir' have become vociferous. In contrast, there is a deafening silence and invisibilisation of voices from Kashmir expressing alienation, anger and disillusionment at perceived breach of trust. The government's control of communication processes is intrinsically undemocratic and harmful, as it privileges the voices of authority and weakens those who speak truth to power.

Detentions, Threats and Investigation

Irfan Malik from Traal was the first journalist to be detained after the 5 August blockade. There is no clarity as to why he was picked up in the first place. Another journalist, Qazi Shibli from Anantnag, was detained in early August even before the clampdown, [reportedly](#) for tweeting about additional troop deployment.

Journalists have been questioned by police and by investigating authorities for certain sensitive stories and have been pressurised to reveal their sources. Editors of some leading newspapers have also been subtly warned that they will face questioning by investigating authorities.

The attempt to harass senior journalists Fayaz Bukhari, Aijaz Hussain and Nazir Masoodi working with the international and reputed independent national media by issuing verbal orders to vacate government-allotted accommodation is another example of the pressure tactics being deployed. Prohibiting columnist and author Gowhar Geelani from travelling overseas on 31 August, is yet another instance of preventing Kashmiri voices from being heard on international platforms.

Independent News-gathering in Peril

Amidst a continued "people's strike" that shows no signs of abating, despite all attempts by the authorities to portray normalcy, journalists are faced with the most severe challenge of their careers, as they are denied access to information. They do not possess the means to gather news, verify or authenticate the information and, if they do manage to do so, face huge challenges in disseminating it. While the situation is grim in the capital Srinagar, even less is known about the districts, rural areas, small towns and about the border areas where the army is in total control of the flow of information.

While some newspapers and periodicals were forced to suspend publication after August 5, with the announcement of the abrogation of Art 370, about three

major newspapers and around six other smaller newspapers came out with truncated editions of barely four to eight pages everyday some without editorials, with much lower print runs and erratic distribution.

While online news sites, a hitherto vibrant and bold media space, have had to shut down, newspapers and other publications have not been able to update their websites since 4 August, when the Internet was shut down.

Select government officials, police and security forces have access to mobiles and to landlines. But citizens, including members of the media, have none. While government figures claim that 26,000 landlines (with 95 working exchanges) across J&K have been restored, the majority in Jammu and Ladakh. In both areas, the ban on the Internet has been lifted but communication remains erratic.

In the Kashmir Valley, landlines are working only in certain areas and significantly, not in the press enclave, which houses most of the newspaper offices. The administration said that the press enclave falls within the Lal Chowk exchange which has only 8000 lines but that since it is a 'sensitive' area and under heavy security, it would not be possible to provide landlines only to the press enclave.

Indeed, it is clear that the government pulled off the total ban on communication by ordering private telecom operators and cable television service providers to suspend their services. None of this appears to be in writing. With hardly any landlines as a majority of the population had shifted to mobile phones, the ban was easily effected.

The control over the media operates in bizarre ways. For journalists in Srinagar, a Media Facilitation Centre was set up on 10 August in a starred private hotel, reportedly rented on a daily basis at a huge cost by the state government. It is equipped with five computers, a BSNL internet connection and one phone line controlled and managed by government officers attached to the Directorate of Information and Public Relations (DIPR). Journalists queue up to access the Internet, file stories and upload pages for their newspapers. Often, they wait an entire day just to send one file. If, as often happens, the media house they file for has queries or clarifications on their stories, they have no way of responding and stories are often held back or not used as a result.

The top-down approach of the government is reflected in the irregularly held press briefings by senior members of the administration in the Media Facilitation Centre in Srinagar, lasting about 10-15 minutes, where questions are either not taken or not answered.



(Television cameras line up in anticipation of a press briefing in a government created media centre addressed by Principal Secretary Rohit Kansal in Srinagar on Sept 2, the only administrative exercise to 'speak' to the media. The meeting last exactly 12 minutes. He took three questions and answered none).

Manoj Pandita, senior SP and spokesperson, asked about the shooting of a shopkeeper last week, told a member of this team that journalists who sought followups could obtain more details on Twitter. The administration was constantly updating information on Kashmir on so many Twitter handles, he said. The irony of expecting journalists who have little or no access to the Internet to check social media networks for official information was hard to ignore.

Indeed, the Twitter handles of government spokespersons are in overdrive, putting out reactions to a myriad news reports and statements and criticizing reportage by the media. Clearly, these are for the consumption of national and international readers and audiences, completely beyond the ken of a population that is unable to access the Internet even if it is the subject of social media chatter.

The news that does emanate from Kashmir is overwhelmingly based on government pronouncements and updates on its activities. A cursory glance at the plethora of press releases issued by the government only underscores this: a press release about attendance in re-opened schools neatly bypassed the fact that students continue to stay away due to fears for their safety to and from schools, and no possibility of communication with their families in case of a crisis.

Another press release gave details and data on the number of surgeries performed in government hospitals but a simple question by a journalist on the number of pellet victim injuries to Principal Secretary Rohit Kansal at his press briefing on 2 September, went unanswered.

While journalists' organisations in Kashmir have demanded that the ban on the Internet be lifted, the administration merely tells them that they will try to

arrange for more computers in the media centre. The irony of operating in such controlled conditions and under constant surveillance is not lost on the journalists.

Journalists also operate under the ever-real threat of retribution for any adverse reports. Journalists who file reports based on verified information, are summoned by the police for questioning about their sources. As a result, most journalists we spoke to said they were forced to practice self-censorship.

Editors expressed concern that their district correspondents and stringers who were the backbone of their information ecosystem, have not been contactable for the last one month. There is no information at all about them, much less of the areas they live in and the condition of the people residing there.

The ongoing information blackout has had an overarching impact on freedom of expression for all Kashmiris and put media freedom into grave peril. The basic democratic right to information has been denied to citizens and the mandate of the media to disseminate the truth without fear or favour has been severely endangered.

Highlights of our investigation:

Censorship and control of news

While no official censorship or ban is in force, the lack of communication channels and restrictions on mobility have affected journalists in the following steps of news-gathering:

- Shutdown of internet and phones impacts receiving information about incidents or information from contacts and sources
- Lack of mobility, restrictions on entering certain areas prevents primary news gathering.
- Being blocked from first hand verification and verification from witnesses in the absence of confirmation from official sources, means that the credibility of stories could be compromised.
- The inability to respond to playbacks and queries from editors on email and phone, especially regarding fact-checks, has meant that stories cannot be carried. It is thus not a matter of simply uploading a story at the Media Centre, but being available to clarify queries.
- In times of tension and conflict, absence of access to playback can be dangerous, since the choice of words is a sensitive matter in local contexts and can also endanger the journalist concerned.

There is a clear 'unofficial' directive regarding what is permissible content.

- High ranking police officers reportedly came to media offices to tell media-persons to keep off some topics: protests, stone pelting, restrictions.
- The team heard that BJP members are landing up at media offices with 7-8 stories, demanding they be published every day. The "offer" is obviously

hard to resist, all the more because there is already a dearth of publishable content.

- There is a clear anti-Pakistan stand – i.e. Don't give coverage to Imran Khan on the front page, even on sports pages; a paper carrying a photo of Pakistani cricketer Misbah ul Haq received a visit from the police.

The absence of the editorial voice in major newspapers in Kashmir is in itself a clear message about the state of the media. Editorials, Op-eds and leads are now on topics such as: "Vitamin A foods: Uses, benefits and top 10 dietary sources"; "Want to ditch junk food?"; "Should you consume caffeine during summer? The answer will surprise you"; "Fruit produce"; " Planetary thinking"; "Our oceans and us". Urdu papers, while overall faring better in terms of news reportage, for the most part have avoided editorials on the current crisis, instead carrying editorials such as "Ghar ki safai kaisey ho" (How to keep the house clean) or "Jodon ka dard" (Joint pain).

Detention and threat of arrest

Even as the portent of things to come, in the shape of visible troop deployment, was visible in late July, Qazi Shibli, editor of the online publication, *The Kashmiriyat*, was detained in Anantnag in South Kashmir for tweets regarding troop deployment and for allegedly publishing an official order regarding deployment of additional paramilitary forces across Jammu and Kashmir.

Irfan Malik, reporter with *Greater Kashmir*, the highest circulating English daily in the Valley, was [detained](#) on 14 August According to his family, the security forces climbed over the wall, barged into his home in Traal in South Kashmir and took him away, subsequently detaining him in the local police lock-up. In the absence of any other communication, his family rushed to the Kashmir Press Club in Srinagar, and also met government authorities. This publicity created a furore and he was released on Saturday, 17 August. The reason for his detention remains unknown

Several journalists in Srinagar and in the districts have been detained for brief periods, summoned to police stations and/or received visits from various arms of the police or investigating agencies with pressures to reveal their sources. However they prefer not to talk publicly about their experiences or escalate the issue lest it invite reprisals.

Assistant editor of *Kashmir Narrator*, Aasif Sultan, detained in August 2018 and charged under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) following his cover story on Burhan Wani, continues to be incarcerated.

The overall atmosphere of intimidation has increased trauma and stress. There is palpable fear due to intimidation of various kinds. Journalists have been summoned to police stations and/or received visits from the CID over various stories, demanding that sources be revealed. There is a very real apprehension of being booked under the sweeping and draconian PSA, UAPA or other counter-terror provisions. This has contributed to a high level of self-censorship. The

blockade of communication has added to this sense of insecurity. "If we are picked up or disappeared, no one will even come to know." "We are telling each other: Don't do that story, stay safe."

Said one senior journalist, "When life is at stake, credibility takes a back seat".

The international media has not been allowed direct access to the Kashmir Valley, but has managed coverage through senior local journalists and thereby been able to maintain a flow of credible news. However, there are severe pressures on local journalists reporting for the international media. Overall, the international media has been able to provide a more holistic picture of the situation post- 5 August than has appeared in the local or national media. The fall out has been a targeting of reporters with access to international publications or relatively independent national publications and channels. A "List" with the names of seven journalists has reportedly been compiled. These are: Fayaz Bukhari (Reuters), Riyaz Masroor (BBC), Parvez Bukhari (AFP), Aijaz Hussain (AP), Nazir Masoodi (NDTV), Basharat Peer (NYT) and Mirza Waheed, writer resident in the UK.

In what can only be interpreted as a measure of harassment, three of the above (Fayaz Bukhari, Nazir Masoodi and Aijaz Hussain), who are among more than 70 journalists allotted government quarters, received verbal directions to vacate their accommodation immediately. They asked for a written eviction notices, but none were issued.

Undermining of local media

Journalists spoke with some bitterness of the administration's preferential treatment to 'national' media from Delhi. The latter, who parachuted in during the first days after the abrogation of Art 370, obtained the red-coloured movement passes meant for government officials and security forces while local media had to contend with the white-coloured citizen passes.

The non-local media were also given Internet access to file stories. As a local journalist put it, this was "the biggest news story for us and I couldn't file anything."

International reporters and those from the national media outside the Kashmir Valley are totally dependent on the local media. They can move around and do stories only because of local journalists. But what the blackout has done is to stifle the Kashmiri voice.

Local journalists shared their frustration and sense of alienation at being asked by the media houses they worked for to step aside while bureaus based in Delhi or elsewhere sent reporters to file stories. "I would have written the story differently. It was clear they did not want my report. So now, I don't file anything," said one journalist working with a prominent newspaper.

'Embedded' journalists, mostly from the national media are creating a narrative convenient to the government, said local journalists. Due to this there is hostility to the media in general. International media has the wherewithal to take on accusations of inauthenticity. For example the BBC video on the protest in Soura on 9 August was challenged by the Government of India, and BBC provided the uncut footage to establish its authenticity and rebut allegations of fake news.

The difficulties of solidarity among the media community in Kashmir is characteristic of any conflict situation, with a number of players – the government, intelligence agencies, the armed forces and armed militant groups – pulling in different directions, providing or withholding access, spreading disinformation, within an overarching atmosphere of surveillance and intimidation. There is a high level of mistrust and suspicion, and caution is the operative mode. With not much hope of support from media houses in case of incarceration or fake cases, journalists are wary of speaking out in groups. In such a context, the small but spirited Kashmir Working Journalists Association, the Kashmir Young Journalists Association and the emergence of the Kashmir Press Club with a newly elected governing body as a vocal body provide a ray of hope.

The inability to operate freely has also had a deep psychological impact on journalists, inducing a sense of failing their own people. "We are supposed to tell their stories, but we are unable to, and feel helpless. Kashmiris are cornered, because we cannot report the story of Kashmir," said a local journalist, echoing the sentiments of several of her colleagues.



Three decades of covering the conflict

The media in Jammu and Kashmir is no stranger to militarisation, armed insurgency, communication shutdowns and bandhs which have affected routine civilian life as well as the functioning of the media.

1990: After the armed conflict began in 1989, as many as 22 journalists have been killed, most of them directly targeted. From the killing of Lassa Koul, director of the Doordarshan Kendra in Srinagar in 1990 to the killing of Shujaat Bukhari, editor of the Rising Kashmir in 2018, Kashmiri journalists have paid the ultimate price for carrying out their profession.

2008: The J&K government's decision to transfer land to the Shri Amarnathji Shrine Board in saw widespread protests, firing by security forces that left several dead and hundreds injured saw major shutdowns for months.

2010: The turmoil following a "fake encounter" in which three young men from a village in Baramulla were reported to have been killed by the army, left more than a hundred dead and several hundreds injured when security forces fired at protestors. The Valley witnessed shutdowns and curfews and severe restrictions on movement.

2016: The large-scale protests following the killing of militant leader Burhan Wani by security forces saw almost two months of curfew, cutting off of mobile phone connectivity. Almost a 100 people were killed and thousands injured during lethal crowd-control measures including pellets.

Laws: The media has been operating under restrictions and threat of arrest of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act which gives sweeping powers to military personnel, and public security laws like the Public Safety Act 1978 of Kashmir, which allows detention without trial of persons –including journalists– for "acting in any manner prejudicial to security of state or maintenance of public order". Counter-terror agencies such as the National Investigation Agency (NIA) set up in 2008 have sweeping powers to summon, detain and investigate civilians including journalists.

Dealing with the Internet ban

The ban on the Internet has crippled the work of journalists. Journalists have had to use incredible innovation to deal with the absence of Internet connectivity. But this has been exhausting and fraught with continuous apprehension of surveillance.

- In the initial days, some journalists managed to send reports on pen drives to colleagues elsewhere
- Some journalists actually travelled by road to parts of the state which did have internet access
- Some found they could not even get trusted colleagues or relatives elsewhere to open their mails because they had installed two-step verification on their devices. The OTPs they were asked for would come to their mobile phones, which had been rendered useless.

Internet Shutdown in Kashmir

Kashmir is no stranger to Internet shutdowns, having experienced 180 internet shutdowns since 2012. On August 4, 2019, the ban on mobile and broadband Internet services was the 55th in the seven months of 2019!

But this is the first time that the suspension of mobile, broadband Internet services, landlines and cable television have been suspended altogether, resulted in completely cutting off any kind of communication both within and outside Kashmir.

According to a [report](#) from the Software Freedom Law Centre (SFLC) that tracks Internet shutdowns from 2012, the longest ban on mobile Internet services was in 2016 in the wake of the protests over the killing of Burhan Wani on 8th July 2016. Then, mobile Internet Services were suspended for 133 days. As the SFLC tracker says, 'While mobile Internet services on postpaid numbers was restored on November 19, 2016. Mobile Internet services for prepaid users were resumed in January 2017, this implies they faced almost a six month Internet shutdown.'

There is no official notification available about the specific ban on communication services and even if there is, it has not been made public. Effected in the wake of the imposition of Sec 144 CrPC, which bans the assemblage of more than four persons in public, the extension of this provision for digital and online communication has been criticized and even challenged legally but to no avail. In 2015, the Gujarat High Court had upheld the use of Sec 144 CrPC (*Gaurav Sureshbhai Vyas v. The State of Gujarat*). Section 69 A of the Information Technology Act provides for the blocking of websites but the legal basis for a complete ban on all forms of electronic communication were effected through amendments to the Indian Telegraph Act in August 2017.

However, there is no transparency in any process related to the imposition of the communication ban, much less any review process with any committee. As such, the administrative justifications for the communication ban – from the initial 'precautionary measures' to maintain law and order in the wake of the abrogation of Art 370 has now [shifted](#) to the prevention of 'terrorist activity and communication between 'terrorists'.

Even when there is any connectivity, there is an astounding level of surveillance and monitoring. Social media networks are regularly under the intelligence scanner and there isn't even any attempt to disguise this. District Magistrates routinely issue directives that administrators of WhatsApp groups must submit details of all their groups and the members, thus violating the right to privacy, as well as the right to free flow of information.

In a press release issued on August 23, the Kathua district magistrate told administrators to enable 'only admins can send messages' status in all WhatsApp groups till October 21, 2019! The admins have also been directed to report to the nearest police station 'any posts or rumours circulated which are sensitive and likely to cause public disorder'.

Update: On 17 August, 2G services were restored in 5 districts of Jammu, including Jammu, Samba, Kathua, Udhampur and Reasi but remained suspended in the border areas of Poonch, Rajouri, Kishtwar, Doda and Ramba. In Ladakh, as it is in the periphery



(Unabated hunger for news: A reader walks along a deserted Pulwama road, catching up on the news)

Closure of publications and websites, job losses, salary cuts, precarity for freelancers

The media in Kashmir, though vibrant, diverse and witnessing a proliferation of newspapers, magazines and digital platforms in recent years, has always struggled for survival in a region wracked by three decades of conflict and the consequent lack of financial viability. However, the recent crisis has exacerbated this precarious situation.

According to official data, there are 414 empanelled newspapers in Jammu and Kashmir, of which 242 are in Jammu and 172 in Kashmir. Of these 172, there are 60 Urdu and 40 English newspapers. There are 100 dailies and the rest are fortnightlies and weeklies. The Department of Information and Public Relations (DIPR) Government of J&K, controls the advertising budget, amounting to about Rs 40 crore annually.

Advertising from the central Directorate of Advertising and Visual Publicity (DAVP) had ceased around 2010, and newspapers are heavily dependent on advertisements from the DIPR. When the DIPR suspended advertisements to two major English dailies in February, the media community was outraged, even publishing blank front pages as a mark of protest.

- The media, which was already precariously placed financially due to a ban on government advertisements to several independent newspapers, is further squeezed now due to the lack of revenue from private businesses during the period of lockdown.
- Major papers have had to lay off almost 75 per cent staff. Senior staff are taking salary cuts up to 30 per cent.
- While some of the national newspapers and magazines have been understanding about the reduced output of their Kashmir-based contributors, there is an apprehension that the situation cannot continue endlessly, and that they would soon lose their contracts.
- "It's Sept 3 today and I am yet to be paid. I don't even know if I will be," said one journalist.
- A number of journalists are freelancers, writing for websites and publications in both national and international media. "On August 20, I finally managed to access my mail and found that I had 12 assignments. I couldn't respond to a single one," said one.



(Newspaper vendor in Shopian. The stall was opened after more than 20 days and he made a two-hour journey to cover the 50 kms to Srinagar early in the morning to obtain copies for sale).

Women journalists chip away at the barricades

The intensified military presence on the roads and the shutdown has affected women in Kashmir in a myriad ways. For women journalists, collecting information and trying to send out their news reports and photographs to the publications they file for, has been a huge challenge. In fact, after facing a lot of

difficulty in sending their stories when the Media Facilitation Centre was set up, they forced the administration to provide a computer for their use.



(Television journalists set up their camera at the historic Lal Chowk blocked by security forces before the Friday prayers on Aug 30).

Women journalists trying to operate in the Valley are facing immense challenges dealing with the severe restrictions on movement and heavily militarised roads. Many of them do not own private transport, making it even more difficult for them to move about. Pressures from families to stay safe also prevent them from putting themselves in situations of potential risk. Women photojournalists, at the frontlines, have been doing their best to create a visual record of the happenings after the cataclysmic change brought on by the abrogation of Article 370 and related developments. One told us how the security forces were enforcing a strict clampdown on visual records of the unprecedented deployment of forces, and also of agitations against the forces. Both male and female photojournalists were regularly accosted and forced to delete footage of protests, especially stone pelting.

Another taboo area was hospitals were victims of pellet injuries and injuries due to beating by the forces were being treated. Women journalists also tried passing themselves off as family members of victims, in order to gain access. Indeed, women journalists have been able to connect with Kashmiri women who have

been suffering immense hardships due to the communications clampdown, militarisation and restrictions on movement. Women in late stages of pregnancy, those who are unwell and those seeking treatment for ill family members have had to surmount huge hurdles to access medical care, contrary to the official version of medicines being freely available and hospitals running as per routine.

Women have also been bearing the brunt of the mass detentions, official figures of which have not been released. Mothers and sisters of young men (many minor boys) picked up by the police spend anxious and nerve-wracking hours waiting outside police stations to locate their sons, brothers and fathers. Thousands having been sent away to jails outside the state, they have to make arduous and expensive journeys to jails in Agra, Bareilly, Jodhpur, Rohtak and Jhajjar to meet their loved one. When J&K has seen one of the highest numbers of enforced disappearances in the world, with figures ranging from about 4000 (official) to about 8000 (civil society), their fears are very real, and women have been doing all in their power to locate their sons. Their stories are yet to be told.

The untold stories

The local media is playing safe, to avoid harassment, or even the fear of being banned, thus rendering the entire staff jobless. There is therefore a sort of self censorship in operation. Likewise, to protect themselves, most newspapers are covering the same stories. "Exclusives" at this point are less of a priority than keeping safe. Many local correspondents spoke of getting messages from their main offices not to file stories that might put them at risk of arrest or even physical threats. Given this self-imposed restraint, some important stories are not being covered by the local media:

- Stories of detentions and torture of youth, especially in the districts. We heard from people that police were entering villages at night and picking up young boys, from 12 years of age onwards. They are reportedly being kept in custody for short periods, beaten and tortured and then released. The police demand that they and/or their families come back to the station the next day, or slapping them with PSA cases and removing them out of the state to jails in Agra, Bareilly, Jodhpur, Rohtak, and Jhajjar. Lists are published in the office of the District Commissioner, with information about where the detainees have been sent. Police stations and the DC offices are crowded in the evenings with mothers trying to locate their sons.
- The denial of access to healthcare became a major embarrassment for the Indian government in the initial days of the blockade. A month in, the situation has hardly eased, the only difference being that the government spokesperson, Principal Secretary Rohit Kansas, reels off statistics on the number of surgeries in government hospitals. As soon as journalists seek more details (how many pellet wound injuries, for instance), their questions are ignored.

- There are no clear statistics of pellet injuries. Doctors and other hospital staff have been prohibited from talking to the media. The ward that used to house pellet injured in one hospital, has now been changed, so the injured are not accessible, Families too are scared to talk to the media lest a case is slapped on their sons. Significantly, those with pellet injuries are going to private hospitals to avoid police scrutiny. In government hospitals, names and contact details are recorded, making it easier for the police to track and foist cases on the injured, naming them as stone pelters or protesters.
- The violations of the rights of journalists is itself an untold story, since journalists are loath to become the story and harassment and pressures on them are not reported.

Conclusion

The unprecedented cessation of the Internet has caused havoc in the lives of citizens, cutting them off from contact with their families, jeopardising the lives of patients in dire need of medical help, denying students or youth timely access to online sites for information on applications for courses or job opportunities and, in some utterly inhuman instances, robbing people of the dignity of information about the death of loved ones.

The current crisis for the media in Kashmir has been exacerbated by the ongoing conflict, the intense militarisation and overall erosion of fundamental human rights and democratic freedoms. The communication blockade and the ban on the Internet has caused unimaginable and inhuman problems for all citizens. But it has also sounded the death-knell for the media. It is imperative that the following measures be undertaken to demonstrate a commitment to freedom of expression. Anything less will only be hollow pronouncements and proclamations:

1. Immediately lift the internet shutdown and enable high speed internet connectivity
2. Restore all landlines and mobile telephones with priority given to journalists and media houses.
3. Lift restrictions on movement of journalists to enable on-the-ground reporting and verification of authentic news.
4. Desist from monitoring and surveillance of journalists and immediately cease intimidatory tactics such as summons to police stations, threat of arrest and detention, the lodging of false cases etc.
5. Create a level playing field for all local, national and international media so as to ensure equal access to official sources and information.
6. Set up a transparent and accountable mechanism for disbursement of government advertising.
7. Ensure an enabling environment for the safety and dignity of working journalists, a robust and viable media that can guarantee just wages and other protections for working journalists, thus enabling the full exercise of the right to Freedom of Expression.

** Journalists Laxmi Murthy and Geeta Seshu are members of Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI) and co-editors of the Free Speech Collective (FSC), both of which are non-funded and volunteer-driven. They visited Kashmir from Aug 30 to Sept 3, 2019. The identities of all the people we spoke to have been withheld in accordance with their express wishes and in the interests of their safety.
(Photographs by authors)*

Cover photo: Concertina wires encircle a deserted Lal Chowk, 3p.m. Aug 30, 2019.

VOICES

“I do bring out my newspaper daily but I feel immensely guilty towards my readers. I feel I am letting them down because I cannot give them the real picture. My reporters cannot get in touch with their sources or communicate with the office.”

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“I have decided not to publish. I don't want to bring out a pamphlet”

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“Communication is at the core of this conflict. The media has been delegitimized over the last ten years, now this lockdown.”

“

We have so many district reporters but there is no news at all from the districts. They have no means to contact us, no means to send news. This has become a zero news zone.”

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“In the media centre, when the officials respond, there are bursts of laughter, their answers are so absurd. When we asked them how many arrests were made, they say these are operational details and they can't share it.”

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“There's a high degree of self-censorship.”

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“ The local media in Kashmir is completely crushed between the Indian media and the International media. Can we tell our own stories? Do we even have the right to our own narrative?”

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“I don't know if the media centre the government has set up is a blessing or a curse. We are all in the queue for four or five computers and the Internet speed is barely 2kbps. They stand behind us to check who is filing what. Everyone is under watch.

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“There is no access to officials. Our stories are complete but if we don't get an official confirmation, how can we use them? This is another way of stalling the news till it becomes irrelevant.”

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“I went to the hospitals from day one. I've seen such terrible scenes. I collapsed twice in hospital! These parents of a young boy with lots of pellet wounds were crying so much, they were so frightened and upset. I couldn't write, couldn't file anything that day.”

“

Though there is an official denial, everyone knows that they have withdrawn the guns from the Jammu and Kashmir police? There is so much speculation. Did they fear that people will revolt and snatch guns from the police? Or that the people will revolt and that the police would join them?”

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“Local journalists have been frozen. They have brought outside journalists to manage the narrative. I have been working for the last 20-25 years. I felt terrible when my colleagues from the Delhi bureau landed up to do the story. I don't have a problem. They are my colleagues and I helped them. But I keep feeling 'why'? Can't I file the story? I didn't feel like I could be trusted.”

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“Our newspaper owners have to publish. They have to secure themselves. But the pages are reduced and if the curbs continue, they will have two options: for the first month, they may be magnanimous and say we have to look after our families. They may pay us, but then, after the second month, they may not be as magnanimous. Then what?”

“

I have never seen such a complete shutdown. I've covered the conflict here for years. I tried venturing out in the first few days of the curfew but the security forces wouldn't even acknowledge my id card. I work for an international media house and I tried sending a report on a pen drive with a local travel agent. But I stopped when they got to know of it.”

“

In the peak of the militancy in the 90's, there was no Internet, no mobiles then. But landlines worked, faxes worked. Mobility was not an issue. The media could move about freely. There was no harassment. Even during the Kargil war, we had no water, but phones worked.”

“

What we witness, we cannot write. We have to keep our information vague.”

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“In future, the government can do worse. They are getting away with this (communication clampdown). Now that they have tried this out, they will do this everywhere.”

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“We know that some people working in the media departments of the government have been given landlines and BSNL phone connections. But they have to give an undertaking that it will not be ‘misused’ in any manner.”

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“I was in Hawa Kadal area and the police had ordered us to delete our videos. I quickly changed to another memory card and saved my files.”

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“The media is asking for the right to more phones and more computers. We are asking for a privilege which is being denied to all other citizens.”

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“What we are seeing here today is a total disempowerment of everyone. The mainstream politicians, the activists, the journalists.”



(Television cameraperson takes aim and shoots: Lal Chowk, Aug 30)

