

# When the Media Makes Heroes: Malala Yousafzai and Journalistic Ethics

Communication & Journalism Research

6 (1) pp 1-10

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ISSN 2348 – 5663

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## Abstract

Malala Yousafzai was relatively unknown before her blog “Diary of a Pakistani Schoolgirl” was published by *BBC Urdu* in January 2009 about her experiences of living under the Taliban rule. Propelling into prominence, she gave interviews in print and on television, was nominated for the International Children's Peace Prize, was the victim of a Taliban assassination attempt, was featured in the 2013, 2014 and 2015 issues of *Time* magazine as one of "The 100 Most Influential People in the World", was awarded Pakistan's first National Youth Peace Prize, became the recipient of the 2013 Sakharov Prize, spoke at the headquarters of the United Nations, and was the co-recipient of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize.

Gender, race, ideology and religion along with a pinch of politics played a major role in creating, or rather “manufacturing” the personality and identity of Malala: a brave, courageous child fighting passionately for a cause, in spite of numerous risks and even the threat of death. Drawing on her autobiography *I Am Malala*, and on the narratives of Adam B Ellick and Irfan Ashraf- the journalists who introduced Malala to the world through *BBC Urdu* and *The New York Times*, this paper examines, in light of prevailing concepts of journalistic ethics, the role played by the media in moulding Malala as a heroine, and its consequences.

## Keywords

Malala, Journalistic and Media Ethics, Human Rights, Undue and Unbalanced Coverage

## Introduction

Say the name “Malala”, and one can hear about education, of girls going to school, of the United Nations, of the Nobel Peace Prize, and of the violence of the Taliban. One usually does not associate the media with Malala, and certainly the notion that there was a violation of journalistic ethics and human rights by the media with relation to Malala will sound a bit far-fetched. However, this paper seeks to underline the fact that the media played a

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prominent role in the creation of the personality of Yousafzai Malala, and that the Taliban's attempt on her life was but a grave consequence of it.

### **A Brief History of Malala**

Malala Yousafzai was born on 12 July 1997 in the Swat District of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan. She was named after Malalai of Maiwand, a warrior-heroine of Afghanistan. The literal meaning of her name is "grief stricken". Her father, Ziauddin Yousafzai, ran a small school called the "Khushal School". She grew up in a school. As a toddler, Malala used to walk around the school, and sometimes the female teachers even taught class with her sitting on their laps. By the time she was three or four, she knew enough to be placed in classes for much older children.

Ziauddin Yousafzai liked to engage in political discussions and soon became locally known as a reputed local speaker and activist. In 2007, Irfan Ashraf, a news reporter who worked for *Dawn News* went to Swat to report on the aftermath of an earthquake. While he was there, he noticed a cleric, Maulana Fazlullah who was gaining a quick popularity among the people. Fazlullah, who was the son-in-law of Sufi Muhammed who founded "Tehrike-Nifaz-e-Sharia-e-Mohammadi" (TNSM) or "Movement for the Enforcement of Islamic Law", a militant group that sent men to fight in Afghanistan, introduced himself as an Islamic reformer and an interpreter of the Quran. He was the leader of the Taliban in Pakistan. He set up a FM Radio station and began to broadcast from daily seven to nine in the morning and again from eight to ten in the evening. In the beginning he talked to people about adopting good habits and abandoning bad practices. He asked men to stop smoking and using tobacco, heroin and hashish. He even told the correct way to do their ablutions. Then slowly he began to warn people to stop listening to music, watching movies and dancing-such acts would invite the wrath of God, he said. Many women were impressed by his charisma and gave him their gold jewellery and money. Then he closed down beauty parlours, banned shaving, told women not to go to bazaars, and stopped health workers from giving polio vaccinations. Next, Fazlullah began holding a "shura", a kind of local court. People liked this as justice was speedy, and began going to him and his men to resolve grievances about anything from business matters to personal feuds. The punishments were usually public whippings.

In the process of reporting the rise of the Taliban in Swat, Ashraf came across Ziauddin. Many people were afraid to talk openly to journalists, but Ziauddin was very vocal and liberal. He became an source, and as their relationship progressed, became friends. He was also becoming well known in the local media circles as an outspoken activist who was not afraid of speaking his views.

In 2008, Aamer Ahmed Khan, the head of the *BBC*'s Urdu service and his colleagues discussed a novel way of covering the Taliban's growing influence in Swat: Why not find a schoolgirl to blog anonymously about her life there? (Cooke, 2012). Their correspondent in Peshawar, Abdul Hai Kakar, asked Ziauddin if he would be willing to allow one of the students in his school to blog about the closing down of schools. He could not find anyone willing to talk because of the fear of the Taliban, but he suggested that his daughter could be the one to write instead. To protect her identity, Kakar chose a pseudonym, "Gul Makai", the heroine of a Pashto folktale. The entries, which ran on *BBC* websites in Urdu and English from January to March 2009, were a hit, and were also regularly reproduced in local Pakistani media.

Around the same time in 2008, David Rummel, Senior Producer for News and Documentary at the *New York Times* recognised that a story on the closing of the Swat schools could be more powerful, than reports on floggings, bans, killings and suicide attacks which were becoming more and more common as the Taliban established their foothold. Subsequently, Adam B. Ellick, correspondent for the *New York Times*, contacted Irfan Ashraf about the possibility of being a "fixer". In journalism, a fixer is a person, often a local journalist, who is hired by a foreign correspondent to help arrange a story, and to act as a translator and guide, and to gain access to local interviews that the correspondent would normally be unable to do on his own. Ellick wrote:

We need a main character family to follow on both the final days of school (Jan 14–15) and again on the possible new days of school (Jan 31-Feb 2)... And most of all, the family and daughters should be expressive and have strong personalities and emotions on the issue (as cited in Brenner, 2013).

When he read this, Ashraf was reminded of a young girl with "bright brown eyes" and a "piercing gaze" whom he had seen in the computer screen of the editing console of the *Dawn Television* news in Peshawar earlier in 2007. When he enquired about her, the bureau chief had told him that she was "Takra jenai" which in Urdu means "a shining young lady" and that her name was Malala. Ashraf immediately suggested her name to Ellick.

On 14 January, just eleven days after her diary began to be published, Irfan Ashraf arrived with a cameraman at Malala's house in order to shoot the documentary. The documentary *Class Dismissed* was aired that spring, and Yousafzai and her father became famous on the international scale for their work on girls' education. Following this, she began to appear in television on *Geo TV*, *AVT Khyber*, *Daily Aaj*, and on *Toronto Star* for various programmes including interviews and to publicly advocate for female education. By December 2009, it was an open secret that it was Malala Yousafzai who had written the *BBC* blog "Swat: Diary of a Pakistani schoolgirl".

Later, Malala met Richard Holbrooke, the Ambassador of the United States to Pakistan and Afghanistan; and also had a meeting with Major General Athar Abbas who was the chief spokesperson of the Pakistan Army and its head of public relations. In October 2011, she was nominated for the international peace prize of Kids Rights by Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Shortly after, she was invited by the Chief Minister of Punjab Shahbaz Sharif to Lahore to speak at an education gala. She was also awarded Pakistan's first ever National Peace Prize, where she met the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani.

As her profile became more and more public, she started receiving death threats from the Taliban. However, her father was reluctant to accept the protection offered by the police. On October 9, 2012, while she was returning home in the afternoon with her friends in the school-bus after writing an exam, two bearded young men boarded the bus and asked, "Who is Malala?" Thinking that the young men were journalists seeking to interview her, the other girls looked towards Malala. Pulling out a pistol, he fired three shots at her in point blank range. The first bullet went through her left eye socket and out under her left shoulder. The second went into her friend Shazia's left hand. The third went through her left shoulder and into the upper right arm of another girl, Kainat Riaz (Malala, 2013, p.).

Malala was immediately driven to the Swat Central hospital. Soon, the army took charge and airlifted her to Peshawar. She was later shifted to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham, UK. The assassination attempt received worldwide media coverage and produced an outpouring of sympathy and anger. She made a rapid recovery. On July 12, 2013, she spoke before the United Nations. The day, which was also Malala's birthday was declared as "Malala Day" by the UN.

On 10 October 2014, Yousafzai was announced as the co-recipient of the 2014 Nobel Peace Prize along with Kailash Satyarthi. On 12 July 2015, her 18th birthday, Yousafzai opened a school in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, for Syrian refugees.

### **The Making or "Manufacturing" of Malala**

After the Taliban's attempt on her life, Irfan Ashraf, in an anguished article titled "Predatory Politics and Malala," wondered if he and the journalistic community were indirectly responsible for the attack on Malala. In later talks and interviews, he blamed the *BBC* and the *New York Times* for unnecessarily exposing her to dreadful consequences. In an interview with Marc Hermann that was published in the *Pacific Standard*, he said: "We needed a doll, didn't we? We needed this story that will fill the belly and we needed Malala to say these things. Everyone else is scared to say things" (2012).

This is revealed when one examines the circumstances that led to Malala becoming known in the international media as a girl who stood up for education and her rights.

Malala's diary which was published as "Swat: Diary of a Pakistani schoolgirl", was compared by many, including the former first lady of the United States, Laura Bush and by the *Washington Post* as a modern version of Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl*. But whereas the diary of Anne Frank was spontaneously written, and discovered only later by her father, Malala's diary was written for the sole purpose of publication. Her experiences were taken down by BBC correspondent Abdul Hai Kakar over the phone. She recounts:

I had never written a diary before and didn't know how to begin. Although we had a computer, there were frequent power cuts and few places had Internet access. So Hai Kakar would call me in the evening on my mother's mobile...He would guide me, asking me questions about my day, and asking me to tell him small anecdotes or talk about my dreams...Then he wrote up my words and once a week they would appear on the BBC Urdu website...I was a bit shy to start with but after a while I got to know the kind of things Hai Kakar wanted me to talk about and became more confident. He liked personal feelings and what he called my 'pungent sentences' and also the mix of everyday family life with the terror of the Taliban (Malala, 2013, p.129).

This raises up a question of considerable seriousness about the authenticity of her diary. Was it was Malala's own narrative or was the reporter trying to elicit a formatted response and later polishing it. But responding to accusations that he had coached her, Kakar told that her words "ran unedited" (as cited in Brenner, 2013).

However, her diary started to receive attention, and newspapers began to print extracts. She says "I began to see that the pen and the words that come from it can be much more powerful than machine guns, tanks or helicopters...And we were learning how powerful we are when we speak" (Malala, 2013, p.131).

Soon after this, Irfan Ashraf who had been hired as a fixer by the *New York Times*, went to Malala's house in order to shoot the documentary on behalf of Adam B. Ellick. The documentary was intended to focus only on the plight of education and not on the Taliban's brutality. But when the documentary was released, the editors added additional video clips of Taliban floggings. Ashraf spoke out, saying that the "NYT's morbid fascination with the horrors of the Taliban presented Malala as a symbol of resistance in a time when she was still living with her family in Taliban-controlled Swat Valley...the editor overlooked the horrible fact that the child protagonist was within reach of the merchants of

death” (2014). The *New York Times* explained that the gory scenes were actually part of the Taliban’s tactics and that they were only reporting the real life of Swat residents. In his article, “*Predatory Politics and Malala*”, Asraf admitted that:

Back then, the exercise was something of a thrill for all of us, so much so that it made me blind to journalistic ethics and to the security of my friend Ziauddin. It didn’t occur even once to me that there was a threat in this situation for the then pre-teen Malala. This was partly because the documentary was about education and making video packages was part of a daily routine (2012).

However, the international media realized that a young girl’s voice of innocence can be much more powerful than weapons of war and destruction. Jennifer Braunschweiger, editor of the *More* magazine underscores this point: “Why is it that a girl’s voice can be so powerful? Perhaps it’s that even when the world goes haywire, we all want our kids to have the same things: a full stomach, a warm bed, a comforting hug. A safe place to learn and a safe place to play” (2013). Malala acknowledged this fact in her autobiography: “The more interviews I gave, the stronger I felt and the more support we received. I was only eleven but I looked older, and the media seemed to like hearing from a young girl” (2013, p.117).

And this fact made her bold. She was no longer worried about hiding the identity of “Gul Makai”; in fact she notes in her autobiography that “it seemed like everyone knew I had written the BBC diary” (Malala, 2013, p.161). Aamir Ahmed Khan, the head of *BBC Urdu*, was quick to pass on the blame of revealing Malala’s identity upon her father, Ziauddin. An article in the *Time* magazine titled “Pakistani Heroine: How Malala Yousafzai Emerged from Anonymity” which was based on interviews with Khan, states that “the teenage blogger shot by the Taliban had been anonymous on the BBC’s Urdu service - until her family decided to take her public” (Cooke, 2012). The article referred to the instance in 2008 where Ziauddin Yousafzai had taken Malala to a local press-club event in Peshawar, where she gave a speech titled “How Dare the Taliban Take Away My Basic Right to Education?” that was widely publicized in Pakistani newspapers and on TV.

But this is a disturbing fact, because Ashraf in “Malala: The Journalistic Ethics of Source Well-being”, that was published in *ViewsWeek* points out that “much before her father could disclose anything, journalists in Peshawar and Swat [the writer included] knew that Malala was writing diary entries for the BBC using her pen name “Gulmakai.” Therefore, I assume from my association with journalism in the region that it was not difficult for the Taliban to know who was writing against them. Normally, journalists covering the so-called ‘war on terror’ from Peshawar and Swat cultivate good relations with the Taliban”.

He continues: “If writing a diary was a commitment between Malala and the BBC correspondent Abdul Hai Kakar, who leaked Malala’s identity to other journalists in Peshawar?” He also stressed the fact that the BBC Urdu chief cannot absolve himself of the responsibility for what happened to Malala by shifting the blame on her father. “Despite knowing well that Malala’s secrecy was slippery and the revengeful Taliban would settle scores with the child protagonist once they got the chance, the BBC encouraged the 11-year old child by providing her a platform to write what she could not say publicly against the Taliban” (2014).

Irfan Ashraf goes on to assert that Malala’s security was deliberately ignored or was not even an issue for consideration “as long as the poor child served the editorial interests of both these elite media outlets[the *BBC Urdu* and the *New York Times*]” (2014). But, security for its own was evidently important for the *NYT*, because Adam Ellick did not come to the Swat valley to shoot the documentary himself, but instead sent Ashraf, because, in Malala’s own words, “it was too dangerous for foreigners” (2013, p.133).

The question, whether eleven-year Malala was mature enough to understand the consequences and implications of what she was doing, remains unanswered. This matter has been whitewashed by the *BBC Urdu* and the *New York Times* by pointing out that the consent of Malala’s father was taken before publishing and broadcasting her views and face.

The next issue of importance, whether Malala was mature enough to become famous is also unanswered. Although, this issue may tend to be more psychological in nature, the fact that Malala was denied a normal childhood by being in the centre of media attention must not be ignored. When a child is exposed to fame, the development of his/her personality is also influenced by it, at times leading to an over-inflated sense of oneself.

Ashraf underscored this point in an interview with Marc Hermann when he asserted that “(when) the international media came. They started talking about her and she knew that she had become important. She had become a very big voice... I want to give her agency. But we made her this icon. I don’t know if, at that age, you can understand what it means to become an icon” (2012). Adam B. Ellick also conceded that he was “part of a system that continuously gave them awards ... which emboldened her ... and made her more public, more brash, more outspoken” (as cited in Brenner, 2013).

From a child whose first published words were “I am afraid” (Malala, 2013, p.130), where even a man shouting on the phone scared her, Malala became bold and even rash to the extent that on the talk show *A Morning with Farah* she said, “If a Talib is coming, I will pull off my sandal and slap him on

his face” (as cited in Brenner, 2013 ). Later, even after receiving direct threats from the Taliban, she refused to stop speaking and also turned down an offer of protection from the police.

Because of her rising popularity, Malala was able to meet Richard Holbrooke, the Ambassador of the United States to Pakistan and Afghanistan; and also Major General Athar Abbas, chief spokesperson of the Pakistan Army and its head of public relations. After, she was nominated for the international peace prize of KidsRights by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in October 2011 she was invited by the Chief Minister of Punjab, Shahbaz Sharif to Lahore to speak at an education gala. Malala started to openly attack the Taliban. At the gala, she talked publicly about how she had defied the Taliban edict of closing down girls’ schools by attending school secretly, and that she was not afraid of anyone (Malala, 2013, p.179).

She was also awarded Pakistan’s first ever National Peace Prize, by the Prime Minister of Pakistan, Syed Yousaf Raza Gilani. She spoke at the Sindh assembly, and even had schools named after her. She was quickly turning into a hero. The media continued to give wide coverage of her activities, so much so that she admitted that once “so many journalists thronged to the school that day that it turned into a news studio”.

Even after the Taliban threatened to kill her, Malala was not troubled. She believed that the Taliban would not attack her because she was just a ‘child’. “People often said the Taliban might kill my father but not me. ‘Malala is a child,’ they would say, ‘and even the Taliban don’t kill children.’” (2013, p.131, 136). Even when her father wondered if they should stay quiet for a while, Malala refused:

I don’t know why, but hearing I was being targeted did not worry me. It seemed to me that everyone knows they will die one day. My feeling was that nobody can stop death; it doesn’t matter if it comes from a talib or cancer. So I should do whatever I want to do.

‘Maybe we should stop our campaigning, Jani, and go into hibernation for a time,’ said my father.

‘How can we do that?’ I replied. ‘You were the one who said if we believe in something greater than our lives, then our voices will only multiply even if we are dead. We can’t disown our campaign!’

People were asking me to speak at events. How could I refuse, saying there was a security problem? We couldn’t do that, especially not as proud Pashtuns. (2013, p.188,189)



Even when the police informed them that Malala's national and international profile had attracted attention and death threats from the Taliban and that she needed protection, and offered guards, her father was reluctant to accept the gesture. Ashraf speaking later in an interview with the *Pacific Standard* said that this seeming courage was not inherent, but rather "manufactured" because of the coverage given by the media and the encouragement offered by the public opinion.

Irfan Ashraf also accused the media for turning Malala's advocacy for education into a solid campaign against the Pakistani Taliban (2012). By highlighting the issue of education, Malala was used as a tool to attack the whole structure of the Taliban and all its associated activities. However, it has to be remembered and reiterated that the Taliban did not attack Malala Yousafzai the schoolgirl. The Taliban attacked Malala Yousafzai, the icon.

While the international media was quick to condemn the barbaric and cowardly attack of the Taliban upon a young school girl, it has not introspected about its own role in making Malala a target. Aamer Ahmed Khan, chief of the BBC Urdu, does not regret finding Malala and helping take her voice to the public. He said:

If I was to sit here at my desk today and think, oh my God, if we hadn't found her, this would never have happened, that would actually mean that I am not taking into account the contribution that children like Malala make to a cause that we so strongly believe in. Would you be talking about the state of education for girls in Pakistan if it had not been for her? (as cited in Cooke, 2012).

While there is no doubt to the fact that the issue of girls education has been made visible for discussion, the underlying question if Malala's right to life was denied due to the role played by the media has continued to evade serious discussion. Only Irfan Ashraf who has since claimed to have "disassociated [himself] from such projects" has cast doubts on the journalistic integrity, ethics and standards that has been followed, and is being followed by what he terms as the "elite media". He wondered if the media professionals in the West would put their own children in the path of harm the way they have allowed themselves to do with children in poor countries (2014).

### **Other Issues for Consideration**

It is interesting to note that both the *BBC* and the *NYT* had the idea of using a child's voice rather than an adult's to speak against the oppression of the Taliban. But, Malala was not the only female child to go to school in secret. However, after the blog was published and the documentary broadcasted, the security of the other girl students have been compromised. The safety of

students who go to Khushal school has also been greatly affected, as now the identity of the school has been made public, thus making it more vulnerable to possible attack by the Taliban in future.

While many have pointed out that it was only after the shooting that the world has been made aware of the atrocities and oppression committed by the Taliban, the question that is not discussed is whether it was right, whether it was in tune with journalistic and ethical standards of protecting the identity of sources, to expose a teenage girl to the heights of fame, and ultimately, to the danger of death. The fame given by the media, which made her bold, also gave her a bullet in the head.

It may be true that the media helped the world become aware about the effects of Taliban rule, and on growing terrorism. It raised awareness about the lack of education, the oppression and difficulties that women face in developing regions. It even made a young teenage girl the youngest awardee of the Nobel Peace Prize and one of the most famous personalities of the time.

But at what Cost?

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