

# Exposé

Magazine made as part of final year university assignment.  
All interviews have been taken by Mariam Maroof.

## EXCLUSIVE

Read more about Rana Ayyub and her life as an investigative reporter.





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# MAZHAR FAROOQUI: A MAN WHO ISN'T AFRAID OF EXPOSING THE TRUTH.

BY MARIAM MAROOF

Mazhar Farooqui is no stranger to the media fraternity, especially when he's the only notable investigative journalist in the United Arab Emirates.

Working with *Gulf News* for 15 years and having put over 200 people in jail or had them deported as a result of his extensive investigations, this man is nowhere near letting go of his passion.

Investigative journalism or investigative reporting, according to Farooqui, does not only involve sting operations or exposing of frauds, but could simply be a well-researched article regarding practically any topic.

"It's the only thing I know, I don't have any other traits," says Farooqui in regard to his passion for journalism. Having worked for big names like the *Hindustan Times* and *Times of India*, among others, the Indian knew all along that investigative journalism is what his heart was set on.

Farooqui, sitting in the most laid-back manner, goes on to narrate how with even 26 years behind him in this career, he is still as hooked. "The adrenaline keeps on pumping," says Mazhar.

"The newspaper industry is the only one where you get paid to tell the truth, and if you can do that in a very coherent manner, if you can change corporate decisions and impact lives, I don't think you can find a profession that brings more satisfaction than this one."

A multiple award-winning journalist, including India's most prestigious award for excellence in journalism, the K.C. Kulish International Award, as well as a member of the Global Investigative Journalism Network, Farooqui has made a name for himself here in the UAE, despite facing strict media laws that spare nobody. Not even Farooqui himself, who once spent 15 hours in prison as a result of a story he published.

The stringent laws of the UAE, however, don't stop Farooqui from going out of his way to report scams. The Heera Group scandal, fraudulent job-portal Wisdom Jobs, con woman Gill Wallace Hope, the dodgy Exential Group and con man Aziz Mirza are only some of the groups and individuals that have been exposed courtesy of Mazhar Farooqui.



**Image Credit: Gulf News**  
 Mazhar Farooqui receiving the K.C.  
 Kulish International Award

With a serious, yet humorous, feel, Farooqui reveals some of what he goes through because of his work. "I've got multiple lawsuits against me, lots of defamation notices as well, but I guess I play my role in keeping the legal department busy.

"There's also one guy who calls me dutifully for the past year and a half, I believe he wants to threaten me, but I'm not too sure. I will admit, on some days when I don't receive a call, I do tend to miss him a little!"

Along with getting himself in trouble, Farooqui also keeps *Gulf News* tangled up in his legal battles. "I get *Gulf News* in trouble all the time. Defamation suits against me cause the company a lot of money because each time a lawyer represents me, the company has to pay. But at the same time, *Gulf News* gains a lot of popularity because my stories drive the site's traffic, so it's a double-edged sword."

However, it's not all that light-hearted in the life of an investigative reporter who has put some in jail and made others very unhappy.

"After a certain point in such a career, threats don't faze you anymore. But it does get a little overwhelming when you receive 60 calls in the middle of the night, wake up to a legal notice and then come across threats, trolling and malicious campaigns against you online throughout the rest of the day," says Mazhar

The existence of criminals doesn't worry him as Dubai is a relatively safe city but, the fact that there are "people who could go to extreme measure because I exposed those they supported does worry me a little," the journalist confesses.

Being in such a career for well over two decades does come with a few frightening encounters. Death threats and harassment online are a rather milder form, physical dangers however, one can never be prepared for enough.

**"But at the same time, Gulf News gains a lot of popularity because my stories drive the site's traffic, so it's a double-edged sword."**



Coming back to UAE and it's strict defamation and cyber-crime laws, the sad reality of practising a profession like that of Farooqui is that not all your hard work sees the light of day. Some stories require months of investigating, gathering information, and deciphering through all the evidence, whereas other times the journalist gets lucky and gets a breakthrough quickly.

Due to legal compulsions, journalists often have to drop a story or leave out important information simply because they would be breaking laws if done otherwise.

"People think investigative journalism is very glamorous and we're like James Bond, but it's anything but that. Newspapers, in this age, don't have the luxury to spare a journalist for one big story. So while I'm working on an investigative piece, I'm also working on press releases, weather reports and other stuff."

Some stories Farooqui comes across himself, while others are told to him by people who've suffered at the hands of a fraudulent company or individual. What makes the job of a journalist even harder is the fact that often when they drop a story, they stand in an awkward position where people relying on Farooqui keep questioning him regarding updates on the story - while he's got nothing to tell them.

"I wish there were more investigative reporters in the UAE," says Farooqui.

"Sometimes, I feel upset because I'm the only one who does such stories, there's only so much that I can do. There are so many stories to be told, so many lies to be exposed, but it's not possible for me to do all of this. So if there were more journalists in this field, there'd be a better and bigger pool of journalists investigating and the common man would have more journalists to rely on."



**Image Credit: Mazhar Farooqui**  
Mazhar Farooqui receiving the best story of the month award

Farooqui lists out other journalists and news outlets whose work he has looked up to and enjoys reading. Indian journalists Anirudh Bahal and Ashish Khetan's were among his top favourites, and he's also fond of investigative stories from global outlets, *The Guardian*, *The New Yorker* as well as a Philippines based news outlet called *Rappler*.

Towards the end of the interview, Farooqui is kind enough to lend a helping hand out to student journalists, as well as those wanting to pursue investigative journalism.

"For newcomers and aspiring journalists, they need to spend some time and contact the right people. The best way to do that would be to contact the Global Investigative Journalism Network. They're the ones behind huge stories, Panama Leaks sort of stuff."

"It's a network of thousands of journalists, you can approach them, become a member, and they'll invite you and train you free of cost regarding how to report, cover facts, teach you tricks about how to find deleted posts on Twitter, how to find people with just their contact numbers and all of that. It's crazy but really helpful.

"See, possibly the best thing about investigative journalism is that you don't have to work for a publication to practice this form of journalism – not many people know that. All you need is a cracking story.

"There are so many agencies worldwide that will listen to your story pitch, find you a publication, fund your expenses as well as pay you for your work. All you need to know is who to contact," concludes Farooqui.

With the interview finished, the nerves and anxiety of the student journalist are replaced with inspiration, motivation and ambition to investigate.

# INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM WORLDS APART: UNITED STATES VS. PAKISTAN

BY MARIAM MAROOF

The United States, contrary to popular beliefs, has been cracking down on journalists. Physical assaults and arrests are almost becoming a norm, though it's said to be getting better. The Trump government has carefully changed their traditional White House press conferences in a way that restricts the ability of journalists to ask questions of any nature.

The Islamic Republic of Pakistan has been doing much worse. The military has long been against independent journalists, more so since Imran Khan came to power. Pakistan already has quite the image regarding the safety of journalists. With 106 journalists having been killed in the last two years alone, investigative journalism is as risky as it gets in such a country.

Jim Schaefer is an investigative journalist based in Detroit and has spent most of his professional years writing and investigating for the *Detroit Free Press*. He gained an interest in journalism after starting off as a writer for his school newspaper. "At the time, you know, I was much better in writing than math, and it just sounded like something fun," says Schaefer. Over the years, Schaefer went from reporting crimes and fires to the court system and eventually landed up writing and investigating.

Kaswar Klasra is an investigative journalist based in Islamabad and is a contributor to a couple of newspapers including *South China Morning Post*, *Deutsche Welle*, *The Daily Mail*, and *India Today*. While in college, Klasra was an avid reader of pieces by Nusrat Javed, Hamid Mir and Rauf Klasra, who were and still are prominent journalists in Pakistan. It is through these journalists that Kaswar slowly developed an interest in journalism. According to Kaswar, "I knew journalism is a very noble profession and if journalists can play a role in the construction of society, then I should do so too."

Ever since 2002, Schaefer and his partner had been looking into the former mayor of Detroit, Kwame Kilpatrick, as he'd been living a life full of scandals and corruption. "We did investigative stories on him for about eight years before he went to jail because of our work. I thought his story was essential to investigate because he was stealing from the public, and so were some of his friends and relatives."

"We caught him in his tracks, and we wrote some stories that the FBI investigated after we published them. They found him to be criminal and ended up indicting him. He's now serving 28 years in prison," adds Schaefer.



Despite this, over his 30-year long career, Jim has never received any serious threat or ever felt as if his life was in harm's way. "It surprises some people because they think the mayor should have sent people out to beat us up," laughs Jim.

On the other end of the spectrum lies Klasra, who has been kidnapped 2-3 times over his 13-year long career for the stories he's published. "I once wrote a piece about a militant organization who were notorious for sending their people to Kashmir in the name of Jihad, and I'd written the story for *India Today*. Not only was I subjected to immense pressure from the organization, but I was also eventually kidnapped by them since at the time, their presence was in the Islamabad-Rawalpindi area where I was located as well."

"I was lucky because my editors and influential friends who were journalists helped in diffusing the tension. I was released after my friends gave the militant group their word and told them I'd refrain from publishing such stories again," says Kaswar.

"I've been lucky enough to come out alive in such situations, but unfortunately, lots of journalists in our country don't have the same fate."



**Image Credit: Kaswar Klasra**



**Image Credit: Jim Schaefer**

Though Schaefer doesn't feel like press freedom has necessarily declined in the States since Trump came to power, he does believe that the government has become a lot stingier when dealing with reporters. "His constant criticism of the media finds an audience with a lot of his supporters. But we're still able to do our jobs, and I don't really feel like there's any regulation that's come forth though he's talking about enforcing those too. But, that would be such a change, a historical change in the freedom of the press that this country was basically founded on."

"It's a lot of talks but I don't see any of it as a genuine threat to the press freedom" he adds further.

What comes as a surprise to people within and outside of Pakistan is the regulations put in place by Imran Khan's government since they came to power in 2018. Klasra believes that governments in countries like Pakistan need to understand the journalism plays a vital role in the smooth functioning of democracy. His view was that just as official institutions such as the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) or other intelligence agencies provide reports to the government, journalists, in their own ways do the same."

"We identify fraudulent departments, we identify where the embezzlement of funds takes place and then we report it through articles or on our news channels. But the government, for some reason, feels as if we're exposing them because we're against them, and as a result, they censor our work."

Kaswar is also adamant with his belief in the press being freer during the previous government. "We had basic liberties, the government never created as many hurdles in our way. I hope what's happening with the media during this government is only temporary, and that Prime Minister Imran Khan has better things planned for us because what's happening now is a shame for us journalists."

A common ground both journalists stood on was regarding how expensive investigative journalism is proving to be. Schaefer is confident that investigative journalism isn't dying; however, it is suffering. He said the reason it's suffering is that it's costly and newspapers are having a hard time making money off of journalism. "Advertising is dying slowly, so we've to find new ways of making money. I'm not fearful of it disappearing, I think it'll always exist maybe just in a different form."

Klasra, however, doesn't see a good future for investigative journalism in Pakistan at least. This, as per Klasra, is because publication houses don't have a proper revenue model, and most of their funding comes from the government. "In that case, if you publish stories that expose the wrongdoings of the government, they can and will pull out the money they've provided."

"In such circumstances, when newspapers aren't in the position to pay their staff, then you definitely cannot expect such a field to prosper."

Towards the end, both journalists expressed their views for budding journalists wanting to join the field. "Yes. Do it. It's awesome and also very important. You can actually have an impact on the world and the overall benefit to the community is so worth it," says Schaefer. "It's such a noble profession and such a great field."

And to be very honest, journalism is more of a passion than a job, and there will never be a reason to follow your passion whole-heartedly," Klasra adds.

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# RANA AYYUB: THE STORY OF A FEARLESS INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST IN PRESENT-DAY INDIA

BY MARIAM MAROOF

In a country that's been under fire for the most part since Narendra Modi got elected as the Prime Minister for the second time, Rana Ayyub, an investigative journalist in India, has kept her stance and been maybe amongst the most outspoken journalists the country has come across.

Rana Ayyub, known for speaking out excessively against the Modi government and the pro-Hindu like atmosphere the country is slowly developing, is a warrior if one must describe her in a word. Having worked and interned for a number of noted news outlets including *Aaj Tak*, *Times Now* and finally *Tehelka*, which she credits as the magazine that got her some of her best work, Rana is clearly among the top journalists in the country.

A Muslim girl born in Mumbai, Rana witnessed the 1992 Bombay riots – the first sort of communal violence she'd seen first-hand. "It was extremely debilitating; we were right there. Later, when I went to Gujarat and saw the injustice that took place, I knew I had to give a voice to it. I think those experiences somehow shaped me, who I was and my instincts," says Rana.

Ayyub credits her father as the sole reason for her to join a field where she could make an impact. "My father was a part of the Progressive Writers Movement, and we'd have their meetings take place in our house most of the time. I was fond of reading their work, and I just knew I wanted to do something of the sort that my father was doing." The Progressive Writers Movement was a literary movement who were left-winged and anti-imperialistic and advocated for equality – something Rana aspired to stand up for one day.

Born as a weak child who later developed polio in her right arm and leg (which she recovered from), she knew she'd have no chance fighting for what's right if she joined the police force – keeping her physical weakness in mind.

"I would see the injustice that took place around me, I was raised in the midst of injustice. I knew I wanted to make some sort of difference and to my luck, I realised how good I was at narrating experiences, talking to people and holding conversations with those who had a story to tell. I think that point in my life was when I knew I needed to become a journalist."

"I've always been curious," says Rana.

"I remember during my first job at *Aaj Tak*, around 1000 Muslims were arrested after the 7/11 train blast and for some reason, nobody wanted to investigate and find out what really happened. The immediate emergency of the situation made me realise that it was investigative journalism that I wanted to focus on."

"You become an investigative journalist to tell the truth" Rana adds. "To find the truth you must go and search for it. A truth that resonates with the audience. I was never content with front-page headlines and the traditional headlines, I wanted to go beneath and check," she says.

Possibly her biggest investigation was the one she pulled off in 2010 when she posed as Maithili Tyagi, a student and filmmaker from the American Film Institute Conservatory, who'd come to Gujarat to shoot a short film. The eight-month-long undercover sting operation, according to Ayyub, "took a lot of training."

"I had to change my accent, change my name and live with the identity. I had eight cameras on me, one in my tunic, one in my earring, my bag, my watch, and so on."

Rana Ayyub was investigating the truth that had led to the Gujarat riots in 2002. Posing as a Hindu whose father had been a part of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or RSS, a right-wing, Hindu nationalist organisation. Because of this link, Rana, disguised as Maithili, was able to speak to police officials, bureaucrats as well as Narendra Modi, the Chief Minister of Gujarat at the time, all while wearing a camera and microphone.

The investigation and evidence collected was solid proof that held Narendra Modi and Amit Shah, a member of the Gujarat Legislative Assembly guilty for more than what the public knew. The findings of the investigation also sent Amit Shah behind bars in 2010 – an achievement that keeps Rana's head up high.

As proud as the investigative journalist is of an operation that took the country by storm, she wouldn't entirely advise it as much herself. "Looking back at it now, to pull off an investigation like that at 26 years of age honestly feels great. However, I wouldn't exactly advise sting operations to anybody because of the kind of mental health issues that I faced after that - I mean if you're undercover for 8 months under the harshest circumstances, you get prone to anxiety and depression later in life."



**Image Credit: The Washington Post**  
Rana Ayyub

Ayyub being an investigative journalist, believes that sting operations should not be made a norm while practising journalism. When her book, 'Gujarat Files: Anatomy of a Cover Up' was published, in which she put all transcripts from her sting operation since Tehelka had refused to release her work, her ethics as a journalist was questioned and heavily criticised. "If I was able to unearth the truth using conventional methods, I'd never opt for a sting operation. I'd be the last person who would want to do something of this sort because when you go undercover, you're betraying the trust of the people you're interviewing."

"Sting operations should be used in the rarest of rare cases. In my case, I tried every possible way to get the truth out, and when it was absolutely impossible, I had to resort to carrying out a sting operation" says Rana.

"So for me, the ethical considerations were very clear in this case, I was only going undercover to get information from the people that should've spoken the truth, but refrained from doing so."

Such work doesn't come without threats, not for Ayyub at least. She believes that it isn't a profession for those with a faint heart, you have to develop a thick skin. "I've taken on the most powerful men in this country, of course there will be threats."

"I've gotten phone calls in the middle of the night telling me that there are people standing outside my house, I've received death threats. It's gotten so out of hand that U.N experts have said that they are concerned about my life and the government has offered me a revolver license."

Rana Ayyub, currently working with The Washington Post as their Global Opinions Writer, has long been known to criticise the BJP government in India due to their religious intolerance as well as their efforts to make the country a Hindu nation. She believes that since this government has come to power, with every passing day it's getting harder for journalists to do their job.

"I wrote a piece in 2014 I think, criticising Amit Shah when he became president of BJP and that piece was taken down within two hours of being published. There's always been a certain amount of censorship in the media, even before Narendra Modi came to power, but I'd never seen censorship of this sort ever before."

"Journalists are refraining from speaking the bare truth. Some of our topmost journalists are now consulting editors or contributing editors or freelance journalists, it speaks volumes of the ways the media in this country is under Narendra Modi."

"A journalist like me who left Tehelka in November 2013, was jobless till last year when The Washington Post offered me a job. So, if journalists speak the truth, they will be jobless in this country", she adds.

But clearly, there are more issues for journalists than just being able to speak the truth. Rana shares what she had to face in her early days when she started off in this profession. "The challenges start right from the beginning when you go on the field as a woman journalist. My editor told me that I couldn't do politics because then I'd have to engage with politicians and hold conversations late at night since the material we can use only comes out then."

"Even though I never thought of myself as a woman journalist, I was constantly made to feel like one."

Despite the gender discrimination, she did believe that the field by itself is pretty tricky, regardless of gender. The journalist and author also went on to talk about how India was practising investigative journalism all wrong. "What we pass off as investigative journalism in India is basically getting information by your source and publishing it in a newspaper. This is not investigative journalism; leaks are not investigative journalism. Investigative journalism requires rigour, research and persistence."

Ayyub then finally comments on the ongoing debate regarding the death or possible death of investigative journalism. "I don't think it's dying if anything it's becoming more robust around the world. This is the best time to be an investigative journalist in my opinion since there is so much injustice in the world today."

"There are journalists questioning their leaders every single day and just because it's not happening as such in India, doesn't mean it's not happening at all."

"Never before has investigative journalism been more important than it is today", concluded Rana.

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