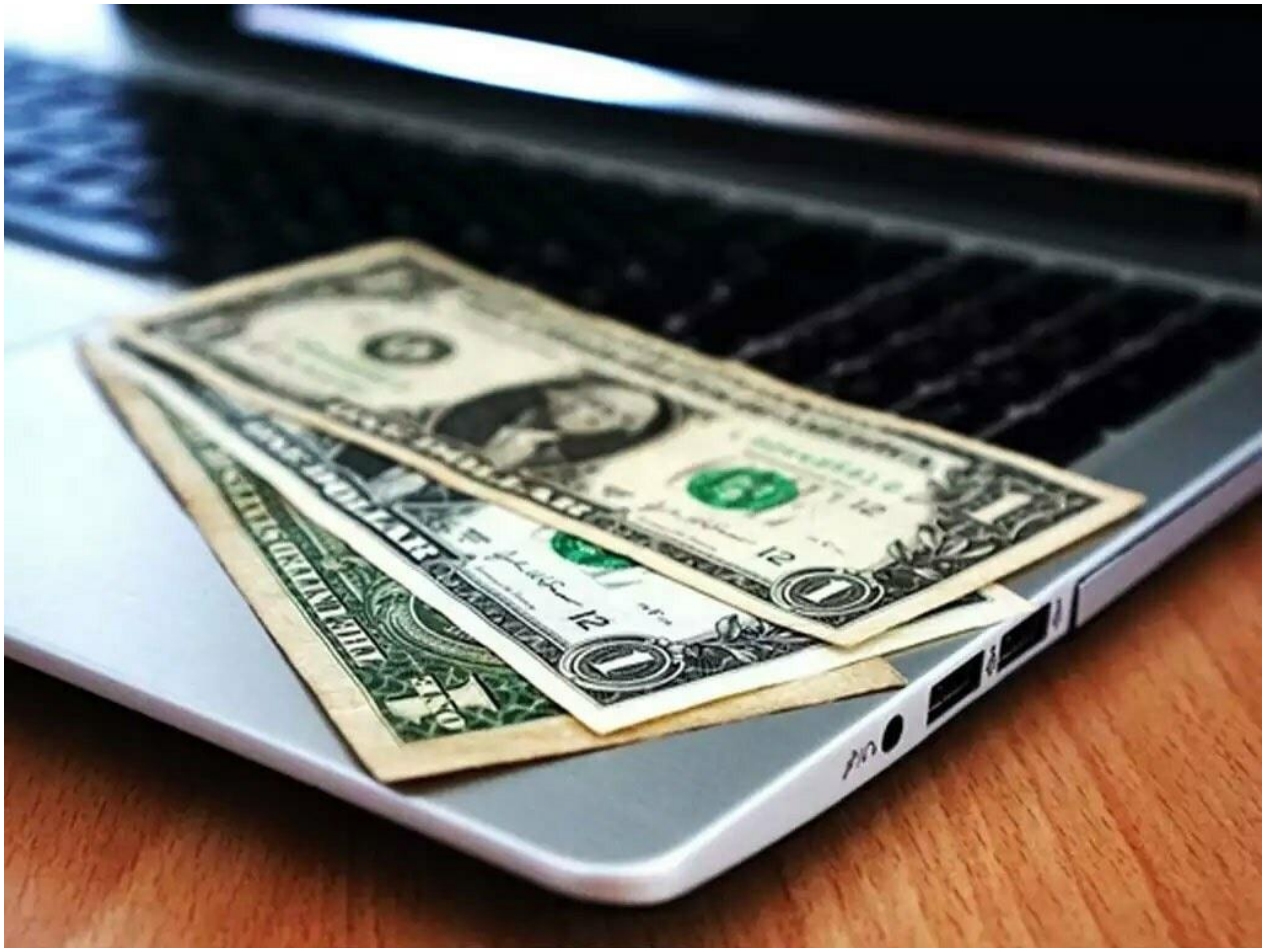


Tech glitches, economy twitches

Iqra Munawar | 29 August 2024



In today's digital landscape, the internet has become a fundamental necessity for individuals and businesses alike. However, in certain countries, the reliability and accessibility of this vital resource remains a persistent challenge. At the top of this list is Pakistan, where a concerning trend of frequent internet blackouts and restrictions on social media applications, most notably Twitter, has emerged.

These measures are often imposed by the government in the name of national security, prompting digital rights activists or a common man to express their views. Also, the fact that the installation of firewall and its potential is used to filter social media content and suppress dissenting voices.

The government has invested a significant amount of money in a national firewall that monitors and filters incoming and outgoing traffic, primarily to block propaganda and unwanted content. While the importance of filtering social media content cannot be ignored, especially in an age where information overload is a significant issue, it has become inevitable.

Misinformation, propaganda from hostile elements, and certain content can indeed pose national security risks. However, it is important that this process remains transparent and fair. Additionally, the bigger problem lies not in filtering but in connectivity issues. Shouldn't providing the best quality Internet to the common man be the priority for the government?

As technology continues to evolve, the nature of work has undergone a significant transformation. A growing focus on online, web-based work, commonly known as freelancing, has emerged. In the past few years, the freelancing industry has experienced a remarkable boom, with many individuals turning to it as a supplemental source of income to combat inflation. Some have even embraced freelancing as a full-time career path, while others work as part-timers. Notably, a substantial portion of these freelancers are women, drawn to the flexibility of working hours that allows them to manage both work and family responsibilities.

Pakistan-based freelancers contributed foreign exchange earnings worth \$350.15 million during fiscal year 2024 (July-March), says the Economic Survey 2023-24 – Pro-Pakistani, depicting a major contribution of Pakistani Freelancers in the growth of the economy.

“However, the freelancing industry in developing countries, such as Pakistan, faces a unique set of challenges, such as internet connectivity issues, payment difficulties, unreliable electricity supply, tax-related concerns, communication skill gaps, and intense competition. The impact of these challenges is particularly acute for freelancers, whose livelihoods are completely dependent on a stable and reliable internet connection to access clients, deliver work, and manage their businesses, are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of these intermittent outages.”

The inability to communicate with clients, submit assignments, or access necessary online resources can lead to missed deadlines, lost opportunities, and a significant disruption to their livelihoods. In the long term, these intermittent outages can also hinder the growth and development of the freelance economy. As we all know, unemployment often leads to a higher risk of criminal activities.

The recent warning from platforms like Fiverr, advising clients against engaging Pakistani professionals due to frequent internet downtime, lack of access to online payment methods, etc., creates hurdles for both clients and freelancers, making it difficult to finalise deals effectively, underscores the gravity of the situation.

These obstacles not only hinder the growth and success of individual freelancers but also have broader implications for the country’s economic development. As the younger generation seeks better opportunities abroad, the brain drain phenomenon becomes increasingly prevalent, with many opting to pursue careers outside of their home country away from their families. That’s the reason Vice chancellor PIDE always says that “Pakistan is a talent repellent country” and I believe this is a harsh truth about my country.

The potential of the freelancing industry can be significantly enhanced if the government spends on offers for tax reductions, expansion of National Incubation Centers and co-working spaces, vocational trainings

programs, most importantly addresses internet connectivity and energy security issues, efficient payment transfer methods, and includes communication skills courses in training programs.

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