

State Control, Corporate Interests, and Media Independence in Pakistan

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During the past two decades, the media sector in Pakistan has grown immensely in terms of scale and influence. With the deregulation policy and emergence of private TV channels in the early 2000s, electronic media became a power broker and a marker of public sentiment. Corporate entities have since engaged in a frantic war over occupying public attention. News cycles, after decades of state control on information, turned into a real-time, 24/7 process.

This sudden explosion has had implications for the quality, impartiality, and accuracy of the media landscape. With the gradual dwindling of print media and legacy editorial filters, TV channels have had a field day in not just reporting on the power politics of the country but also acting and engaging as power brokers and kingmakers. However, the rise of the internet and social media—popular amongst a largely adult but mostly young population in Pakistan—is now overtaking TV as one of the key sources of news and information. After the decline of print, the electronic media industry and its business model are under stress. The digital age has shaken the country and its traditional power structures as it gives a direct voice to the netizen and is increasingly 'uncontrollable' by the state.

Yet, the issue of state control remains. And when it intersects with corporate imperatives, the results are toxic for the goals of upholding the public interest or creating a fair environment for citizen access to information.

REGULATION AND CONTROLS

The electronic media is regulated by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), which is responsible for licensing and overseeing TV and radio channels. Print media falls under the Press Council of Pakistan, which works to maintain journalistic standards. However, the concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few conglomerates has raised concerns about pluralism and independence. According to a report by the Center for Media and Democracy Pakistan, this concentration has led to a lack of diverse viewpoints and a focus on commercial interests over public welfare or journalistic integrity. To multiply their wealth, media corporations ensure sustainability by relying on advertisements, sponsorships, government ads, and affiliation with political parties.¹ The top 8 owners (Jang Group, ARY Group, Express Group, the Government Group, Nawa-i-Waqt Group, Samaa Group, Dawn Group, and Dunya Group) reach 68 percent of the audience share across television, radio, print, and online. All of them have a significant presence in more than one media sector.²

In Pakistan, many journalists believe that the traditional media ownership model, where a single investor or family holds control, has utterly failed.

¹Zahra, Noreen et al. Analysis of issues and challenges of Media and its Sustainability: A case study of Electronic Media in Pakistan, *Pakistan Journal of International Affairs*, Vol 5, Issue 2 (2022).

²GOP 2021.

This failure has harmed not only the financial stability of media outlets but also the freedom of journalists and the quality of journalism. Financial challenges have led media owners and management to succumb to increasing pressure from the state, including the government and security agencies, which are becoming less accepting of critical media coverage. As a result, advertisement revenues have diminished, and many prominent journalists and talk shows have been silenced or asked to self-censor. The Pakistani media outlets cling to outdated models of information and news cycles, disregarding the changing consumer behaviours and the fact that people are drifting to online sources in droves for news and information.

Furthermore, the television world is giving way to an even clamorous, anarchical world of social media, where, according to Arifa Noor, “vloggers and YouTubers have taken over from the anchors and analysts who replaced the writers and reporters”.³ In Pakistan, as elsewhere in the world, governments are figuring out ways to tame it. And as the battle continues, there are instances when the state seems to have scored a victory or two, while at others, social media triumphs over the state.

The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) regulates telecommunications and internet services, indirectly affecting the digital media landscape. It has the authority to block online content deemed inappropriate or against national interests. The most recent evidence of this practice is a nationwide Twitter (now X) ban that has been going on since mid-February 2024. The internet monitor Netblocks has confirmed a nationwide disruption to X ostensibly to quell the public discontent over allegations of election fraud. The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has clearly warned that shutting down the internet or any social media platforms “bleed online businesses and commerce and adds to the misery of an already fragile and struggling economy”. Not to mention that such a ban “infringes on people’s right to democratic decision making, information and expression”.⁴

DEMOCRACY IN DECLINE

According to the Freedom House 2023 report, both the civilian authorities and military in Pakistan have curtailed media freedom in recent years. The PTI government (2018-2022) accelerated this trend, but it has become worse in recent years. Media outlets are facing interference with distribution and broadcast, the temporary disappearance of journalists, a ban on specific television presenters, physical attacks, and withdrawal of government advertising.

The media sector faced similar dangers under the PDM government (April 2022-August 2023). In August 2022, media regulators took the ARY News television channel off the air after a PTI official criticized the role and involvement of the military in Pakistani politics on a broadcast. “The official was arrested and charged with sedition and abetting mutiny”⁵. In October 2022, a gunman killed ARY News anchor Arshad Sharif in Kenya in an apparently targeted attack. Sharif fled to Kenya after receiving death threats.⁶ The military also prohibits movements and access to militancy-and insurgency-affected areas, impeding coverage of issues there. Authorities have ordered local journalists to refrain from discussing the separatist activity in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, while rebel or militant groups threaten them when allegedly siding with the government, Freedom House notes.

The traditional media’s financial decline is because of two prominent reasons: declining money flow and censorship of political dissent. The second half of 2018 brought bad tidings for the media industry; even big and stable media groups have been forced to shut down their publications, removing journalists from their employment due to withdrawal of government subsidies and dwindling advertising revenue. It should also be noted that the pay cuts are widespread now and even traditionally reliable employers such as the Dawn Media Group have also induced them. Adnan Rehmat notes that The Express Media Group and Dunya Media Group also reportedly “laid off over 200 journalists, apart from cutting the salaries of the remaining workers by 15 to 35 percent in recent months”⁷. Only a few channels still manage to pay salaries to employees on time. An estimated 15 percent to 20 percent decrease in sales has been recorded by the newspaper industry in Pakistan, notwithstanding the emergence of new titles as non-legacy media groups have brought out newspapers. Due to the declining readership of English-language newspapers, telecom companies are investing their remaining ad-spends to Urdu-language TV channels.⁸ This also explains the closure of two English-language news channels since 2015.

⁴<https://www.dawn.com/news/1758241>

ibid.

⁵<https://freedomhouse.org/country/pakistan/freedom-world/2023>

⁶<https://freedomhouse.org/country/pakistan/freedom-world/2023>

⁷<https://www.dawn.com/news/1495230>

⁸<https://www.dawn.com/news/1495230>

The television rating points (TRP) system, simply put, is manipulated and non-transparent. First, PEM-RA's control of rating marks a question on the independence of rating agencies. The rating is used to award advertisements to the channels. Five companies are licensed to conduct the electronic media rating business in the country but the company named MediaLogic has a monopoly on the rating service business, which calculates overall TRPs daily using people-metres. The sample size is just 2,000 households in over 30 cities to represent the whole population, which is itself not statistically representative. A report by PIDE on the issues and challenges of electronic media further addresses the challenges with the rating systems in Pakistan as they operate "just like a mafia in which big players set the stage, lacking reasoning".⁹ The business model of rating companies is dependent on media houses that depend on the advertisers. The model has resulted in the monopoly of advertisers under the name Pakistan Advertisers Society, which binds the members to buy ratings from the approved rating company. This can be further exploited by cable operators who could place a channel far below so that it is difficult to access and gets less view. Lastly, ratings are just representations of urban Pakistan – they exclude rural areas, resulting in a disproportionate coverage of rural issues.¹⁰

As noted earlier, censorship or controls by the state are further choking media credibility and survival. The country's long and arduous history with martial law and the subjugation of representative governments by the deep state have been facilitated through media control mechanisms. The government remains a big advertising client for the media and these adverts are used as a censorship tool that brings short-term gains for corporate media. Due to this brutal domination by the deep state, the existence of media independence has been mostly fictional, diluting the relationship with media consumers and hence contributing to the crisis of slowly killing off the media. "The media industry is collapsing not just because the money is being squeezed from government coffers but because the media legal regulatory regime, already not very supportive of media independence, is being used to muzzle the media," says Aftab Alam, the executive director of the Institute for Research, Advocacy and Development (IRADA), which campaigns for civil liberties.¹¹ Most of the media has become significantly less critical of government authorities compared to the past few years. During the PTI government's first year in power, it resorted to the continual suppression of media and wanted to bolster the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) which was passed during the earlier government of Pakistan Muslim League (Nawaz). In this context, both political parties have

displayed an anti-democratic attitude towards media industry.¹²

Besides censorship, the lack of adherence to journalistic ethics has emerged as a major challenge in recent years. The political economy of the media suggests that economic and political elites use the media for their vested interests. Politicians and media owners exploit working journalists. Journalists are underpaid, and they are forced to indulge in unethical practices. Sensationalism, biased reporting, and the blurring of lines between news and propaganda have eroded public trust. There is a "race to cover breaking news has replaced the practice of news verification and source validation".¹³ There is an evident need for stronger ethical guidelines and training for journalists to ensure accuracy, impartiality, and responsible reporting. Furthermore, the age of digitisation is intensifying the perception amongst the masses that journalists are not performing their professional and ethical duties and responsibilities properly. The journalists, or anchors, on television screens may seem to discuss the problems of the country on their talk shows, but these have no productive outcome because they mostly discuss the issues with warring politicians and their divisive, polarising politics. Experts and professionals find little space on the mainstream, and this is why the media sector has been unable to inform public opinion on the huge challenges faced by the citizens of Pakistan. The coverage on education, health, climate change, and exploding population growth remains almost non-existent. Researchers have observed how mainstream TV debates resemble entertainment shows where guests, mostly politicians, insult opponents; some anchors even add fuel to the fire to attain scandalous fame.¹⁴

⁹<https://pide.org.pk/research/the-electronic-media-economy-in-pakistan-issues-and-challenges/>

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹<https://www.dawn.com/news/1495230>

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ali, S. W. (2021, June 16). Pakistan's electronic media-credibility crisis. Daily Times. <https://dailytimes.com.pk/773586/pakistans-electronic-media-credibility-crisis/>

¹⁴<https://www.ajpor.org/article/27243-perception-of-electronic-news-media-of-pakistan-in-the-digital-age>

CITIZEN JOURNALISM

Social media has transformed the media landscape, enabling real-time information sharing and public participation. Citizen journalism has been instrumental in covering social movements and protests in Pakistan. This is facilitated by the widespread use of smartphones and social media platforms. It has empowered ordinary citizens to report on events and issues in real-time, providing alternative perspectives to mainstream media narratives. For instance, the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), which advocates for the rights of the Pashtun community, received significant attention through citizen-reported content on social media, highlighting issues that were often under-reported in mainstream media. Social media platforms, such as Twitter and YouTube, offer opportunities for diverse voices to have political involvement and take part in knowledge production. They contribute to the accountability of those in power, especially when traditional media outlets are heavily censored and limited due to their financial models. In addition, they give coverage to dissenting voices, a case in point being the reach of the recent Baloch March amongst the general public through social media campaigns and hashtags.

However, decentralised media has also led to the spread of misinformation, echo chambers, and online harassment. During the recent election period and post-election period, Pakistan has seen a proliferation of misinformation aimed at influencing public opinion and discrediting political opponents. False news stories, doctored images, and manipulated videos have been spread through social media platforms, leading to confusion and polarisation amongst voters. Anonymity on social media platforms gives the purveyors of false stories and trolls the comfort that they will not be held accountable for the lies or hate messages they disseminate. According to the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Risks Report 2024, the widespread use of misinformation and disinformation, and tools to disseminate them, may undermine the legitimacy of newly elected governments in countries that are heading to polls in the coming months, including Pakistan, India, Indonesia, Mexico, the UK, and US¹⁵.

The state has been unable to engage with the rise of social media in a positive manner. Its playbook remains old-school: impose curbs and use coercive agencies to punish vloggers and social media users. It is, therefore, imperative for the incoming Parliament to initiate a debate on this and more importantly review PECA and other draconian laws to chart out a new path for a healthier media environment. In fact, coercive tactics would not fix the fake news issue. What is urgently needed in Pakistan and many other countries of the world is to launch media literacy campaigns. Schools and higher education curricula ought to address this issue. Citizen journalism is here to stay and there can be no alternative to creating an informed citizenry. Traditional and new media owners, the parliamentarians, and civil society at large all have a role to play in this direction. Otherwise, further polarisation and misinformation chaos might just tear apart Pakistani society.

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¹⁵<https://www.dawn.com/news/1804883>