

Report Title: Social Media and Censorship in Pakistan
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Introduction

The 21st century has seen a change in the way information is created, transmitted and consumed. Traditional media, namely newspapers, radio and television have been replaced by the internet and digital platforms. Although these are complementary, there are higher participation rates in social media than in conventional platforms (Arif, 2022). The intersection of this change can be the Arab Spring, which served as a lever to facilitate the communication of the protesters and the smooth organisation of the demonstrations. This practice raised public awareness and triggered public discourse (Batool, 2020).

This transformation is significant in Pakistan, where the media landscape has evolved rapidly in response to technological developments and socio-political dynamics, offering a new landscape for expressing citizen discontent. According to JICA research, 36.5%, or 82.90 million people of the population use the internet and 71.70 million are active on social media. Of these, most of the population (71.7) use YouTube, with 43.55 using Facebook. Impressive is the participation on Twitter (X) where in times of important political events, active participation increases. For example, its share rose from 1.5% to 20.56% in March 2022 (Arif, 2022). The World Population Foundation (WPF) report shows that the majority of internet users (around 50%) are young, aged 18-24, with a higher proportion of men (69%) than women (31%) (Zulqarnain, & Taimur, 2017).

Social media has played a crucial role in the democratisation process in Pakistan, enabling citizens to learn about socio-political issues, express their opinions, engage in political dialogue and promote human rights. Their action is perceived in 5 ways: they amplify - and often break - stories that traditional media are unable or unwilling to cover, 2) serve as a communications platform by spreading information about protest campaigns and other social movements, thereby playing a mobilising role, 3) humanitarian dimension, 4) advocating for social causes 5) stimulate political communication (Kulgeman, 2012).

Already from 2007 to 2009, the Lawyers' Movement, also known as the Movement for the Restoration of Judiciary or the Black Coat Protests, developed, whose purpose was to oppose the decisions of the former president, Pervez Musharraf, to suspend the power of the Supreme Court judge, an act that violated the Constitution of Pakistan. Thanks to social media, the Movement gained a great deal of momentum, as it helped to organise the protesters and gain support (Dawn, 2007). Similarly, the social media acted as a lever for exerting pressure on the state authorities. In particular, countries received campaigns such as #JusticeForZainab that aimed to raise awareness to demand justice for the rape and murder of a little girl. Finally, many initiatives, such as the Pakistan Software Houses Association, have been developed to educate and raise awareness among citizens, especially women, regarding the dangers of the internet and digital rights (Kulgeman, 2012).

Despite their positive contribution, social media in Pakistan has also been linked to several human rights violations. Government regulations and measures such as the Prevention of Cybercrime Act (PECA) of 2016 have been identified as a roadblock to civil liberties.

Particularly during the 2024 national elections, there were serious concerns about freedom of expression and privacy; several social media accounts of political activists and opposition supporters were suspended or blocked, leading to complaints of censorship. At the same time, incidents of state surveillance and violations of users' privacy and confidentiality have increased (Abbas, 2024). Finally, the absence of strong cybersecurity measures, combined with the rise of technology (e.g. AI) has made social media vulnerable to attacks or the transmission of fake news. For example, during the 2024 elections, several cases of fake news and manipulated content aimed at influencing public opinion were reported (Kalbe, 2024).

The report examines the presence of social media in Pakistan and its intertwining with censorship. It provides a historical contextual background in which it studies the presence of the internet and social media and their evolution in the fragile sociopolitical landscape. It then proceeds with an examination of government policies and regulations, detailing the legal framework, key laws and recent legislative changes affecting social media. Finally, it explores the social impact of these regulations, focusing on freedom of speech and the daily lives of citizens, and journalists, highlighting how censorship affects communication and information sharing.

Background on Social Media in Pakistan

Social media platforms have become integral to Pakistan's digital landscape, offering diverse avenues for communication, expression, and engagement across various demographics.

As of June 2024, Facebook dominates the social media landscape in Pakistan with a commanding 95.45% share. It stands out as the most widely used platform, attracting millions of active users from urban and rural areas alike. Facebook serves as a multifaceted tool for personal networking, business promotion, political campaigning, and social activism. Following Facebook, YouTube and Instagram maintain notable but comparatively smaller user bases at 1.67% and 1.56%, respectively. YouTube enjoys significant popularity for its diverse video content, spanning entertainment and educational materials in Urdu, English, and regional languages. Instagram, on the other hand, is rapidly gaining ground among younger Pakistanis fascinated by visual content, such as fashion influencers and artists.

Pinterest and Twitter cater to more specialized audiences, with usage rates of 0.58% and 0.54%, respectively. LinkedIn, focusing on professional networking, holds a modest 0.1% share. These statistics underscore Facebook's pervasive influence in shaping digital connectivity and online discourse across the country.

Social media in Pakistan began gaining significant traction in the early 2010s, driven by increasing internet penetration and widespread mobile phone usage. Platforms like Facebook and Twitter quickly became popular, reflecting the country's growing digital

connectivity, particularly among urban youth. The journey of social media development in Pakistan started with the introduction of dial-up email services in the 1990s and expanded in 1996 when the internet was extended to major cities through a sustainable development marketing program. The establishment of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) further improved internet bandwidth and accessibility, facilitating broader use of online platforms. By 2014, Pakistan had around 20 million social media users, with Facebook being the most visited site.

However, the path of social media development has been marked by significant challenges and regulatory hurdles. The government has frequently intervened to control content, citing religious sensitivities and national security concerns. Notable instances include the 2008 YouTube ban over "anti-Islamic" videos, the 2010 Facebook ban following a Lahore High Court order related to a controversial page encouraging users to post drawings of the Prophet Muhammad, and the 2012 YouTube shutdown in response to the "Innocence of Muslims" film. These actions underscore the ongoing tension between maintaining religious sensitivity and upholding freedom of expression.

Despite these periodic restrictions, social media's influence continued to grow, playing a pivotal role in amplifying voices, mobilizing social movements, and facilitating political participation. During crises like the 2010 floods, social media became a crucial tool for coordinating relief efforts and disseminating information. Additionally, it has been instrumental in advocating for social causes such as women's rights and minority issues, highlighting abuses, and mobilizing support for reform. As politicians increasingly use these platforms to connect with constituents, social media has also reshaped political campaigning and public discourse, although its potential for large-scale political change remains constrained by factors such as low internet penetration in rural areas and the enduring influence of traditional media.

Government Policies and Regulations

Pakistan's legal framework governing social media is complex and continually evolving, with the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) serving as the primary regulatory body overseeing digital communications. Key legal instruments, such as the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016, aim to prevent and combat cybercrimes by imposing stringent penalties for offenses like cyber terrorism, electronic fraud, and hate speech, while also protecting data integrity and confidentiality. The PTA, in conjunction with the Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication (MoITT), has the authority to regulate content, block material that violates moral and ethical standards, promotes terrorism, or undermines national security, and enforce compliance with local regulations such as data localization and cooperation with law enforcement.

In recent years, legislative changes have intensified regulatory oversight, raising significant concerns about freedom of expression and human rights. The Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight, and Safeguards) Rules 2020

empower the PTA to remove or block content deemed contrary to the glory of Islam, security of Pakistan, public order, or decency and morality. These rules have been criticized for potentially infringing on freedom of expression and leading to over-censorship, with social media companies questioning the feasibility and impact of compliance. Critics argue that the broad and vague criteria for content removal could be used to suppress dissent and limit the free exchange of ideas. Social media companies operating in Pakistan have also expressed concerns about the feasibility and impact of complying with these stringent regulations. They argue that the requirements could lead to over-censorship, stifling creativity and innovation on digital platforms. Furthermore, the lack of clear guidelines on what constitutes unlawful content adds to the uncertainty, making it difficult for companies to navigate the regulatory landscape. Additionally, the Draft Data Protection Bill 2020 and the Cyber Security Policy 2021 propose stricter data protection obligations and increased regulatory oversight, further complicating the landscape for social media platforms operating in Pakistan.

These developments illustrate a tightening grip on digital communications, posing challenges to free expression and digital rights in the country. While the intention behind these regulations is to create a safer and more secure digital environment, the implications for civil liberties are profound. The balance between security and freedom is delicate, and there is a growing concern that the current trajectory of regulatory changes might tilt too far towards control and surveillance, at the expense of individual rights and freedoms. As the legal landscape continues to evolve, it will be crucial for policymakers to carefully consider the implications of their actions, ensuring that the digital space remains a place for open and free communication while safeguarding the interests of the nation.

Impact on Society

Censorship in Pakistan significantly affects journalists, bloggers, and ordinary citizens. Journalists often face risks such as harassment or legal action when reporting on sensitive topics like political corruption or human rights abuses. This environment of fear can lead to self-censorship, compromising the diversity and quality of news coverage. Bloggers and independent content creators may also face scrutiny, with their work subject to potential removal or shutdown based on regulatory guidelines.

For ordinary citizens, censorship impacts their ability to freely express opinions and access information. Restrictions on certain topics and the blocking of content limit public debate and hinder the dissemination of crucial information, thereby affecting democratic engagement and informed citizenship.

Everyday Life

In everyday life, censorship influences communication and information sharing. Users may experience restricted access to specific topics or face difficulties discussing politically sensitive subjects. The pervasive environment of surveillance and monitoring can create a climate of caution, where individuals are wary of what they post or share online. This

atmosphere stifles open dialogue and limits the opportunities for meaningful engagement on important issues, impacting the vibrancy and effectiveness of public discourse.

Conclusion

The evolution of social media in Pakistan illustrates a complex interplay between technological progress and regulatory challenges. While social media has transformed communication and public engagement, it also faces significant hurdles related to censorship and freedom of speech. The regulatory landscape continues to evolve, striving to balance security concerns with the need to uphold civil liberties. As Pakistan navigates these complexities, it is crucial to find a balance that supports both digital innovation and the fundamental rights of its citizens, ensuring that the digital space remains open and conducive to free expression.

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