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The Journey of Traditional Media to Modern Journalism in Pakistan

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Abstract

This study critically examines the historical trajectory and contemporary terrain of journalism in Pakistan, its journey from the print activism of the colonial period to the multi-encoded map of digital age complexity. Informed by Habermas's Public Sphere Theory, Media Systems Theory and Political Economy of Communication, the research explores how political, technological and regulatory factors have influenced the mode, autonomy and influence of Pakistani journalism at distinct historical junctures. Using a qualitative research strategy based on systematic analysis of secondary data, the initiative compiles, analyses and synthesizes scholarly articles, books, policy documents and case studies in order to empower the construction of a thematic and temporal storyline.

The evidence suggests that the journalism of Pakistan has always oscillated between cycles of freedom and coercion, with each advance or descent— from the growth of the Urdu press and the state-imposed airwaves to the dawn of privately owned television and digital technology — bringing new opportunities and challenges. Liberalization and digital platforms on the one hand have democratized news production and increased access to information, but they have also presented new risks, sensation, misinformation, online harassment and regulatory uncertainty included. The normative ideal of an open, rational-critical public sphere remains only tenuously realized, as government control and commercial influences, as well as structural inequalities, still circumscribe the press's capacity to discharge democratic functions on a regular basis.

The study's final suggestion is the need for wide ranging regulatory reform, updated ethical standards for digital journalism, media literacy campaigns, and better safeguards for journalists. These reforms are necessary to move towards a more independent, ethical and inclusive media that will be better positioned to meet the democratic potential of journalism in Pakistan's rapidly shifting national landscape.

Introduction

Background/Context

The media climate in Pakistan has changed dramatically over the past century, a fact that not only reflects the country's stormy political journey but also its incredible technological development. From its colonial past where newspaper was seen as a weapon to resist imperial rule, a deluge of private television channels came, subsequently overtaken by digital and social media, journalism has changed with the rest of governance, society and technology in Pakistan

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over the years (Khan, 2024; Paracha, 2015). Print media, such as Jam-i-Jahan Numa and Zamindar, have played a central role in building the political consciousness of Muslims in British India and the Pakistan movement (Paracha 2015, Jalal 1996). Post independence, the state imposed tighter control on print as well as broadcast journalism through the instruments of law and regulatory bodies in controlling the content of media and silencing dissent (Jalal, 1996; Maqsood, 2020).

The early 2000s ushered in a new era with the liberalization of broadcasting, first under President Musharraf, broadcasting was allowed which gave birth to a number of private television channels including Geo News, ARY News, Dunya News, and many others (Abbas 2019; Yusuf, 2011). These changes, in increasing pluralism and access to the information, were accompanied by challenges such as sensationalism, political bias, and reinforced state-media confrontation (Ali et al., 2021). Between 2010 and 2019, the revolution of access to the internet has democratized information flows, facilitated citizen journalism, and revolutionized news consumption patterns (Baig, 2020; Khan, 2022). Social media sites Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube have emerged as key sites of public discussion, grassroots activism, and live reportage, but also as sites of disinformation, cyberbullying, and political interference (Hussain 2023; EU DisinfoLab 2021).

Research Problem/Justification

Despite these shifts in technology and regulation, Pakistani journalism remains fraught. State and legal limitations, e.g., the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016, coupled with violence against journalists, restrict media independence and rattle critical debate (Khilji, 2021; UNESCO, 2023). The rise of digital media, for instance, has not solved previous issues but amplified them, including the fast transmission of fake news, the increasing political polarization, and the impact of algorithm-based echo chambers (Baig, 2020; Al-Zoubi et al., 2024). The rise of artificial intelligence, podcasting, and mobile journalism offers new opportunities for innovation but also new ethical and professional challenges (Ahmed, 2023; Aziz, 2023). The legal system follows and struggles to grapple with the competing interests of national security, press freedom, and public accountability (Khilji, 2021).

There is an urgent need for research that moves beyond such a chronology and engages with political, technological and ethical forces, to evaluate how they have influenced the course of the ever-changing practice of journalism in Pakistan. The literature provides important historical and descriptive detachment of accounts of media systems, but somewhat fair in an integrated analysis of sense of changing media technologies, regulatory patterns, societal hopes, and correlation of these trends which redefine the profession and the role it plays in democracy (Khan, 2024; Ali et al, 2021; Hussain, 2023).

Aims and Objectives

This project aims to provide a comprehensive and critical analysis of the evolution of journalism in Pakistan from traditional print media to the digital age. The specific objectives are:

- To trace the historical development of journalism in Pakistan, focusing on key turning points such as the colonial period, post-independence state control, the liberalization of broadcast media, and the digital revolution.
- To critically analyze the main forces—political, technological, and regulatory—that have shaped media practices, autonomy, and public trust across different periods.
- To examine the contemporary challenges and opportunities facing journalism, especially in the context of digital media, citizen journalism, and artificial intelligence.

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- To propose recommendations for promoting ethical, independent, and innovative journalism that can strengthen democratic processes and public accountability in Pakistan.

Research Questions

To achieve these objectives, the project will address the following research questions:

- How has journalism in Pakistan evolved from the colonial era to the present digital landscape?
- What are the major challenges and opportunities facing journalists and media organizations in Pakistan today?
- How do political, technological, and regulatory factors influence media autonomy, professional standards, and public trust?
- What strategies can be adopted to ensure ethical, independent, and resilient journalism in Pakistan's changing media ecosystem?

Literature Review

Thematic and Critical Review

I. Colonial Roots and Early Print Activism

The roots of journalism in Pakistan are set in the colonial period, when newspapers were key sites for anti-imperial resistance and nation-building. Publications, like Jam-i-Jahan Numa and Zamindar in early years, were not only sources of information but also means for political mobilization of the Muslims in British India (Paracha, 2015). Paracha (2015) observes that these newspapers paved the way for subsequent journalistic activism, and nurtured a tradition of journalism and politics being interwoven. Jalal (1996) reinforces his point, saying English print media of colonial India not only served as a source of news information but also helped construct a new domain of shared perception and shared interest, mobilizing the public opinion for the Pakistan Movement.

But the press that helped independence would soon find itself subject to state censorship after 1947. Jalal (1996) and Maqsood (2020) have been reminding that the media had been treated by subsequent Pakistani regimes not only as a means of nation-building but also control. Although newspapers such as Dawn and Nawa-i-Waqt acquired household recognition over the years, these newspapers continued to remain confined under both legal restrictions and directives from the regulatory authorities for editorial independence.

II. Post-Independence Media and State Control

Following independence, the position of the media vis-a-vis the state became more complicated and contentious. As Abbas (2019) and Maqsood (2020) have suggested, in Pakistan the spate of the military and civilian rules have shown a tendency of going back and forth in terms of allowing and silencing the freedom of media to increase their power. Retrospectively, they led to an atmosphere of self-censorship and caution due to the imposition of repressive laws like the Press and Publications Ordinance (1963) and the grip of military tyrants such as Ayub Khan and Zia-ul-Haq (Jalal, 1996; Abbas, 2019). While government channels such as PTV (Pakistan Television) and Radio Pakistan aimed to create a national narrative, they were widely condemned for being propaganda-driven and suppressing of dissent (Iqbal, 2013).

In spite of these limitations, some eras also saw brave muckraking. Dawn and Jang are a case in point having learnt from and negotiated state pressures in disclosing matters of public interest with inevitable intimidation, closure or cooption by the state also characterizing their efforts (Hussain, 2023; Khan, 2024).

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III. Media Liberalization and the Rise of Private Channels

One of its seismic shifts came from the early 2000s when the broadcast industry was opened up during the rule of General Pervez Musharraf. The development of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) in 2002 marked the end of state broadcasting monopoly and opening avenues for dozens of private television stations (Yusuf, 2011). Geo News, ARY News and Dunya News established new talk shows and investigative journalism in the genres (Abbas, 2019; Ali, Ghaznavi and Khan, 2021). This era is generally attributed to enhancing news accessibility, encouraging public discussion and unveiling political dishonesty (Kamboh, Hameed, & Ittefaq, 2023).

Yet academics caution that media liberalization had its downsides. Ali et al. (2021) claim that a "ratings war" fostered sensationalism, partisanship and the degradation of professional standards. Kamboh et al. (2023) are likely to collaborate to certainly biased reporting probably a threat to the watchdog function of the press as well. There was no rigorous journalistic education and code of ethics to set the overall frame of news so that commercial and political interests could not dictate news agendas (Chaudhary et al., 2025).

IV. Digital Revolution, Social Media, and Citizen Journalism

One of the greatest disruptive effects on Pakistani journalism has undoubtedly been the advent of the digital revolution in recent times. The number of internets users in Pakistan grew from fewer than 10 million in 2005 to over 87 million by 2025 (Khan, 2024). Social media platforms of prominent newspapers such as Dawn. com and The Express Tribune, among others, turned into the go-to news websites for many while user-generated content websites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube allowed members of the public to take part in news production and distribution themselves (Baig, 2020; Khan, 2022).

The result has been a democratization of information - and also new vulnerabilities. Misinformation infects at the speed of light: EU DisinfoLab (2021) explains how the falsehoods spread, with 65 percent of all Pakistanis being exposed to false news weekly. Baig (2020) and Shah, Rashid, & Adnan (2022) detail how social media can be used for grassroots activism (e.g., #PashtunLongMarch), but also for harassment, echo chambers, and surveillance by the state. Particularly, women journalists receive unequal online abuse and threats (UNESCO, 2023; Hussain, 2023).

V. Artificial Intelligence, Podcasts, and Mobile Journalism

New frontiers in journalism are being opened up by emerging technologies. Ahmed (2023) and Al-Zoubi, Ahmad, and Hamid (2024) investigate how artificial intelligence (AI) is used in newsroom automation, data journalism, personalized news feeds. Even though AI applications may maximize efficiency and reach, scholars warn that depending on automated content threaten to inject editorial bias and dilute responsibility (Al-Zoubi et al. Likewise, the emergence of podcasts and mobile journalism is expanding content and attracting younger readers, but the lack of regulation and sustainable models for monetization continues to be problematic (Aziz, 2023; Baig, 2020).

VI. Regulatory and Ethical Challenges

Lastly, regulations in Pakistan are unable to keep up with technology. Khilji (2021) contends that statutes like PEMRA, PECA (2016) are antiquated, selectively implemented, and occasionally act as weapons to silence opposing voice instead of serving the public. Hussain (2023) and UNESCO (2023) report instances of legal intimidation, preemptive shutdowns, and

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virtual harassment of journalists, which have instilled fear. The absence of substantive, future-oriented regulatory framework for both innovation and media independence is widely acknowledged (Khilji, 2021; Abbas, 2019).

Gaps in Existing Research

Technology Policy and Practice Integration:

The majority of the literature look at technology innovation or regulation challenges separately. Few deliver systemic analyses of the way that technological, social, and ethical drivers interplay to influence the development of journalism (Khan, 2024; Khilji, 2021).

Empirical work on AI and Emerging Tools:

Although some researchers have discussed the possibility of artificial intelligence and mobile journalism, there is little empirical evidence on how these opportunities have been realized, and their impact on the quality of news and ethical challenges, in the Pakistani context (Ahmed, 2023; Al-Zoubi et al., 2024).

Gender and Region Aspect:

However, there is little available data on the special dangers faced by female journalists, minority communities, and rural citizens, although reports on their greater vulnerability to risks on the Internet and while off-line are increasing (UNESCO, 2023; Hussain, 2023).

Comparative and Longitudinal Comparisons:

The literature still remains deficient as far as comparative research investigating how Pakistani journalism compares with other South Asian situations such as how media reforms affect the journalism field in the long run is concerned (Chaudhary et al., 2025; Khan, 2024).

Media Literacy and Trust:

Media literacy among Pakistani public and trust in different types of media, and their relations with vulnerability to misinformation Few studies provided a systematic investigation related to the media literacy and trustworthiness in numerous forms of media and their correlations with the susceptibility to misinformation among the Pakistani public (Baig, 2020; EU DisinfoLab, 2021).

In conclusion, the long history of Pakistani journalism stretching through periods of activism, state control, deregulation, and digital innovation raises questions about the complex interplay of technology, regulation, and professional work. The field could do with additional empirical, comparative and interdisciplinary research, in particular given the evolving digital reality of AI, mobile platforms and social media in redefining the contours of journalistic labour.

Theoretical Framework

A robust theoretical framework is essential for critically analyzing the evolution of journalism in Pakistan, especially in understanding the complex relationship between media, society, and the state. This study adopts Habermas's Public Sphere Theory as its primary lens, complemented by insights from Media Systems Theory and Political Economy of Communication.

Habermas's Public Sphere Theory

The Public Sphere Theory, first articulated by Jürgen Habermas (1989), conceptualizes the media as a space where individuals come together to discuss and debate matters of public interest, ideally free from state or corporate interference. Habermas posits that a vibrant public sphere is fundamental to democracy because it enables rational-critical discourse and holds authorities

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accountable. The media, in this model, acts as both a platform and facilitator of public debate, informing citizens and enabling participatory governance (Habermas, 1989).

In the context of Pakistan, the evolution of journalism can be seen as a struggle over the boundaries, accessibility, and independence of the public sphere. Colonial newspapers such as *Jam-i-Jahan Numa* and *Zamindar* provided a nascent public sphere for anti-colonial discourse (Paracha, 2015). However, after independence, state-controlled media outlets like PTV and Radio Pakistan narrowed this sphere, using their monopoly to promote state narratives and suppress dissent (Jalal, 1996; Iqbal, 2013). The liberalization of media in the 2000s expanded the public sphere through private channels, yet also introduced challenges of sensationalism, polarization, and partisan bias (Abbas, 2019; Ali et al., 2021).

The recent digital revolution has further complicated the dynamics of the public sphere. Social media platforms, online journalism, and citizen reporting have diversified voices, making the public sphere more inclusive but also more fragmented and vulnerable to misinformation (Baig, 2020; EU DisinfoLab, 2021). The Pakistani case thus exemplifies both the potential and limitations of the public sphere, as new technologies enable wider participation but also introduce new forms of control and manipulation.

Media Systems Theory and Political Economy

While Public Sphere Theory provides a normative ideal, Media Systems Theory (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and the Political Economy of Communication (McChesney, 2008) offer practical frameworks to analyze how media structures, ownership, and regulatory environments shape journalism. In Pakistan, the dominance of state and corporate interests, the influence of military and political actors, and the commercial pressures of the digital age have all impacted the autonomy and diversity of the media system (Kamboh et al., 2023; Khilji, 2021).

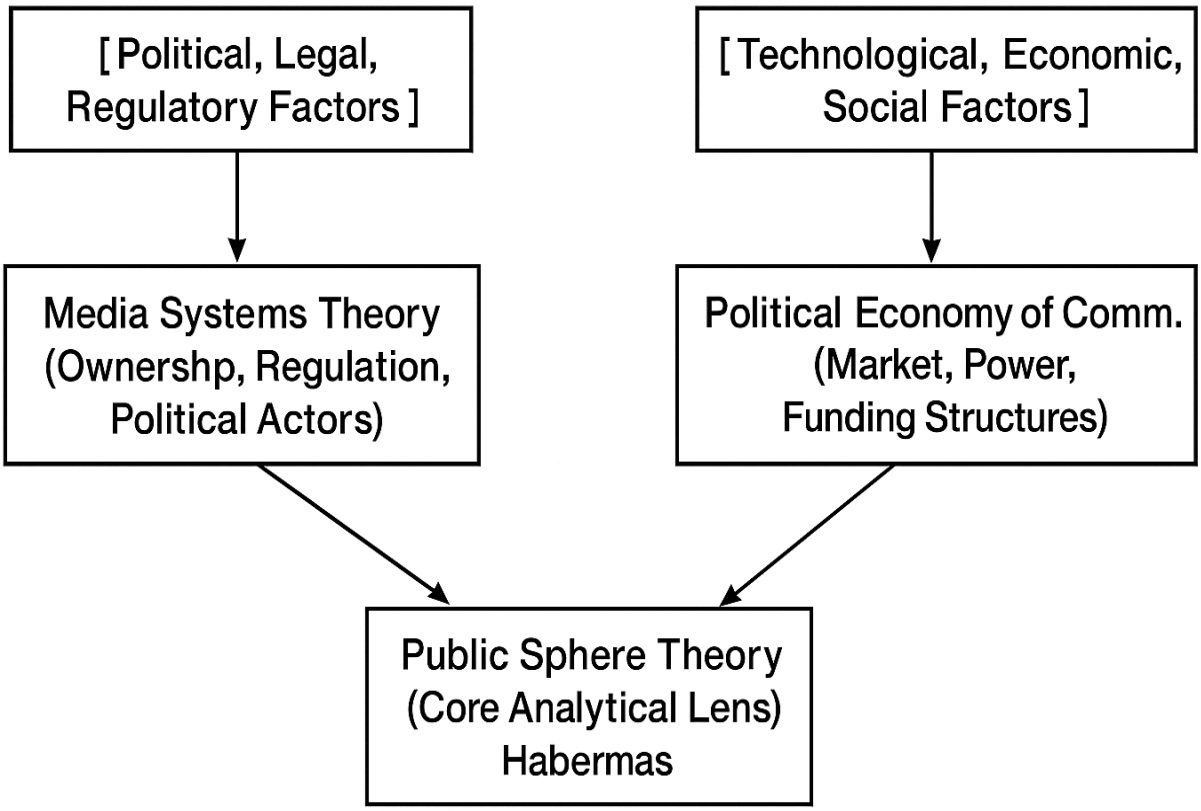
Framework Application

By combining Public Sphere Theory with these complementary perspectives, this project examines:

- How the boundaries of the public sphere have shifted with changes in media technology and policy,
- How structural and economic factors impact the independence and pluralism of journalism,
- What digital media both democratizes and fragments public discourse in Pakistan.

This theoretical lens enables a nuanced analysis of the persistent tensions between state control, market forces, technological disruption, and the democratic ideals of journalism.

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Theoretical Framework

Methodology

A robust methodology is essential for critically investigating the evolution of journalism in Pakistan, particularly given the project's focus on historical and contemporary developments influenced by technological, regulatory, and sociopolitical factors. This research employs a qualitative approach, drawing primarily on systematic secondary data analysis. The methodology is structured around the following key elements: research design, data sources and collection, analytical approach, and limitations and ethical considerations.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design appropriate for exploring complex social and historical phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The research is descriptive and exploratory, aiming to trace the trajectory of journalism in Pakistan from its colonial origins to the contemporary digital landscape. Qualitative research is particularly suited to unpacking the interplay of cultural, political, and technological dynamics that have shaped Pakistani media over time. Instead of generating numerical data, the study emphasizes nuanced understanding through critical engagement with a wide range of textual materials, academic analyses, and case studies.

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Data Sources and Collection

Secondary Data:

The primary data source for this research is systematic secondary data analysis. This involves reviewing and synthesizing existing literature, including:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles from reputable databases (e.g., Scopus, JSTOR, Google Scholar)
- Books and monographs on Pakistani journalism, media studies, and political communication
- Official reports from organizations such as UNESCO, PFUJ (Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists), and EU DisinfoLab
- Media archives and case studies illustrating significant developments and incidents in Pakistani media
- Relevant legal documents and regulatory frameworks (e.g., PEMRA, PECA)

A rigorous inclusion criterion was adopted, prioritizing sources published within the last 10 years to ensure contemporary relevance, with foundational historical texts included for context (Khan, 2024; Abbas, 2019; Jalal, 1996).

Analytical Approach

Thematic and Chronological Analysis:

The data were analyzed thematically, guided by the Public Sphere Theory and supplemented by Media Systems Theory and Political Economy approaches. Key themes included:

- Colonial roots and print activism
- Post-independence state control and censorship
- Broadcast liberalization and media pluralism
- The digital revolution, social media, and citizen journalism
- Regulatory, ethical, and technological challenges

A chronological framework was employed to illustrate the evolution of journalism across distinct historical periods. Critical discourse analysis was used to examine how power relations, regulatory policies, and technological innovations have influenced the autonomy, structure, and professional standards of the Pakistani media system (Fairclough, 2015).

Synthesis and Critical Evaluation:

The analysis went beyond summary, engaging critically with source materials to highlight contradictions, gaps, and areas of consensus or contestation within the literature.

Limitations and Ethics

Limitations:

- The study is limited by its exclusive reliance on secondary data, which may be subject to the biases and limitations of existing literature.
- The absence of primary data (e.g., interviews or surveys) means that direct perspectives from contemporary Pakistani journalists or media consumers are not included.
- The study's scope is broad; depth in any single historical period may be constrained by the need for an overarching analysis.

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Ethical Considerations:

- As no primary data was collected and no human participants were involved, risks related to privacy or consent are minimal.
- Care was taken to ensure that all secondary data sources are credible, properly cited, and used in accordance with fair use and academic standards (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).
- Potential biases in source material were acknowledged, and efforts were made to present a balanced perspective by triangulating findings from multiple reputable sources.

Analysis/Findings

This section critically analyzes the evolution of journalism in Pakistan through three interconnected eras: the colonial and early independence period, the era of broadcast liberalization, and the digital/social media age. Each era is assessed thematically, using the Public Sphere Theory to interpret how political, technological, and regulatory forces have shaped journalism's capacity to serve democratic discourse.

Colonial and Early Independence Period: Journalism as Activism and Nation-Building

The emergence of journalism in colonial India was rooted in resistance and political activism. Newspapers such as *Jam-i-Jahan Numa* and *Zamindar* were not passive chroniclers but active participants in shaping political consciousness, especially among Muslims seeking independence from British rule (Paracha, 2015). These early newspapers operated as fledgling "public spheres," offering limited but vital platforms for dissent and debate outside the control of colonial authorities (Jalal, 1996).

Critical Interpretation:

Habermas's (1989) vision of the public sphere is only partially realized in this context. While the press provided a forum for anti-imperial discourse, access was limited by literacy, colonial regulations, and social hierarchy. Nevertheless, the synergy between journalism and political mobilization established a tradition where the press was seen as both a tool for social change and a target for state control (Paracha, 2015; Jalal, 1996).

Post-independence:

Following 1947, newspapers like *Dawn*, *Nawa-i-Waqt*, and *Jang* transitioned from nation-building to navigating the complexities of a new state. However, their autonomy was soon tested by Pakistan's oscillation between democratic and authoritarian rule (Jalal, 1996; Abbas, 2019). Press freedom was repeatedly curtailed by military regimes through both overt censorship and subtle economic pressures. While the press occasionally played a watchdog role, it often faced reprisals, co-option, or co-opted itself to survive (Maqsood, 2020).

Broadcast Liberalization: Pluralism, Sensationalism, and New Power Struggles

The 1980s–2000s were dominated by state-controlled broadcasting—Radio Pakistan and PTV—which functioned as extensions of state policy. Programming reflected official narratives, stifling diversity and limiting the public's exposure to dissenting views (Iqbal, 2013; Jalal, 1996).

Liberalization and the private channel boom:

The early 2000s marked a turning point, as military ruler Pervez Musharraf initiated media reforms leading to the establishment of PEMRA (Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority) and the rapid expansion of private television channels (Abbas, 2019). Channels such as Geo News, ARY News, and Dunya News broke the state monopoly, introducing new formats—live debates, investigative journalism, and public call-in shows (Yusuf, 2011).

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Critical Interpretation:

The pluralism introduced by broadcast liberalization aligns with Habermas's ideal of a more accessible and inclusive public sphere. However, the commercial logic of ratings, advertising revenue, and market competition led to new forms of distortion. Ali, Ghaznavi, and Khan (2021) argue that sensationalism, partisanship, and a relentless "breaking news" culture often supplanted nuanced reporting and analysis. Kamboh, Hameed, and Ittefaq (2023) emphasize that political actors and corporate owners continued to exert significant influence, sometimes fostering bias and self-censorship within ostensibly "free" channels.

Impact:

While private media increased the diversity of voices and brought issues such as government corruption and human rights abuses into the public spotlight, the rise of sensational and polarized reporting deepened social divisions and sometimes compromised journalistic integrity (Baig, 2020; Kamboh et al., 2023). The watchdog function of the media was thus enhanced but unevenly applied, often depending on the political climate and ownership interests.

The Digital and Social Media Age: Democratization, Fragmentation, and New Risks

The past decade has witnessed the most rapid and disruptive changes, with over 87 million Pakistanis online by 2025 (Khan, 2024). News outlets like *Dawn.com* and *The Express Tribune* have reoriented their reporting for digital consumption, offering multimedia storytelling, real-time updates, and interactive features (Khan, 2022).

Social media and citizen journalism:

Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube have radically democratized news production and distribution, empowering ordinary citizens and activists to challenge official narratives and mobilize support for causes (Baig, 2020; Shah, Rashid, & Adnan, 2022). Hashtag activism (#PashtunLongMarch, #ReleasePoliticalPrisoners) and viral videos have forced mainstream media and policymakers to address grassroots issues.

Critical Interpretation:

From a public sphere perspective, these technologies vastly expand the number of participants and break traditional gatekeeping mechanisms. However, this democratization is double-edged: EU DisinfoLab (2021) found that 65% of Pakistanis are regularly exposed to fake news, while Baig (2020) notes that online harassment, disinformation, and echo chambers threaten civil debate. Instead of rational-critical discourse, social media often amplifies polarization and misinformation.

Regulatory and professional dilemmas:

Attempts to regulate digital media (e.g., PECA 2016) often lag behind technology and risk curbing legitimate dissent (Khilji, 2021). Journalists face threats both offline (physical violence, legal harassment) and online (gendered abuse, trolling). Women and minority journalists are disproportionately targeted, compounding existing inequalities (UNESCO, 2023; Hussain, 2023).

Emerging trends:

The rise of mobile journalism, podcasts, and artificial intelligence further complicates the landscape. Mobile reporting has enabled real-time coverage of remote events (Aziz, 2023), but new monetization and ethical dilemmas emerge. AI tools, while promising efficiency, risk introducing bias and automation without accountability (Ahmed, 2023; Al-Zoubi, Ahmad, & Hamid, 2024).

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Comparative and Cumulative Insights

Comparing these eras reveals recurring themes:

Persistent struggle for media autonomy: Each new technology or regulatory shift offers opportunities for greater pluralism, but state and market actors continue to contest and often restrict independent journalism.

Fragmentation and polarization: The growth in the number of voices (especially in the digital age) has not always translated to healthier democratic debate. Instead, both broadcast and social media eras have seen rising sensationalism, partisanship, and misinformation.

Shifting boundaries of the public sphere: While colonial and early post-independence journalism laid foundations for civic discourse, the privatization of broadcast media and rise of social platforms have both expanded and fragmented the public sphere, raising new challenges for accountability, trust, and inclusiveness.

Overall Critical Interpretation:

Journalism in Pakistan has demonstrated resilience and adaptability, yet it remains constrained by both old and new forms of power—state censorship, corporate ownership, regulatory lag, and technological disruption. The field stands at a crossroads, with digital innovation presenting as many challenges as opportunities for fulfilling its democratic role.

Table 1

Chronological Evolution of Journalism in Pakistan

Era/Period	Key Developments	Main Actors/Institutions	Public Sphere Role
Colonial Era (pre-1947)	Emergence of Urdu/English press; political activism	Jam-i-Jahan Numa, Zamindar	Anti-colonial mobilization
Early Independence (1947–80s)	Expansion of print media; state censorship	Dawn, Nawa-i-Waqt, PTV	Nation-building, limited dissent
Broadcast Liberalization (2002–2010)	Rise of private TV channels, pluralism	Geo News, ARY, Dunya, PEMRA	Expanded debate, new biases
Digital/Social Media Age (2010–present)	Internet penetration, citizen journalism	Dawn.com, Express Tribune, Social Platforms	Democratic access, fragmentation

Note. Adapted from Abbas (2019); Khan (2024); Baig (2020); Paracha (2015).

Table 1 Analysis

Table 1 traces the trajectory of journalism in Pakistan, showing a transition from activism under colonial rule to state-dominated narratives after independence, then to a pluralistic but commercially driven broadcast sector, and finally to a fragmented digital landscape. Each era offered new avenues for public engagement but also introduced new forms of control and bias (Abbas, 2019; Khan, 2024).

Table 2

Thematic Analysis: Challenges and Opportunities Across Eras

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Era/Period	Major Challenges	Key Opportunities	Critical Issues Identified
Colonial/Early Print	Colonial censorship, low literacy	Anti-imperial mobilization, nation-building	Limited access, political risk
State Control (1947–2000)	Censorship, propaganda, press repression	Press growth, cautious investigative journalism	Co-option by state, lack of autonomy
Broadcast Liberalization	Sensationalism, partisan bias, corporate control	Increased pluralism, investigative reporting	Watchdog function, ratings-driven reporting
Digital/Social Media Age	Misinformation, polarization, online harassment	Citizen participation, rapid mobilization	Regulatory lag, gendered/ethnic abuse

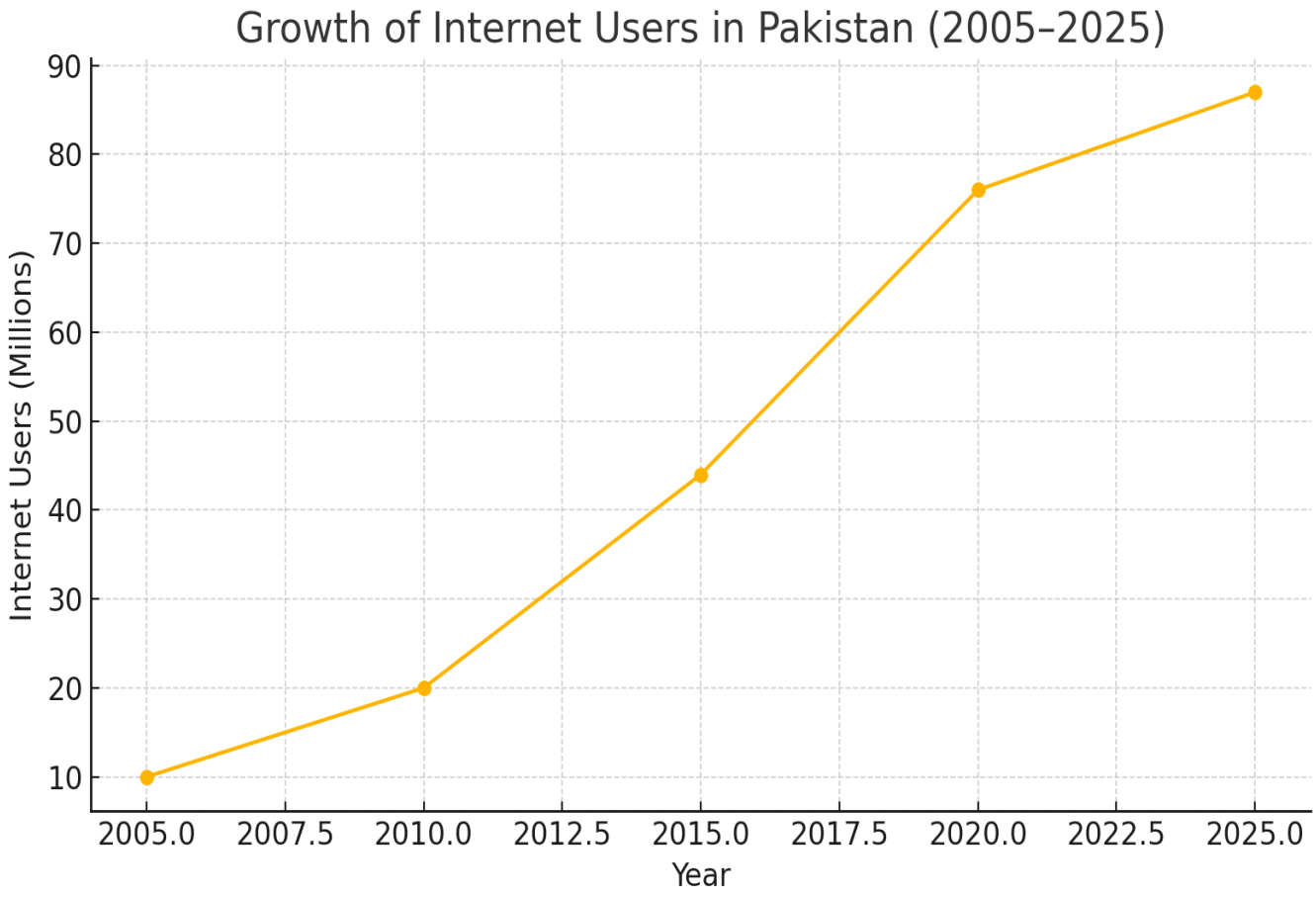
Note. Summarized from Baig (2020); Khilji (2021); Ali et al. (2021); EU DisinfoLab (2021).

Table 2 Analysis

Table 2 highlights how each era's technological and regulatory landscape produced unique sets of challenges and opportunities. While the digital age has democratized information, it has also fostered fragmentation, misinformation, and new vulnerabilities for marginalized voices, revealing the need for adaptive regulation and media literacy initiatives (Baig, 2020; Khilji, 2021).

Analysis for Each Graph

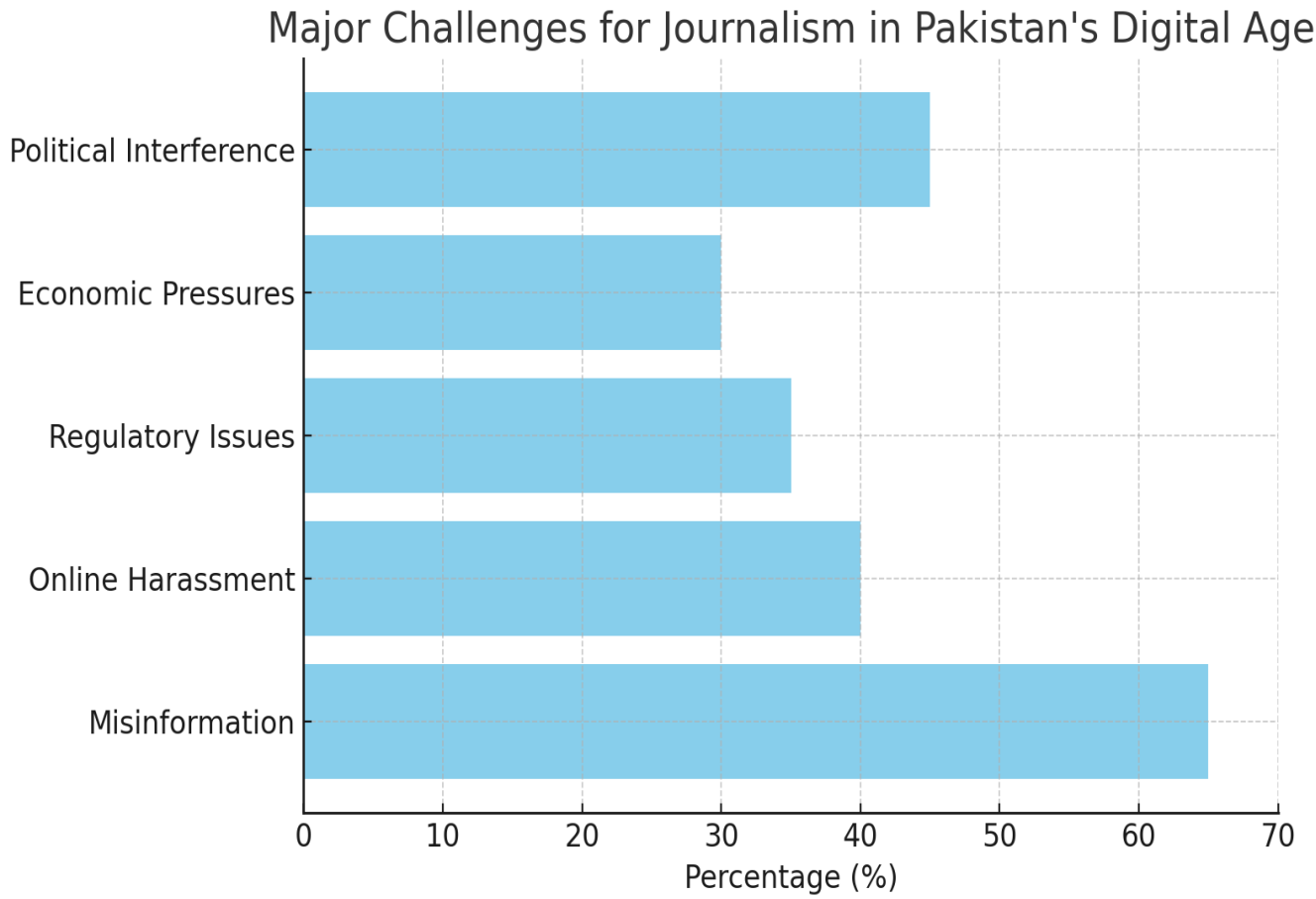
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Graph 1: Growth of Internet Users in Pakistan (2005–2025)

This graph shows a dramatic rise in internet adoption, from 10 million users in 2005 to an estimated 87 million by 2025. This exponential growth underpins the rapid shift of Pakistani journalism toward digital platforms and citizen-driven content. The digital transformation has democratized news production and access, but also accelerated the spread of misinformation and created new regulatory and ethical challenges (Khan, 2024; Baig, 2020).

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Graph 2: Major Challenges for Journalism in Pakistan's Digital Age

The horizontal bar chart highlights that misinformation is the most significant challenge, affecting 65% of journalists and media consumers (EU DisinfoLab, 2021). Online harassment (40%) and political interference (45%) also rank high, showing that new media freedoms coexist with persistent risks. Regulatory issues and economic pressures reflect the struggle of journalists to adapt to both new laws and unstable revenue models, underscoring the need for robust legal protections and innovative business practices (Baig, 2020; Khilji, 2021).

Discussion

Implications for Theory and Related Literatures

Aim This study aimed to critically examine the trajectory of journalism in Pakistan within the framework of Habermas's Public Sphere Theory, supplemented by Media Systems Theory and the Political Economy of Communication. In doing so, they highlight the complex, tacitly antagonistic engagements surrounding technological transformation, state control, and societal reconfiguration—the historical modes of a highly context-specific and era-driven process.

Habermas's Public Sphere Theory is a useful lens through which to understand the evolution of Pakistani journalism. This colonial and early post-colonial era illustrate how newspapers such as Jam-i-Jahan Numa and Zamindar served as circumscribed yet significant public spheres,

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enlisting anti-colonialist sentiment and promoting the cause of nationalism (Paracha, 2015; Jalal, 1996). But as literature also attests, the openness and inclusivity of this public sphere was marred by colonial regulations and social rankings—echoing Habermas's sentiment that the "ideal" public sphere is not often "actually realized" (Habermas, 1989).

As the analysis demonstrates, the postindependence period involved both expansion and suppression. The literature also emphasizes waves of press freedom and restriction (Jalal, 1996; Abbas, 2019; Maqsood, 2020). State-owned media have attempted to promote nation-building narratives albeit within monopolistic systems that restrict pluralism and critical discussion. This being consistent with McChesney's (2008) assertion regarding the adverse impact of state and corporate control with respect to the independence of media.

The 2000s liberalization of broadcasting, as discussed by Yusuf (2011) and Kamboh et al. (2023), broadened the public sphere and diversified debate, but at the cost of new patterns of distortion—sensationalism, commercial bias, and corporate or party meddling. This intricate relation is captured in both Habermas's and Hallin & Mancini's (2004) thinking, which warn that neither commercial, nor regulatory changes of themselves established more democratic media.

Digital/Social media's literature (Baig, 2020; Khan, 2024; EU DisinfoLab, 2021) would support that new technologies have democratized access to information and have empowered citizens to become players. But as the numbers and analysis show, this democratization is beset with new threats: misinformation, polarized discourse, online harassment and regulatory lag. These findings converge with recent criticisms about digital media's disruptive, rather than unifying, force in the public sphere (Baig, 2020; Khilji, 2021).

Addressing Research Questions

RQ1: How has journalism in Pakistan evolved from the colonial era to the digital landscape?

The project demonstrates a transition from journalism as political activism and nation-building to state-controlled narratives, and ultimately to a pluralistic but fragmented digital environment. Each era has presented both opportunities for democratic engagement and challenges of control, bias, or fragmentation.

RQ2: What are the major challenges and opportunities facing journalists and media organizations today?

Key challenges identified include state censorship, regulatory lag, misinformation, economic precarity, and gendered or ethnic harassment. Opportunities arise from technological innovation—AI, mobile journalism, podcasts—which expand reach and participation, though they also create new ethical and professional dilemmas.

RQ3: How do political, technological, and regulatory factors influence media autonomy, professional standards, and public trust?

Political actors and regulatory frameworks continue to shape the boundaries of media freedom, often using both traditional and digital laws to stifle dissent. Technology has increased access and speed but not always quality; public trust is threatened by sensationalism, misinformation, and perceived bias, echoing global trends (Khan, 2024; Baig, 2020).

RQ4: What strategies can be adopted to ensure ethical, independent, and resilient journalism?

Findings suggest the need for:

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Modernized regulatory frameworks that protect both freedom of expression and the public from harm

Robust media literacy programs to empower citizens against misinformation

Ethical guidelines for digital journalism and AI

Institutional support for journalist safety and diversity, especially for women and minorities

Critical Reflection: Strengths and Weaknesses

Strengths:

Comprehensive Scope: The project covers the entire historical evolution of journalism in Pakistan, providing context for contemporary developments and linking them to theoretical frameworks.

Thematic Depth: The analysis is structured thematically and chronologically, enabling nuanced interpretation of trends, continuities, and disruptions.

Critical Perspective: The project moves beyond description, offering critical engagement with both literature and empirical data, and drawing out tensions and contradictions in media evolution.

Weaknesses:

Reliance on Secondary Data: The absence of primary data (e.g., interviews with journalists, surveys of audience perceptions) limits the ability to offer first-hand insights or test findings empirically. While the use of secondary sources is methodologically justified for a historical/thematic analysis, future research could enrich understanding through fieldwork.

Limited Regional and Gender Analysis: While the analysis highlights challenges faced by women and minorities, these perspectives could be further deepened, particularly with respect to rural media, vernacular press, or non-mainstream digital spaces.

Rapidly Changing Landscape: The fast pace of technological and regulatory change means that some findings may soon be outdated. This is particularly true in areas like AI, where policy and practice are still emerging.

Reflection on Theoretical Framework:

The application of Public Sphere Theory illuminates the recurring struggle for a democratic media space, but also exposes its limitations in contexts characterized by recurring authoritarianism, regulatory capture, and new forms of digital manipulation. Combining this with Media Systems Theory and Political Economy perspectives provides a more grounded understanding of how structural, economic, and political constraints continue to shape—and sometimes undermine—the democratic potential of Pakistani journalism.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

This study critically analyzed the trajectory of journalism in Pakistan through the lens of Public Sphere Theory, Media Systems Theory, and the Political Economy of Communication to explain how historical, technological, and regulatory factors have influenced the media terrain of the country. The results demonstrate that journalism in Pakistan has gone through major changes—from its roots in anti-colonialist protest, going through states of state enslavement and media liberation, and today's new digital age of citizen journalism.

Key findings include:

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Vicious Circles of Freedom and Repression: Journalism has always swung between highs and lows in Pakistan, whether it is during colonial, military, or democratic rule. Despite technological developments that have opened spaces for public speech, political and legal circuits have tried, again and again, to limit the freedom of the press (Jalal, 1996; Abbas, 2019; Khilji, 2021).

Pluralism with Fragmentation The liberalization of broadcasting and the skyrocketing expansion of digital and social media platforms have democratized access to information, with a broader range of voices and perspectives. But this pluralism is tainted with sensationalism, partisanship and erosion of professional standard (Ali et al., 2021; Baig, 2020).

New Digital Threats: The three main priorities for the KBF are misinformation, online harassment and deepening polarization, along with the traditional threats of state censorship, violence and economic intimidation that it's long faced. New technologies, such as artificial intelligence and mobile journalism, also hold promise and risk, thus adding layers to the journalism landscape (EU DisinfoLab, 2021; Ahmed, 2023).

Unrealized Potential of the Public Sphere: Even with technological developments and the influence of regulatory conditions, the ideal-standards of the open, rational-critical public sphere are not met in their entirety. While persisting structural inequalities and regulatory time lags are in place, new modes of digital manipulation increasingly challenge the ability of journalism to uphold its role as a democratic watchdog and forum for rational debate (Habermas, 1989; Khan, 2024).

Recommendations

Modernizing of regulations and policy

Update media laws to today's digital journalism and citizen media reality. Regulatory regimes such as PEMRA and PECA should reflect values of openness, due process, and press freedom instead of becoming instruments capable of stifling or coercing (Khilji, 2021).

Create independent bodies for media oversight, including journalists, civil society, and digital experts to guarantee balanced, non-partisan enforcement.

Enhancing Ethical and Professional Values

Develop and enforce revised codes of ethics for both traditional and digital journalists that focus on topical issues including misinformation, verification of sources and the responsible use of A.I.

Provide training and professionalization to journalists on digital literacy, cybersecurity and investigative techniques, focusing on women and minority reporters.

Media Literacy and Newspaper Public Media Use Among newspaper readers, 2 in 3 Registered Readers of a local newspaper engage in a public service activity.

Include media literacy in school and media education at universities, in order to help citizens navigate news, differentiate between misinformation and provide them with tools to engage with digital public spheres (Baig, 2020).

Promote partnership between media outlets, schools and tech firms to create usable PSM learning resources.

There are other steps a place like Australia can and should take such as promoting an increased diversity and inclusion in news rooms – ensuring that otherwise under-represented voices and perspectives are taken into account can improve public discourse, help reduce horizons and biases…

Future Research Directions

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Interview journalists, editors, and clients to observe, first hand, today's challenges and opportunities.
Scrutinize implications of Artificial Intelligence, mobile journalism, and emerging business models for media pluralism and ethics and financial sustainability in Pakistan.
Conduct cross-national research to learn what the best solutions are for the struggle between the forces of innovation, regulation and freedom in swiftly changing media.
To summarize, Pakistan's journalism sector is at a crossroads, a product of a hardy tradition of activism, foiled by recurring cycles of manipulation and animated by new digital opportunities. Coalitions of organizations should join together to make this happen at national and local level in all countries with the aim of raising the quality bar for news once more. If journalism is to become the best it can be in democracy, regulation, education, professional practice and research should come together. It is only by means of such multidimensional strategies can Pakistani media inch towards a more open, ethical and inclusive public sphere.

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