



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



Navigating the dynamic terrain: A comprehensive analysis of journalism in Pakistan

Samia Khan *

Department of International Relations, National Defence University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

International Journal of Science and Research Archive, 2024, 11(02), 1896–1903

Publication history: Received on 15 March 2024; revised on 22 April 2024; accepted on 25 April 2024

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/ijrsra.2024.11.2.0726>

Abstract

The landscape of journalism in Pakistan is a dynamic interplay of historical legacies, political pressures, cultural influences, and technological advancements. From its origins in print media during the colonial era to the digital revolution of the 21st century, Pakistani journalism has navigated through challenges of censorship, political interference, and commercialization while upholding principles of truth and accountability. This research article conducts a comprehensive examination of the current state of news coverage and journalism in Pakistan, delving into its historical evolution, regulatory frameworks, technological advancements, and socio-political contexts. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study uncovers the pervasive influence of political actors on news coverage, the impact of media ownership concentration on journalistic independence, and the role of social and cultural factors in shaping news discourse. The findings highlight challenges including censorship, intimidation, and commercial imperatives, while also identifying opportunities for innovation, resilience, and advocacy within the media industry. Ultimately, the research underscores the urgent need to safeguard press freedom, promote media pluralism, and uphold ethical journalism to foster a vibrant and democratic media landscape in Pakistan.

Keywords: Pakistani Journalism; Media Landscape; Press Freedom; Political Influence; Digital Revolution

1. Introduction

The landscape of journalism in Pakistan is a multifaceted tapestry, intricately woven with the threads of history, politics, culture, and technology. From its early roots in print media during the colonial era to the digital revolution of the 21st century, the evolution of journalism in Pakistan reflects the country's dynamic socio-political landscape and its quest for a free and vibrant press. The inception of journalism in the region can be traced back to the British colonial period when newspapers emerged as a tool for both colonial administration and indigenous resistance (Ali, 2015). The first Urdu newspaper, Jam-i-Jahan Numa, was published in 1822, marking the beginning of a new era of mass communication in South Asia (Khan, 2004). During the struggle for independence, newspapers played a pivotal role in mobilizing public opinion and fostering a sense of national identity (Kumar, 2017).

Following independence in 1947, Pakistan witnessed the proliferation of print media, with newspapers becoming the primary source of news and information for the masses. However, the landscape of journalism remained fraught with challenges, including censorship, government control, and economic constraints (Abbasi, 2019). Despite these obstacles, journalists continued to uphold their commitment to truth and accountability, often at great personal risk (Haider, 2018). In recent decades, the advent of digital technology has revolutionized the media landscape in Pakistan, ushering in an era of unprecedented connectivity and access to information (Khan, 2020). The rise of social media platforms and online news portals has democratized the dissemination of news, empowering citizens to participate in public discourse like never before (Shabbir, 2016). However, this digital revolution has also brought new challenges, including the spread of misinformation and the erosion of traditional journalistic norms (Khan, 2018).

* Corresponding author: Samia Khan

Against this backdrop, this research article seeks to explore the current state of news coverage and journalism in Pakistan. By examining the historical evolution, regulatory framework, technological advancements, and socio-political context, this study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing the media landscape in Pakistan today. Through a nuanced analysis of media content, regulatory policies, and industry trends, this research aims to shed light on the role of journalism in shaping public opinion, promoting democratic values, and fostering social change in Pakistan. In conclusion, the landscape of news coverage and journalism in Pakistan is a vibrant tapestry, woven with the threads of tradition and innovation, struggle and resilience. Despite facing numerous challenges, journalists in Pakistan continue to uphold the principles of truth, accountability, and freedom of expression, serving as watchdogs of democracy and guardians of public interest. As the media landscape continues to evolve in response to technological, political, and social changes, it is imperative to safeguard the principles of press freedom and journalistic integrity, ensuring that journalism remains a beacon of hope and enlightenment in Pakistan and beyond.

2. Literature review

The landscape of news coverage and journalism in Pakistan is a dynamic amalgamation of diverse influences, shaped by historical, socio-political, and technological factors. As the fourth estate, journalism plays a pivotal role in shaping public opinion, fostering democratic discourse, and holding power structures accountable (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1956). In the context of Pakistan, the media landscape has undergone significant transformations since its inception, reflecting the country's complex socio-political fabric. Historically, the press in Pakistan has been subject to various forms of censorship and government control, particularly during periods of authoritarian rule (Malik, 2015). The imposition of martial law and the promulgation of stringent media regulations have constrained press freedom, inhibiting the ability of journalists to report independently and critically (Barker, 2007). Despite these challenges, the Pakistani media has demonstrated resilience and adaptability, navigating through turbulent political waters to assert its role as a watchdog and advocate for democratic values (Zaidi, 2015).

The advent of new media technologies has ushered in a new era of journalism in Pakistan, characterized by the proliferation of online news platforms and social media channels (Shabbir & Sarwar, 2018). Digital media has democratized the dissemination of information, providing alternative avenues for citizen journalism and grassroots activism (Khan, 2016). However, it has also posed challenges in terms of ensuring journalistic integrity, combating misinformation, and upholding ethical standards in reporting (Kiani, 2019). The relationship between news coverage and democracy in Pakistan is complex and multifaceted. While the media serves as a catalyst for political mobilization and civic engagement, it also grapples with issues of sensationalism, bias, and commercialization (Nisar & Shafique, 2017). The commercialization of the media industry has led to the prioritization of ratings and advertising revenue over journalistic ethics, compromising the quality and credibility of news content (Farooq, 2018).

Furthermore, the diversity of voices and perspectives within the Pakistani media landscape is often overshadowed by dominant narratives perpetuated by mainstream outlets (Khan, 2017). Ethnic, religious, and gender-based biases continue to shape media discourse, marginalizing minority voices and reinforcing existing power structures (Mukhtar, 2016). Addressing these systemic inequalities requires a concerted effort to promote media pluralism, inclusivity, and social justice (Memon & Channa, 2019). In light of these challenges, the role of journalists in Pakistan extends beyond mere reporting to encompass advocacy, activism, and social change (Shahbaz, 2020). In the face of censorship and intimidation, journalists have increasingly turned to alternative forms of storytelling, such as investigative journalism and documentary filmmaking, to uncover hidden truths and give voice to the marginalized (Khattak, 2018). The landscape of news coverage and journalism in Pakistan is a vibrant tapestry of contradictions and complexities, reflecting the country's tumultuous journey towards democracy and development. As the media continues to evolve in response to technological advancements and socio-political shifts, it is imperative to uphold the principles of press freedom, ethical journalism, and media pluralism to ensure a vibrant and democratic public sphere (Ahmed, 2021).

In neighboring Afghanistan, journalism has played a pivotal role in the country's post-conflict reconstruction efforts (Najafizada & Hanif, 2020). Despite facing similar threats and challenges as Pakistan, Afghan journalists have demonstrated resilience in their pursuit of truth and accountability (Mukhopadhyay, 2021). However, the withdrawal of international forces has cast a shadow of uncertainty over the future of media freedom in Afghanistan (UNAMA, 2021). In Bangladesh, studies have highlighted the role of Bangladeshi newspapers in peace journalism and the coverage of humanitarian crises, such as the Rohingya crisis (Nabi, 2021). Moreover, research on news coverage of environmental issues underscores the media's potential to raise awareness and drive societal change (Ferdous & Khatun, 2020). Ferdous (2023) conducted a study on mHealth apps, revealing the communication dynamics between doctors and patients amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, Nabi (2023) examined the role of ownership in shaping online news content, emphasizing the political economy factors at play. India, with its diverse media landscape, presents a contrasting picture. While the country boasts a robust tradition of investigative journalism and a vibrant

press, it also grapples with issues of media ownership concentration and political bias (Chari & Ramakrishnan, 2020). The rise of digital media platforms has democratized news dissemination but has also raised concerns about misinformation and fake news (Sudhir, 2019).

Sri Lanka's media landscape reflects a complex interplay of ethnic tensions, political polarization, and post-war reconciliation efforts (Senaratne, 2018). Journalists in Sri Lanka face threats from both state and non-state actors, inhibiting their ability to report independently (Purushothaman, 2019). However, the country has witnessed pockets of investigative journalism that have exposed corruption and human rights abuses (Hettiarachchi, 2020). In Nepal, the media landscape has undergone significant transformations following the transition to democracy in 2006 (Pant, 2019). The proliferation of private media outlets has diversified the news ecosystem, providing citizens with multiple sources of information (Budhathoki, 2017). However, challenges such as political interference, low journalist safety, and inadequate legal protections persist (Freedom House, 2021).

Nepal's media landscape reflects its transition from monarchy to democracy, with a proliferation of independent media outlets and a growing emphasis on press freedom (Shrestha & Tamang, 2022). However, challenges persist, including political interference, economic constraints, and threats to journalists' safety (Dhungana, 2023). Despite these challenges, Nepali media play a vital role in promoting accountability and transparency in governance (Bhattarai et al., 2021). Sri Lanka's media landscape is marked by a history of political polarization and ethnic tensions, which have influenced news coverage and journalistic practices (Gunaratne, 2020). The country has seen significant progress in press freedom since the end of the civil war, although concerns remain regarding self-censorship and media ownership concentration (Samarajiva, 2023). Moreover, the emergence of online news platforms has opened up new avenues for public discourse and citizen journalism (De Silva & Weerakkody, 2022). Afghanistan's media landscape reflects the country's tumultuous political history, with media outlets playing a crucial role in post-conflict reconstruction and democratization efforts (Mujib, 2021). However, challenges such as censorship, threats to journalists' safety, and the influence of conservative forces pose significant obstacles to press freedom and independent journalism (Qazi, 2023). Despite these challenges, Afghan media continue to serve as vital platforms for public debate and civic engagement (Ahmadi & Hakimi, 2020).

In summary, the literature on Pakistani journalism underscores the intricate interplay of political, technological, and cultural factors in shaping the industry's trajectory. While challenges such as censorship, digital disruption, and cultural norms persist, there is also evidence of resilience, innovation, and a commitment to journalistic ethics. By critically engaging with these issues, scholars and practitioners can contribute to a more vibrant and inclusive media landscape in Pakistan.

3. Method

This research employs in-depth interviews to investigate the landscape of news coverage and journalism in Pakistan. In-depth interviews are chosen for their capacity to delve deeply into participants' perspectives, experiences, and attitudes regarding the subject matter (Seidman, 2013). Through this qualitative method, the study aims to gain nuanced insights into the challenges, practices, and perceptions prevalent within the Pakistani journalism sector. The participants in this study comprise journalists, editors, media professionals, and stakeholders closely associated with news production and dissemination in Pakistan. Selection criteria prioritize individuals with substantial experience and expertise in the field, ensuring a diverse range of perspectives and insights.

Data collection primarily revolves around semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with the selected participants. The interviews are designed to be conversational, allowing participants to articulate their thoughts, experiences, and observations freely (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Probing questions are tailored to explore various facets of news coverage and journalism, including but not limited to professional challenges, ethical considerations, media practices, and societal impacts. Thematic analysis serves as the primary approach to analyze the qualitative data obtained from the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through systematic coding and categorization, key themes, patterns, and divergent perspectives within the data are identified. This process facilitates the extraction of rich, contextually grounded findings, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics shaping news coverage and journalism in Pakistan.

Ethical considerations are paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent is obtained from all participants, clarifying the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures, and their rights as research subjects (Bryman, 2016). Confidentiality and anonymity are strictly maintained to safeguard participants' identities and ensure their comfort in sharing candid insights. While in-depth interviews offer valuable qualitative data, this method also has inherent limitations. The findings may not be generalizable to the entire population of journalists and media

professionals in Pakistan. Additionally, the subjective nature of qualitative research entails the possibility of researcher bias, which is mitigated through reflexivity and methodological rigor.

4. Results

This chapter presents a thematic analysis of news coverage and journalism in Pakistan, exploring the multifaceted landscape that characterizes the country's media environment. Through a qualitative examination of key themes emerging from the data, this study aims to shed light on the diverse factors shaping news production, dissemination, and reception within Pakistan.

4.1. Political Influence and Press Freedom

The analysis of Pakistan's media landscape highlights a concerning reality: the substantial influence wielded by political actors over news coverage and journalistic practices. This influence forms a tangled web where political agendas intertwine with media narratives, often placing journalists in precarious positions. The findings paint a picture of journalists under constant pressure to tailor their reporting to appease powerful stakeholders, sacrificing the impartiality and integrity expected of their profession. One striking revelation is the prevalence of censorship, intimidation, and harassment directed towards journalists. These tactics serve as stark reminders of the formidable obstacles obstructing press freedom within Pakistan. Despite constitutional provisions guaranteeing freedom of expression, the practical application of these rights remains constrained by a climate of fear and self-censorship. Journalists find themselves walking a tightrope between upholding their professional principles and succumbing to political pressures, highlighting the inherent challenges embedded within their profession.

The intricate dance between political exigencies and journalistic integrity is a central theme that permeates Pakistan's media landscape. Journalists grapple with the delicate balance of fulfilling their duty to inform the public while navigating the minefield of political influence. The consequences of deviating from the prescribed narrative can be severe, ranging from professional repercussions to physical threats. In such a landscape, the notion of a free and independent press becomes increasingly elusive, overshadowed by the looming specter of political coercion. Ultimately, the analysis underscores the urgent need for safeguarding press freedom and ensuring the autonomy of journalists in Pakistan. Without robust protections in place, the vital role of the media in holding power to account and fostering informed public discourse remains compromised. Addressing the systemic challenges impeding press freedom is essential for nurturing a democratic society where diverse perspectives can flourish without fear of reprisal.

4.2. Media Ownership and Commercial Imperatives

The discourse surrounding media ownership and its ramifications for journalistic autonomy and integrity is a pertinent one, shedding light on the consolidation of media control among a select few conglomerates or individuals. This consolidation breeds a uniformity in news content and a preference for commercial gains over public service duties. Consequently, the independence of journalism suffers, with media entities becoming subservient to the economic and political agendas of their owners. This trend not only jeopardizes the diversity of perspectives but also compromises the standard of reporting accessible to the Pakistani populace, accentuating the necessity for enhanced transparency and accountability within the media landscape. The dominance of a handful of conglomerates or individuals in the media sphere underscores a worrisome trend toward homogeneity in news coverage. With a limited number of voices controlling the narrative, there's a risk of suppressing dissenting viewpoints and prioritizing stories that align with the owners' interests, rather than serving the public's right to diverse and unbiased information. Furthermore, the sway of commercial interests over journalistic endeavors poses a threat to the foundational principles of journalism, which hinge on impartiality and truthfulness. When profit motives take precedence, there's a propensity for sensationalism, biased reporting, and even censorship, all of which erode the credibility of media institutions and undermine their role as watchdogs of democracy.

In light of these challenges, there's a pressing need for greater transparency and accountability mechanisms within the media industry. Policies that promote diversity of ownership, encourage editorial independence, and mandate disclosure of conflicts of interest can help mitigate the undue influence of commercial imperatives on journalistic integrity. Additionally, fostering a culture of media literacy among the public can empower individuals to critically evaluate the information they consume, thereby safeguarding against manipulation and propaganda. Ultimately, by addressing the issues stemming from media ownership concentration and commercial pressures, Pakistan can strive toward a media landscape that truly serves the interests of its citizens.

4.3. Social and Cultural Factors Shaping News Discourse

In dissecting the complex landscape of news discourse in Pakistan, it becomes evident that alongside political and economic dynamics, social and cultural factors play a pivotal role in shaping narratives and engaging audiences. Religion, ethnicity, and regional affiliations stand out as potent forces influencing media representations, directing public attention to specific societal concerns, and molding the contours of public dialogue. Pakistan's diverse religious and ethnic tapestry imbues its news coverage with multifaceted perspectives and often leads to the prioritization of issues relevant to particular communities. This not only reflects the country's rich cultural heritage but also underscores the inherent complexities of its social fabric, wherein identities intersect and intersecting narratives emerge.

Furthermore, the advent of digital technologies and the rise of social media platforms have revolutionized the dissemination of news and information. While this has democratized access to diverse viewpoints and decentralized the media landscape, it has also given rise to challenges such as misinformation, echo chambers, and online harassment. The blurring boundaries between professional journalism and citizen journalism add another layer of complexity, as individuals wield unprecedented power to shape public discourse, sometimes at the expense of journalistic rigor and integrity. Consequently, traditional notions of media authority and credibility are being redefined in the digital age, with trust becoming a scarce commodity amid the cacophony of voices vying for attention. In navigating this terrain, journalists and media organizations face the dual imperative of adapting to technological advancements while upholding ethical standards and fostering informed civic engagement. In essence, the interplay of social and cultural factors with technological advancements profoundly influences the landscape of news discourse in Pakistan, presenting both opportunities and challenges for media practitioners and audiences alike. As the media ecosystem continues to evolve, understanding these dynamics becomes imperative for fostering a more inclusive and informed public sphere.

4.4. Challenges and Opportunities for Journalistic Practice

The thematic analysis delves into the intricate tapestry of challenges and opportunities that shape journalistic practice in Pakistan. At the forefront are the formidable hurdles journalists confront daily, ranging from jeopardized personal safety to navigating ethical quandaries and preserving editorial autonomy. These obstacles pose significant barriers to the pursuit of truth and the dissemination of unbiased information. However, amidst these challenges lies a fertile ground for innovation and resilience within the media landscape. Alternative media platforms, investigative journalism networks, and advocacy groups emerge as beacons of hope, championing transparency, accountability, and the fundamental right to freedom of expression. These entities serve as essential pillars in upholding democratic principles and holding power structures accountable.

Furthermore, international collaborations and partnerships offer pathways for knowledge transfer and skill enhancement, enriching the journalistic milieu and amplifying its impact. By leveraging global expertise and resources, Pakistani journalists can better navigate the complexities of their profession and elevate the quality of their reportage. In summation, the thematic analysis paints a nuanced portrait of Pakistan's media ecosystem, characterized by its vibrancy and complexity. It underscores the delicate balance between adversities and opportunities, underscoring the indispensable role of journalism in shaping public discourse and fostering societal change. By dissecting these themes, the study contributes to a deeper comprehension of the intricate dynamics at play and provides valuable insights for both media practitioners and audiences alike.

5. Discussion

The thematic analysis presented in this study offers a comprehensive exploration of the landscape of news coverage and journalism in Pakistan, uncovering the multifaceted factors that shape the country's media environment. By synthesizing the findings with existing literature, this discussion aims to elucidate key insights, draw connections, and identify avenues for future research and intervention.

The analysis underscores the pervasive influence of political actors on news coverage and journalistic practices in Pakistan, echoing findings from previous studies (Malik, 2015; Barker, 2007). The findings align with literature highlighting the challenges journalists face in navigating political pressures while upholding professional integrity (Nisar & Shafique, 2017). The prevalence of censorship and intimidation documented in the thematic analysis resonates with research on press freedom constraints in authoritarian contexts (Zaidi, 2015). The symbiotic relationship between political exigencies and journalistic autonomy underscores the intricate dance journalists must perform to fulfill their societal role while mitigating risks to their safety and credibility (Shahbaz, 2020). The discussion echoes calls for robust protections of press freedom to safeguard democracy and public discourse (Ahmed, 2021). The discourse on media ownership and its impact on journalistic independence resonates with global debates on media concentration and

commercialization (Chari & Ramakrishnan, 2020). The findings highlight concerns over homogenized news content and compromised editorial autonomy, reflecting broader trends in media ownership dynamics (Farooq, 2018).

The discussion emphasizes the need for transparency and accountability mechanisms within the media industry to counterbalance the influence of commercial imperatives on journalistic integrity (Nabi, 2023). The thematic analysis aligns with literature advocating for policies that promote diversity of ownership and editorial independence to safeguard democratic ideals (Sudhir, 2019). The examination of social and cultural factors shaping news discourse resonates with studies on media representations of identity and community dynamics (Mukhtar, 2016). The findings echo discussions on the transformative impact of digital technologies on news dissemination and audience engagement, highlighting the dual nature of democratization and challenges posed by misinformation (Kiani, 2019). The discussion underscores the evolving nature of media authority and credibility in the digital age, emphasizing the importance of media literacy and ethical standards in navigating the complexities of online information ecosystems (Ferdous & Khatun, 2020). By contextualizing the findings within broader societal dynamics, the thematic analysis offers valuable insights into the complexities of news discourse in Pakistan.

The thematic analysis illuminates the myriad challenges and opportunities facing journalistic practice in Pakistan, echoing discussions on the role of alternative media platforms and international collaborations in promoting transparency and accountability (Mujib, 2021). The findings underscore the resilience and innovation exhibited by journalists amidst adversities, highlighting the transformative potential of advocacy and investigative journalism in fostering societal change (Khattak, 2018). The discussion resonates with literature on the vital role of journalism in upholding democratic principles and holding power structures accountable, emphasizing the need for continued support for media freedom and professional development initiatives (Budhathoki, 2017). By situating the findings within broader discourses on journalistic ethics and professional autonomy, the thematic analysis offers a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities shaping Pakistan's media landscape.

In conclusion, the thematic analysis presented in this study provides valuable insights into the intricate dynamics of news coverage and journalism in Pakistan. By synthesizing the findings with existing literature, this discussion has elucidated key themes, drawn connections, and identified avenues for future research and intervention. Moving forward, addressing the systemic challenges impeding press freedom, promoting media pluralism, and fostering ethical journalism will be essential for nurturing a vibrant and democratic media landscape in Pakistan.

6. Conclusion

The landscape of news coverage and journalism in Pakistan reflects a rich tapestry woven with the threads of tradition and innovation, struggle and resilience. From its early roots in print media during the colonial era to the digital revolution of the 21st century, the evolution of journalism in Pakistan mirrors the country's dynamic socio-political landscape and its quest for a free and vibrant press. Despite facing numerous challenges, journalists in Pakistan have consistently upheld the principles of truth, accountability, and freedom of expression, serving as watchdogs of democracy and guardians of public interest. Throughout this research article, we have delved into the complexities of Pakistan's media landscape, examining historical evolution, regulatory frameworks, technological advancements, and socio-political contexts. We have witnessed how political influence, media ownership dynamics, and social-cultural factors shape news discourse and journalistic practices in the country. Our thematic analysis has revealed the challenges journalists face, including political pressures, censorship, commercial imperatives, and cultural biases, while also highlighting opportunities for innovation, resilience, and advocacy within the media industry.

One of the central themes that emerged from our analysis is the delicate balance between political exigencies and journalistic integrity. Journalists in Pakistan navigate a landscape where political actors wield significant influence over news coverage, often leading to censorship, intimidation, and self-censorship. The findings underscore the urgent need to safeguard press freedom and ensure the autonomy of journalists to fulfill their vital role in fostering informed public discourse and holding power structures accountable. Another key theme is the impact of media ownership concentration and commercial imperatives on journalistic independence and integrity. The dominance of a few conglomerates or individuals in the media sphere raises concerns about homogenized news content, compromised editorial autonomy, and the prioritization of profit motives over public service duties. Addressing these challenges requires greater transparency, accountability, and diversity of ownership within the media industry to safeguard democratic ideals and promote media pluralism.

Additionally, our analysis highlights the influence of social and cultural factors on news discourse, including religion, ethnicity, and regional affiliations. The advent of digital technologies and social media platforms has democratized news dissemination but also introduced challenges such as misinformation and online harassment. Navigating these

complexities requires journalists to uphold ethical standards and foster informed civic engagement in the digital age. Despite the challenges, our research also identifies opportunities for journalistic practice in Pakistan, including alternative media platforms, investigative journalism networks, and international collaborations. By leveraging these opportunities and advocating for press freedom, ethical journalism, and media pluralism, Pakistani journalists can continue to play a vital role in promoting accountability, transparency, and social change.

In conclusion, the landscape of news coverage and journalism in Pakistan is a vibrant tapestry of contradictions and complexities, reflecting the country's tumultuous journey towards democracy and development. By addressing the systemic challenges and seizing opportunities for innovation and resilience, Pakistan can strive towards a media landscape that truly serves the interests of its citizens and upholds the principles of press freedom, ethical journalism, and democratic values. Through continued research, advocacy, and collaboration, we can contribute to a more vibrant, inclusive, and democratic media ecosystem in Pakistan and beyond.

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