

Shadows and Echoes: Co-Dependence of Media and Government in the Struggle for Power

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Abstract

Political bias in the media has become a persistent age-old phenomenon. The far-reaching effects of such bias are profound, influencing societal progress and governance. The absence of a truly non-partisan media allows individuals to amass disproportionate power, manipulating public opinion irrespective of ground realities. This lack of media impartiality fosters public mistrust, exacerbating political divisions based on affiliations. Social cohesion, vital for national progress, is hindered as civil discourse gives way to divisive rhetoric. This paper aims to critically analyse the role of media manipulation, state intervention in media control, and the objectives they pursue. Emphasis is placed on the micro-level manipulation of news stories and its impact on the broader sociopolitical landscape. The investigation is situated within the context of the political climate in Pakistan, examining the ongoing struggle for narrative control between the state and the media. The intertwined relationship between these entities is scrutinised, revealing how they leverage power for personal and political gains while shaping the collective understanding of crucial issues.

Keywords: Non-partisan Media, Politics, Governance, Freedom.

Introduction

The news media, ranging from present-day news broadcasters and format of the 24-hour news cycle, all the way back to the historical days of the printing press, have been the premier form of transmitting information throughout a society and state, and to disperse information and create an image and narrative of how society was or should be functioning. With the evolution of media and its accompanying technologies, industries such as digital publications and the entertainment sector also entered the fray of image building and narrative construction. Though innocuous at surface level, all forms of the media have been, and continue to be used, as tools for propaganda and misinformation, spinning webs of news stories that are barely able to be deconstructed before the next narrative takes hold of major headlines.

Noam Chomsky discusses the emergence of the first alternative press in the 19th Century in Great Britain. He explores how this press was seen as a substantial threat to the ruling elite, bringing workers together and fostering a collective confidence that could undeniably pave the way for social change.¹ At one point, an MP mentioned that the workers were comparing their current conditions with the potential rewards they could receive in the future. *'Incompatible with human nature'*, as he would go on to state, decrying the publications as inflaming passions and awakening *'selfishness'* among workers. Consequently, to clamp down on the rising resentment being harboured with the aid of these publications, laws and bills were passed that sought to slow down or outright stop the flow of information through the alternative press.

¹ Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), p.3.

Advancing into the 21st Century, an examination of the modern media landscape reveals a notable evolution. While media continues to play a role in narrative construction, its function has shifted. A critical observation shows that, unlike its historical role of critiquing state power, the media now often appears to be complicit in reinforcing state-driven narratives, suggesting a significant transformation from its earlier stance.

Building on this context of media transformation, a pertinent example is the statement made by the then-United States Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, on 12 February 2002. His remarks serve as a contemporary illustration of how narrative manipulation manifests in the modern era: 'Reports that say that something hasn't happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.'²

Secretary Rumsfeld's statement was in response to questions posed by journalists about the pretense of the war in Iraq, where the invasion was justified by pumping the news media full of disinformation regarding the presence of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) under Saddam Hussein, a claim that was in later years disproven when it was revealed there had been little to insufficient evidence to point to their existence.³

² 'DoD News Briefing - Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers', United States Department of Defense, 2002, <http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636>.

³ Glenn Kessler, "The Iraq War and WMDs: An Intelligence Failure or White House Spin?" *Washington Post*, March 22, 2019,

For the duration of this paper, the aim will be to contextualise and critically analyse the role of media manipulation and the state's hand in media control, its aims and objectives, and the methodologies of achieving them. The focus will remain primarily on the manipulation of news stories on a micro-level, and how they affect the bigger picture. The rest of the paper will be framed with respect to the political climate in Pakistan, and how state and media are in a fight for narrative control, while also simultaneously benefitting from the power and influence they both wield and use for their personal or political gains.

Press Practices and State Tactics: A Global Perspective

In his analysis of modern news media's role within the political sphere, Chomsky, in '*Manufacturing Consent*,' articulates how the media has evolved into a key apparatus for government control and narrative shaping. He references the 1981 scholarly study '*Media, Power, Politics*'⁴ by Paletz and Entman, which categorises media into three tiers based on their 'prestige, resources, and outreach,' thereby providing a framework for understanding the hierarchical nature and influence of different media entities in shaping public discourse.⁵

The upper echelon of media groups, endowed with ample resources, prestige, and extensive outreach, alongside government entities and various local and international wire services, predominantly supply local, national, and international news content. This dissemination to comparatively lower-tier media outlets involves not just the distribution of information but also the shaping and curation of narratives on a global scale. Around 80%

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/03/22/iraq-war-wmds-an-intelligence-failure-or-white-house-spin/>.

⁴ David L. Paletz and Robert M. Entman, *Media Power Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1981).

⁵ Chomsky and Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*.

of the global news in circulation can be traced back to four major Western wire services – Associated Press (AP), United Press International (UPI), Reuters, and Agence-France-Press (AFP). According to Paletz and Entman: ‘The wire services “exist to serve markets”, and their prime concern, accordingly, “is with the rich media markets of the United States, Western Europe, and Japan and increasingly with the business community...” They compete fiercely, but AP and UPI “are really U.S. enterprises that operate on an international scale... Without their domestic base, the AP and UPI could not operate as international agencies. With it, they must be American organisations, subject to American pressures and requirements.’⁶

The onset of the War on Terror (WoT) and the subsequent media frenzy marked a significant shift towards greater media influence over public opinion. This shift was characterised by the selective omission of facts in news stories and framing events through a Western-centric perspective. Such framing often emphasised the valour of American troops engaged in the Middle East, under the narrative of fighting for the freedom of the oppressed. One such highlighted news event was in 2003 when soldiers from the U.S. Army killed 54 Iraqis, stating they had ‘cleared out insurgents’ from the city of Samarra. Below are excerpts from three news articles (from *The New York Times*, *Fox News* and *Al-Jazeera*), each beginning with their distinct opening sentences each sentence reflecting different editorial choices and angles. These variations underscore the importance of media literacy in understanding how different outlets can present the same event in divergent ways:

***The New York Times*:** ‘American commanders vowed Monday that the killing of as many as 54 insurgents in this central Iraqi town would serve as a lesson to those fighting the United States, but

⁶ Paletz and Entman, *Media Power Politics*.

Iraqis disputed the death toll and said anger against America would only rise.⁷

Fox News: 'In the deadliest reported firefights in Iraq since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, U.S. forces killed at least 54 Iraqis and captured eight others while fending off simultaneous convoy ambushes Sunday in the northern city of Samarra.'⁸

Al-Jazeera: 'The US military has vowed to continue aggressive tactics after saying it killed 54 Iraqis following an ambush, but commanders admitted they had no proof to back up their claims.'⁹

Each of the aforementioned news stories is reporting on the same story and operating on the same set of facts that were available to news reporters right after the incident, though, the method of reporting the news varies between the three outlets. Out of the three, *Al-Jazeera* remained the only one that included the key fact that US forces had been unable to provide proof of their claims of naturalising active terrorists. The two outlets that were more partisan to American policies, *The New York Times* and *Fox News*, omitted this key piece of information, instead presenting the story as a victory for US forces against a targeted attack by violent insurgents. The Iraq War was still in its early days, and as can be seen with the above examples, American news outlets were actively busy in disseminating stories that would sway the public opinion

⁷ Dexter Filkins and Ian Fisher, "U.S. Sees Lesson for Insurgents in an Iraq Battle," *New York Times*, December 2, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/12/02/world/us-sees-lesson-for-insurgents-in-an-iraq-battle.html>.

⁸ Steve Centanni, "Firefights Leave Dozens of Iraqis Dead," *Fox News*, December 2, 2003, <https://www.foxnews.com/story/firefights-leave-dozens-of-iraqis-dead>.

⁹ Desk Report, "Samarra Clash Toll still a Mystery," *Al-Jazeera*, December 2, 2003, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2003/12/2/samarra-clash-toll-still-a-mystery>.

towards being pro-war. Reporting on the lack of proof available to back up Washington's claims would have potentially caused a backlash from the American public. Though the war was still fresh, American sentiment had been rapidly declining regarding the presence of US troops present in Iraq. Gallup surveys in March of 2003 polled only 23% of American citizens who saw the invasion as a mistake, but by October of the same year had reached almost 40%.¹⁰ At a point when the public's sentiments were rapidly moving away from the narrative that the White House wanted to mainstream, reporting on civilian killings by US forces would have only reinforced the idea that the decision to send troops to Iraq was a mistake. The American government made sure that all reporting done on the war was done favourably. Reporters embedded within the U.S. forces who travelled with the troops had to send their reports through the Commanding Officers before being able to send them to their publications, with reasons of 'security' cited as the main concern.¹¹

From this analysis, it is inferable that a considerable portion of news dissemination exhibits a discernible Western bias. This tendency is likely influenced by the operational and financial dependencies of these news organisations on their host countries. As a result, these media outlets often craft and distribute narratives tailored to their audiences, not only as a means of securing financial resources but also as a strategy to navigate bureaucratic complexities. The apparent influence of the White House on domestic media coverage, especially in the context of American foreign policy, was highlighted earlier, demonstrating how news narratives are shaped and framed. In a state that is regarded as one of the leading examples for media and press freedom, the amount

¹⁰ Gallup, 'Iraq', accessed November 22, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1633/Iraq.aspx#4>.

¹¹ Elisabeth Thurlow, "War Reporting and the 2003 Invasion of Iraq," *Guardian*, February 3, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/gnmeducationcentre/iraq-war-teaching-resource-gnm-archive>.

of overreach it maintains with its own media outlets only highlights how much more control the state exerts over its media as ones goes lower down the list.¹²

The intertwining of media influence and global politics has been a topic of enduring discussion and concern within the international community for decades. This issue gained particular prominence during the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debates in the 1970s, when members of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) – a coalition formed to avoid alignment with major global powers, Western or otherwise – voiced strong criticism against Western news agencies. These newly independent nations recognised that their political autonomy was deeply entwined with economic independence, extending to ideological realms. Western media played a crucial role in shaping perceptions, influencing investment decisions, and framing narratives about the economic landscapes and investment potential in these countries, often determining whether they became lucrative markets or remained economically subservient.¹³

Even today, amidst the proliferation of news media and the vast array of channels available for public consumption, the primary sources of information remain a select group of top-tier players. These entities have long dominated the flow and sourcing of news. The advent of social media platforms like Twitter (of late called 'X') and Facebook has further entrenched this dynamic. These platforms often serve as conduits and allies for the narratives and news stories propagated by traditional news agencies like the Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI), thereby

¹² Reporters Without Borders, "Press Freedom Index," <https://rsf.org/en/index>.

¹³ Oliver Boyd-Barrett, *Media Imperialism: Towards an International Framework for the Analysis of Media Systems* (London: Edward Arnold in association with Open University Press, 1977), pp.116-135.

perpetuating the influence of established media houses in the digital age.¹⁴

Pakistan's State and the Press

Shifting the perspective from the global impact of media to the specific context of Pakistan, the interplay between media and the government exhibits patterns that mirror international trends. The dynamic between these two institutions in Pakistan is characterised by a complex, often contradictory relationship. On the one hand, there is continuous tension, with each entity striving to assert its influence and control. On the other, this interaction can be seen as symbiotic, where both parties, despite conflicts, derive certain benefits that simultaneously support and undermine their respective foundational principles.

Historically, the approach towards media control in Pakistan has varied with the nature of governance. Under military rule, there have been instances of direct censorship and restriction of media freedoms as a means of controlling public discourse. In contrast, democratic regimes have often employed subtler methods to influence media narratives, oscillating between incentivisation and punitive measures. This carrot-and-stick strategy has been a prevalent tool in shaping media content to align with the interests of the ruling entities. Such tactics reflect the ongoing struggle for power and influence within the Pakistani media landscape, illustrating the intricate and evolving relationship between the state and the press.

¹⁴ Pew Research Center, "Candidates Differ in their Use of Social Media to Connect with the Public," in *Election 2016: Campaigns as a Direct Source of News*, report (Washington, D.C., July 18, 2016), <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2016/07/18/candidates-differ-in-their-use-of-social-media-to-connect-with-the-public/>.

For instance, the years 2001-08 in Pakistan witnessed a remarkable surge in the number of news channels on cable TV,¹⁵ a phenomenon typically considered at odds with dictatorial regimes globally. Such regimes often resort to stringent restrictions on free speech, especially during periods leading up to political transitions. Then-President of Pakistan publicly advocated for free media, highlighting its significance in a progressive society. However, this stance was juxtaposed with a regime of strict censorship, enforced through cable watchdogs¹⁶ appointed by the President himself in the years leading up to his downfall.¹⁷ This period saw a clear delineation in the treatment of media groups based on their alignment with government directives. Those conforming to the government's narrative were often favoured, receiving support and privileges. Conversely, media outlets that defied the state's prescribed guidelines faced severe consequences, including being completely removed from cable television. This duality in policy underscores the complex relationship between media freedom and governmental control during that era in Pakistan.

Hence, Pakistani media has often been a participant, either actively or passively, in dynamics that ultimately limit free speech and reduce accountability for the powerful and elite. This role includes

¹⁵ Umer Farooq, "Pakistan's Private TV News Revolution Under General Musharraf," *News Laundry*, December 26, 2018, <https://www.newslaundry.com/2018/12/26/pakistans-private-tv-news-revolution-under-general-musharraf>.

¹⁶ Moeed Pirzada, "Musharraf and the Media," *Guardian*, November 17, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/nov/19/musharrafandthemedial>.

¹⁷ Hena Khursheed Bajwa, "Pakistani Media, Public Opinion, and the Downfall of Pervez Musharraf: News Attribute Agenda-Setting, and Cognitive Liberation in the Lawyers' Movement," (PhD diss., The University of Texas at Austin, May 2016), <https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/items/5c983989-845c-4f8d-9d2d-11c57f80d806>.

a fluctuating relationship with various political and military entities. Journalists, as part of the media landscape, have sometimes been observed transitioning between allegiances, with their editorial histories occasionally revealing contradictory stances within relatively short periods.

For instance, shifts in political power, such as the change in government following the vote of no confidence in April 2022, led to notable changes in media narratives. Critics of the military were observed to alter their viewpoints, shifting from opposition to defence of these institutions. This pattern of oscillating perspectives¹⁸ is not uncommon in the Pakistani media landscape, where political tides can significantly influence journalistic narratives.

Such instances illustrate the complex and sometimes malleable nature of media reporting in the face of political changes. They highlight the challenges faced in maintaining journalistic integrity and consistency in environments where political and military influences are strong. This phenomenon underscores the need for a more rigorous analysis of media practices and the factors that influence journalistic independence in the country.

In Pakistan, powerful entities/institutions have recognised the media's significant capacity to influence public opinion and, by extension, the making or breaking of governments. As a result, there is a concerted effort towards exerting comprehensive control and manipulation over the narratives disseminated across millions of screens daily. Media moguls, along with their subordinates, are acutely aware of their influential role. This awareness is often

¹⁸ Hamid Mir (@HamidMirPAK), "I was present in a meeting at NDU...", Twitter (now X), January 9, 2023, <https://twitter.com/HamidMirPAK/status/1612313458598612994>.
Hamid Mir (@HamidMirPAK), "Will the ambassador of Kashmir...", Twitter (now X), March 23, 2021, <https://twitter.com/HamidMirPAK/status/1374428414170460166>.

leveraged to consolidate power for themselves, employing tactics such as sensationalised news stories and selective reporting. Such strategies can effectively hold governments to ransom and fuel hostilities, serving the interests of these media entities while shaping public perception through careful narrative control.¹⁹

This paper will now further analyse how the boundaries between various stakeholders in the media landscape have become increasingly indistinct. The current turmoil enveloping digital media is projected to escalate unless decisive actions are taken. Implementing bold measures to ensure accountability and maintain a balance among all involved parties is essential for mitigating these challenges.

Reality and Consequence

‘If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.’

- W.I. Thomas

The Thomas theorem is a sociological theory that states that the interpretation of an action or situation defines and frames the reality of the situation.²⁰ Almost a century old, the theorem still holds true in how social interactions and framing of situations tend to result in multiple versions of a single event existing in different groups. While not directly aimed at the media, it can still be applied to contextualise how media organisations and governments maintain their relationship by indulging in a symbiotic relationship that can, at times, border on or cross ethical lines.

¹⁹ Nazir Hussain, “The Role of Media in Pakistan,” *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 35, no. 4 Summer (2012), <https://www.pc.gov.pk/uploads/report/TheRoleofMediainPakistan.pdf>.

²⁰ William I. Thomas and Dorothy Swaine Thomas, *The Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs* (New York: Knopf, 1928), pp. 571-572, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.155699>.

The Pakistani media landscape has historically been characterised by polarisation, a trend that traces back to periods of dictatorship and extends into the complex political terrain of the 2020s. Central to this dynamic is the role of government advertisements.

The Government of Pakistan (GoP) designates a specific budget for advertising expenditures across various media platforms. Managed by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (MoIB), these funds are distributed at the ministry's discretion. There is often a lack of transparency or explicit justification regarding the allocation of these funds, leading to discrepancies in how they are apportioned among media groups. This occurs even among outlets with comparable viewership figures. Such practices contribute to the ongoing debate about media independence and the influence of governmental policies on the media sector in Pakistan.

The manipulation of media by incumbent governments for their own benefit can be discerned by examining the distribution of these government advertising funds. Analysing who primarily benefits financially from these advertisements offers insight into the government's media strategy. For instance, between 2013 and 2018, the government allocated over PKR 5900 million for media advertising, with two agencies receiving a disproportionately large share of these funds.²¹ In stark contrast, during the tenure of the next government, advertising revenues for these news groups experienced a significant reduction, dropping to nearly half – approximately PKR 2,800 million – until the government's tenure ended. This variance in fund allocation to media outlets under different governments indicates a strategic use of financial resources to influence media coverage and, potentially, public perception.

²¹ Waqas Ahmed, "Exclusive: Data on Pakistan Govt Tv Ad Expenditure from 2013 to 2022," September 27, 2023, <https://waqas.xyz/govt-ads/>.

The methodology governing the allocation of government advertisements is outlined in the guidelines published by the Press Information Department, with the most recent amendments in 2021 detailing a step-by-step process. According to these guidelines, a government committee is responsible for determining the recipients of advertising funds.²² However, a critical examination of the actual distribution of funds reveals a disproportionate allocation among channels with similar viewership ratings, suggesting potential biases within these committees.

A significant challenge in assessing the fairness of this distribution is the lack of publicly available Target Rating Points (TRP) for news channels. The competitive nature of the industry often leads to the non-disclosure of actual viewership data, complicating the task of accurately assessing the correlation between advertisement spend and viewership. When relying on surveys conducted by organisations like Gallup Pakistan, it becomes evident that government advertising revenue does not always directly align with a channel's popularity or viewership ratings. This discrepancy raises questions about the criteria and objectivity employed in the allocation of government advertising funds.

A survey conducted by Gallup in 2013 revealed significant differences in the average household reach of two competing news channels, with one channel achieving a 5.1% reach and its competitor a 1.9% reach.²³ However, in the following financial year, the channel with the lower reach received more than three times the government funding compared to the one with the higher reach. Specifically, the lower-reaching channel was allocated PKR 45 million in government funding, whereas the higher-reaching

²² Press Information Department, "Guidelines & Procedures: Advertisement Policy 2021," Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, Government of Pakistan, <http://pid.gov.pk/uploads/AdvertisementPolicy2021Updated.pdf>.

²³ Amal Naeem, "Gallup TV Ratings Services", Gallup Pakistan (2013).

channel received only PKR 13 million during the same period.²⁴ This allocation disparity raises questions about the criteria used for distributing government advertisements and the factors influencing these decisions.

The discrepancy in government advertising spending, favouring a channel with comparatively lower reach, contradicts conventional advertising logic. Typically, advertisers prioritise channels with larger audiences to maximise their potential outreach. However, this trend of imbalanced government spending persisted, contributing to the rapid growth of Pakistan's media industry, which has been one of the fastest-growing worldwide since the early 2000s.²⁵ The change in government in 2018 marked a significant reduction in government advertisement expenditures across all media channels and platforms. This decrease in funding led to considerable downsizing within the media industry, as many channels experienced a substantial loss in revenue.

From mid-2018 to April 2022, there was a notable increase in media scrutiny. In contrast to previous administrations, the media focused intensively on tracking the government's manifesto and promises. This scrutiny was reflected in the creation of web portals, regular publication of op-eds, and meticulous analysis of every government action, even down to the most minute details. This period saw an enhanced level of vigilance and accountability in media reporting, marking a shift from previous practices.²⁶

²⁴ Ahmed, "Exclusive: Data on Pakistan Govt Tv Ad Expenditure from 2013 to 2022."

²⁵ Riaz Haq, "Pakistan Government Ad Spend Cuts Trigger Media Business Shakeout," *South Asia Investor*, December 2, 2018, <https://www.southasiainvestor.com/2018/12/pakistan-government-ad-spend-cuts.html>.

²⁶ "Tracking Naya Pakistan-Three Years into Power, Here's Where PTI Stands on Some of its Promises," *Dawn News*, August 18, 2021, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1641014>. "Khan Meter: Pakistani

While heightened scrutiny by the media is essential to prevent unchecked power and ensure accountability among leaders, it is equally important for the media to maintain consistency in its principles and values. Adhering to non-partisan reporting is crucial to uphold credibility. However, current trends suggest that the Pakistani media often appears to align with the highest bidder, compromising its impartiality. This tendency to aggressively target those who reduce or withdraw financial support undermines the media's role as an unbiased informant and guardian of public interest.

Analysing the coverage by prominent news organisations reveals a correlation between media attitudes and government patronage.²⁷ For instance, the period 2013-18 witnessed a tendency among certain media outlets to maintain a favourable narrative about the government, regardless of expert warnings about the country's economic state.²⁸ Such practices highlight the potential influence

Entrepreneur Launches First Ever Website to Monitor Imran Khan's 100 Days," *Times of Islamabad*, July 31, 2018, <https://timesofislamabad.com/31-Jul-2018/khan-meter-pakistani-entrepreneur-launches-first-ever-website-to-monitor-imran-khan-s-100-days>.

²⁷ "Pakistan Election: BBC Interview with Dawn Newspaper Boss Stirs Controversy," *BBC News*, July 19, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-44872978>. Ahmed, "Exclusive: Data on Pakistan Govt Tv Ad Expenditure from 2013 to 2022."

²⁸ Ali Salman, "Five Years in Power - PML-N Largely Delivered on Promises," *Express Tribune*, June 4, 2018, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1726991/opinion-five-years-power-pml-n-largely-delivered-promises>. Manoj Sharma, "Imran Khan's Worst Nightmare will be Pakistan's Crumbling Economy," *Business Today*, August 3, 2018, <https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/economy-politics/story/is-the-current-state-of-pakistan-economy-imran-khan-worst-nightmare-109686-2018-08-02>. "Pakistan Formally Seeks Financial Assistance from IMF," *Dawn News*, October 11, 2018, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1438309>. "Exports of Goods and

of governmental patronage on media reporting, calling into question the impartiality and integrity of media coverage during different political administrations. During the 2018-22 period, the incumbent government also similarly engaged in practices that could be viewed as favouring certain media outlets. This included granting selective access to journalists, prioritising specific news organisations for story publication, and offering exclusive interviews to chosen channels.²⁹ Such preferential treatment resulted in increased viewership and financial benefits for these favoured outlets.

While this approach did not involve direct financial incentives through advertisements, the granting of exclusive access and interviews to select media channels by high-ranking government officials, including the Prime Minister, raises ethical concerns. It deviates from the traditional role of state-run media, which is conventionally expected to be the central medium for disseminating official government messaging and information. The preferential treatment accorded to private news channels by a sitting Prime Minister not only undermines the state broadcaster's role but also challenges the principles of equal access and balanced reporting in the media landscape. Such actions contribute to a disparity in the media's portrayal of government activities and

Services (% of GDP) – Pakistan,” The World Bank,
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NE.EXP.GNFS.ZS?locations=PK>.

²⁹ Asad Hashim, ‘Silenced’: Pakistan’s Journalists Decry New Era of Censorship,” *Al Jazeera*, August 15, 2019,
<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/8/15/silenced-pakistans-journalists-decry-new-era-of-censorship>. Umer Farooq, “How Pakistani Media has Come a Full Circle under Imran Khan,” *NewsLaundry*, December 31, 2018,
<https://www.newslaundry.com/2018/12/31/pakistani-media-imran-khan-censorship>.

priorities. The imbalance created by these actions underscores the complexities in maintaining ethical standards.

The news media frequently positions itself as a conduit for the political elite to disseminate their narratives. There are assertions that media outlets face oppressive measures from state machinery in response to critical reporting. However, the pattern wherein media proprietors secure lucrative agreements while concurrently echoing narratives favourable to the incumbent authorities raises critical questions. This juxtaposition of alleged suppression with advantageous dealings for media owners suggests a complex interplay of influence and benefit, which warrants a closer examination of the media's role and its relationship with the state.

The prevalence of inaccurate or biased reporting creates vulnerabilities that foreign entities can exploit to their advantage. For instance, the EU Disinfo Lab report, published in December 2020, sheds light on how India's government and intelligence agencies managed to manipulate narratives in Pakistani mainstream media.³⁰ The report uncovered a network of over 500 local media domains across 95 countries, primarily utilised to target Pakistan and influence its global narrative. Outlets like '*Times of Geneva*,' an affiliate of Asian News International (ANI), were found to frequently disseminate news sympathetic to Baloch separatist movements and other narratives aimed at destabilising Pakistan.³¹

³⁰ Gary M.A. Alaphilippe, Roman Adamczyk and Antoine Grégoire, *Indian Chronicles: Deep Dive into a 15-Year Operation Targeting the EU and UN to Serve Indian Interests*, report (EU Disinfo Lab, December 2020), <https://www.disinfo.eu/publications/indian-chronicles-deep-dive-into-a-15-year-operation-targeting-the-eu-and-un-to-serve-indian-interests/>.

³¹ Flora Carmichael and Abid Hussain, "Pro-Indian 'Fake' Websites Targeted Decision-makers in Europe," *BBC News*, December 16, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-50749764>.

Following the EU Disinfo Lab report, several websites, including 'Times of Geneva' and '4 News Agency', were taken down. However, numerous others continue to operate, spreading misinformation within an already oversaturated and unreliable media landscape in Pakistan. These are not isolated incidents but part of coordinated efforts to weaken the country.

The need for a responsible media, capable of working in conjunction with the state to counteract these efforts, is more crucial than ever. Without it, the existing cracks in the information landscape, exacerbated by the spread of misinformation, are likely to widen. The focus of the media should shift from personal career advancement and financial incentives to playing a constructive role in safeguarding the integrity of information and national stability.

Conclusion

The news media is a means of communicating political ideas within a society. Any kind of dialogue that must happen on a national level must be facilitated by the nation's news channels. The news media in Pakistan has increasingly experienced the co-opting of political narratives into mainstream reporting. This trend has facilitated the propagation of personal agendas within the public discourse. The result of this has been a huge political divide within the Pakistani public, with the space for reasonable discourse, amongst individuals of varying political opinions across the spectrum, having been reduced significantly. Accusations of political bias and incorrect reporting run rampant throughout the industry and have subsequently destroyed the public's trust in the nation's main news providers. Furthermore, the news media continues to be used by all sitting governments as a tool for policy influence, more often than not flooding the mainstream channels with information in order to sway public opinion towards a certain direction, such as with issues pertaining to inflation, or law and order.

The Pakistani media bears a significant moral obligation to uphold fairness, accuracy, and responsibility, especially as the country

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stands at the precipice of a changing social order. Alterations in the operational approaches of media conglomerates have the potential to initiate a ripple effect, restoring public trust in a non-partisan and accurate media landscape. The proliferation of false information and contrived news stories has led to a growing sense of distrust among audiences towards the media. This scepticism, in turn, exacerbates the existing divides in political discourse throughout the country, underscoring the critical need for media integrity and ethical journalism in shaping a more cohesive and informed society.

Political events over the past few decades have highlighted a deteriorating relationship between the press, the public, and political figures. There is a growing recognition within the media industry that adopting a more bipartisan approach in editorial practices could attract a broader and more loyal audience, potentially leading to greater commercial success. However, without an effective system to ensure bipartisan editorial integrity, the inherent biases of journalists risk being amplified when they operate within institutions or align with parties that resonate with their personal beliefs or ideologies. This trend underscores the need for balanced journalism to maintain the credibility and effectiveness of the media in its role as a pillar of democracy.

A responsible and unbiased media landscape can re-engage the public as active participants in political discourse, moving beyond mere spectators in political conflicts. A properly regulated media system is crucial for restoring its role in checking and balancing the powers it was originally intended to oversee, thereby reinforcing the foundations of a healthy democratic process. Such a system would allow for a more cohesive, politically diverse national discourse.

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