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Analyzing the Transformation of Digital Journalism in Pakistan: Challenges, Opportunities, and the Future of News
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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the basic transformation of the Pakistan media landscape which has been brought about by the rapid technological advancements in digital media. This study is based on a thorough examination of the existing literature, industry reports, and policy documents, which were obtained from a wide array of sources to help provide an analysis of the transition from traditional print and broadcast model to interactive, multi-platform and user-centred news settings in Pakistan's specific socio-political context. Theories of technological determinism, media convergence, network society and media dependency are used to anchor the analysis. The findings reveal how digital transformation is transforming news production in Pakistan by introducing early implementation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Mobile Journalism (MoJo) in the field. Moreover, it has transformed the way news is consumed, as more than 117 million netizens and 79 million active social media accounts are changing the face of news consumption in Pakistan. The study also addresses the "digital dilemma" that represents the conflict between the rapid spread of information and the need to keep the information accurate and trustworthy in a complex regulatory landscape. According to the article, Pakistan got a drop in rank in the World Press Freedom Index 2025, dropping from 135th place to 158th position. As a result of this credibility crisis and the overwhelming amount of information, new ideas are explored like "slow journalism" and ethical AI standards as ways to overcome the issues. The article concludes by highlighting the potential of digitalization for democratic values of citizen engagement and reduced entry barriers, but at the same time points out that it poses serious economic problems for traditional Pakistani media houses and poses issues about the loss of institutional control and gatekeeping in an era of declining press freedom in Pakistan.

Keywords: Digital journalism, Pakistan, Press freedom, Algorithm dependency, Slow journalism

Introduction

This revolution in the age of the internet has had a dramatic impact on the landscape of mass communication, eroding television, radio and print media's traditional dominance in both developed and developing nations worldwide (Aslanova, 2025; Chaudhary et al., 2025). This is a global shift, but has been especially pronounced in Pakistan, a country of more than 250 million people where digital media is redefining the way citizens access information and how journalists practice their trade. Digital journalism or online journalism/Netizen journalism is the process of distributing editorial content through internet using multimedia such as text, audio, video and interactive storytelling (Wikipedia, 2026). This is a change from the one-way, linear communication approach to a two-way, conversational approach (Ngoc, 2022; Chaudhary et al., 2025).

The media scene in Pakistan has seen remarkable transformations in last 20 years. Deregulation of the electronic media sector in the early 2000s brought the country from the

era of state-controlled broadcasting through Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation (PBC) and Pakistan Television (PTV) to a vibrant private electronic media sector (Krstić, 2023). But this shift has now advanced to a new and even more disruptive stage the digital transition. According to official government statements (2025), Pakistan had over 117 million internet users, over 148 million mobile broadband subscribers and over 79 million active social media accounts in 2025. The penetration rate of the population with Internet access was 45.7 percent, and it continues to grow at a fast pace (DataReportal, 2025).

Technological innovations have indeed made the world smaller as Marshall McLuhan once said, a 'global village' and more recently a 'global family' (Onwe, 2018). The emergence of New Communication Technologies (NCTs) like high-speed Internet and social media has enabled local issues to instantly gain the world's attention with the touch of a finger (Onwe, 2018). From the political protests in Pakistan's capital Islamabad to the natural disaster in remote areas of Balochistan, events can now be seen around the world within minutes, even before the news outlets, if it makes it onto them, have a chance to report. Yet this democratisation of information flow is accompanied by some serious challenges to traditional business models and professional norms (Franklin, 2014). With the abrogation of the central gatekeeping role, news organizations in Pakistan today have to play new roles that focus on curation, aggregation and verification (Sambrook, 2018).

However, Pakistan is facing unique hardships in its digital journalism revolution. The country has been plummeting in the rankings of the 2025 World Press Freedom Index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) from 152nd place to 158th out of 180 countries (The News, 2025). The figure is a drop of 16 positions from 2019. Some of the main reasons cited for Pakistan's decline are the growing restrictions on freedom of the press, state interference, economic pressures, and violence against journalists, according to the RSF report (Minute Mirror, 2025). Platforms that have been critical against the state institutions have been called to task or silenced by the regulatory authorities on several occasions, including the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA). There have been a number of concerns around digital platforms, as cybercrime legislation is applied to try to curb independent reporting and dissent online (Krstić, 2023).

Shift of journalism in Pakistan is a paradox in this context. Digital technology has become a game-changer in relation to democratic participation, citizen journalism and the access to other sources of information. Meanwhile, these technologies have increased economic threats to traditional media outlets, allowed for the rapid dissemination of misinformation, and given governments new means of surveillance and control over content. Media professionals say Pakistan's failure to appear in any of the top journalism studies, including its own Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025, is "bizarre" considering the nation's significant revenue and engagement in the digital space (Dawn, 2025). This is significant because it indicates a lack of studies on the local digital journalism context in Pakistan, which need to be done.

This article aims to fill this gap, and provides an in-depth study on the digital journalism transformation in Pakistan. It covers new technologies in news production, news consumption, the crisis facing traditional media, citizen journalism, regulation, misinformation, gender distribution and new alternatives such as slow journalism and ethical guidelines for AI. Theoretical frameworks are used as lenses to explore the situation from the perspective of Pakistani data in order to facilitate a roadmap towards moving forward in the changing digital world in the Pakistani media industry.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Several intersecting theories help to frame the changes in the nature of journalism in the digital age. These frameworks offer conceptual tools that will help to understand the distinct Pakistani media landscape and its current digital shift.

Technological Determinism

Technological determinism, which was suggested by Marshall McLuhan, posits that new technology will affect the way people in a society think, act and behave (Onwe, 2018). The development from analogue to digital tools, particularly bulky cameras and microphones to smartphones and miniaturized gadgets, has revolutionized the way journalists work (Onwe, 2018). News consumption and creation, respectively, follow patterns of social and behavioral shifts, which are determined by the technology used (Onwe, 2018).

The lens of this theory helps to understand the shift in news production and consumption in Pakistan due to increasing availability of affordable smartphones and 4G internet connection. Mobile phones have become a vital tool for Pakistani journalists to collect, edit and broadcast news reports directly from the field. It is not only a tool, but also an active participant of journalists' practices, priorities, and ethics. Digital technology has revolutionized the way news is reported, and its speed and availability have set high expectations for instant news.

Convergence Culture

As defined by Henry Jenkins, convergence is the convergence of traditional media and new media, with the content transmitted through various delivery channels, and audiences actively seeking out new information over those channels (Aslanova, 2025). This blurring of the distinction between producer and consumer, and the emergence of a "produser" as some scholars call him (Flew, 2012). Media convergence enables journalists to integrate multiple media styles (text, images, data, video) into one to provide a dynamic journalist user experience (Onwe, 2018).

It can be seen well in the functioning of big media organizations like Dawn, Geo News and ARY News in Pakistan. These entities have created a blended digital approach that blends the broadcast and print with social media, podcasting and digital video. As audiences consume news differently from each platform, Pakistani newsrooms are creating content specifically for each platform. Given the fact that audiences consume news differently on different platforms, Pakistani newsrooms are increasingly creating content specifically for each platform. Journalism and entertainment, and social media communication have become more and more blurred in one another, as Jenkins' convergence thesis comes to life.

The Network Society

Onwe (2018) believes that the spread of the internet has led to a new type of interactive communication as theorised by Manuel Castells. This network society is an environment of horizontal, many to many communication that does not follow the institutional paths (Flew, 2012). In this climate power lies not only with the elite gatekeepers of the media, but in the dynamic between platforms, audiences, and professional communicators (van Dalen, 2024).

The experience of Pakistan has been a good example of social media activism and political communication in the age of Castells' network society. In times of political protests and national crisis, the dissemination of information is done through networks of citizen journalists, activists and ordinary citizens on platforms such as X and WhatsApp to bypass traditional media gatekeepers. This horizontal structure of communication has threatened the powers of state broadcasters as well as private media giants, which therefore have new discursive power and contestation points. Reactions by the state, such as the banning of social media sites, arrest of journalists and changes to the cybercrime laws, suggest that control of network flows is a core battleground of political conflict.

The dependency of media and algorithm

According to the Media Dependency Theory, people have their aims depending on the structural resources and constraints of their surroundings (Schaetz et al., 2024). In the digital era, this has become 'algorithm dependency': Users are so dependent on information curation by algorithms that they depend on it to satisfy their information needs which are presented as pleasant and convenient even though there are privacy issues associated with this. This is called 'algorithm dependency' in the digital age: Users rely on algorithmic information curation to satisfy their information needs, even if it is perceived as pleasant and convenient, despite the accompanying privacy issues (Schaetz et al., 2024).

The dependency on algorithms is more pronounced among Pakistani news consumers. Social media algorithms have gained dominance as gatekeepers as nearly 60 percent of young adults get most of their news from social media as opposed to traditional media outlets (Gallup Pakistan, 2024). These algorithms are designed for engagement and virality, not necessarily for accuracy or public service values and can exacerbate the dissemination of misinformation and the creation of ideological echo chambers. Algorithmic curation also leaves Pakistani news consumers susceptible to coordinated disinformation campaigns, which have been claimed to be run by foreign commercial networks (The News, 2025).

Findings**The use of technologies in news production in Pakistan**

What characterises the digital era in Pakistan is miniaturisation of hardware and the democratisation of production tools. Today, journalists who work nationwide have equipped themselves with smart phones, tablet devices and mini cameras to collect, package and share news just a single instant (Onwe, 2018). The "mobile journalism" (MoJo) allows journalists to record and transmit stories from the field, thus boosting their agility and cost-effectiveness in news production, especially in a nation of economic limitations that constrain newsroom resources.

Even prominent news outlets like Dawn, Geo and ARY have been putting a lot of money into digital first strategies (News Alert, 2025). Independent news sites and social media pages are strong competitors that are often first to report on the news. But digital journalism can also mean news can be spread quicker, which can create issues about what is regulated, harassment online and falling advertising revenues. Technology has been a double-edged sword in the Pakistani news media, as it adds innovation but has also posed sustainability challenges to smaller media outlets (News Alert, 2025).

The adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in Pakistani newsrooms is a relatively new phenomenon and one that is important. In 2025, Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD) initiated the project, "Standards for AI in Journalism", the first local initiative to establish responsible AI use in newsrooms in Pakistan (Dawn, 2025). The standards emerged from a hand on co creation process with industry leaders, and aim to support newsrooms to continue to foster journalism's core values by reinforcing accountability and transparency, and maintaining human oversight, integrity and accuracy at the heart of AI use (Digital Rights Monitor, 2025).

In his role as the founder of MMfD, Asad Baig highlighted the importance of the standards not just as a content production tool, but as a technology that will define labor, sustainability and editorial culture in the future (Dawn, 2025). International institutions such as the European Union in Pakistan, and UNESCO, have acknowledged the need for contextual guidance on the use of AI tools for Pakistani journalism.

Samaa Digital showcased its first AI assisted newsroom model at Sahafi Summit 2025, where they introduced their Virtual Anchor, AI generated voiceovers and news summaries (Samaa TV,

2025). Furthermore, Saga Digital AI, established by seasoned journalist Amar Guriro, has become the first newsroom in the country based on Artificial Intelligence, with a staff of five, responsible for editing news and social media content, as well as managing AI generation and video editing (CWPakistan, 2025). It hires around 60 reporters and freelancers from seven countries including Pakistan, Germany, and the United States, to post stories on the platform, and uses artificial intelligence-enabled production tools to assist them (The Express Tribune, 2025).

However, these technologies are not being adopted across the board. The journalism community in the rural areas of Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and interior Sindh is far behind in exposure to new technologies and digital approaches to storytelling as compared to media in major cities such as Karachi, Lahore and Islamabad (News Alert, 2025). Digital divide between urban and rural Pakistan is a major obstacle to achieving equitable transformation of the journalism industry.

The current crisis in business models

Digitization has significantly lowered the costs of producing and distributing, as there is no need to print or send it physically (Picard, 2011). Even after these cuts, legacy media in Pakistan still has a structural problem as online media giants such as Facebook and Google have taken away the significant number of classified ads and print subscriptions from the legacy media (Reuters Institute, 2022).

Historically, news organizations, especially newspapers, in Pakistan have relied on government advertising to a great degree. Critics say this business model was never appropriate to follow because it jeopardises editorial independence and leaves media houses open to political pressure (The Friday Times, 2025). When the government was advertising, they imposed financial instability, resulting in jobs being lost, editorial independence being curbed, and, in some cases, in the demise of news organizations (Minute Mirror, 2025).

The financial challenge is compounded by the structural dynamics of digital advertising. The social media advertising market in Pakistan is expected to reach US\$ 69.4 million in 2025, and is projected to experience 11.15 per cent compound annual growth rate (CAGR) from 2025 to 2030 (Chinook Strategy, 2025). According to the report made by Pakistani creators, their CPMs (cost per thousand impressions) are lower in comparison to the western markets as in Pakistan, the income per thousand views is as low as few pennies (The News, 2025). In March 2025, Meta announced that it would only payout from certain countries due to the necessity for payout accounts and tax information, limiting access for many Pakistani creators (The News, 2025).

Different experiments have been made by traditional media outlets. However, the print newspaper and magazine industry in Pakistan remains at PKR 98.6 billion, of which nearly one-third is generated by digital editions, apps and subscriptions (Aurora, 2025; Minute Mirror, 2025). Even in the absence of wider access to digital media and the high trust placed in print media, a large number of people outside the big cities are continuing to consume news content through Urdu newspapers (Minute Mirror, 2025). English language print media still exist; however, they are for a smaller, elite audience.

Economically, the situation of the Pakistani media is tough. Audiences shifted from traditional media to digital platforms, leading to layoffs, restructurings, or even shutdowns of channels (LinkedIn, 2025). News media that used to have hundreds of journalists have been cut back to the bare bones, and the quality of news has suffered, as well as depth.

Changes in consumption and algorithm curation

The news consumption mechanism has changed from the front page of a website or newspaper to a highly fragmented platform-based system in Pakistan. In the case of the under 35's, who are increasingly watching or listening to news rather than reading it in a text-based format (Newman et al., 2025), the smartphone is the anchor device for news consumption.

The digital presence of Pakistan grew significantly in 2025. According to official statistics, there are over 117 million internet users, 148 million mobile broadband subscribers and over 79 million active social media accounts (Tarar, 2025). With over 71 million users, YouTube is the top platform followed by TikTok with nearly 67 million users, Facebook with 60 million users and Instagram with 18.8 million users (The News, 2025). Pakistanis used mobile apps for 79.1 billion hours, marking an increase of 14.1% from 2024, highlighting the pivotal position of smartphones in their lives (The News, 2025).

Much of media consumption is 'incidental' and takes place in feeds generated by algorithms on social media platforms (Schaetz et al., 2024). Gallup Pakistan's 2024 survey shows that majority of young adults get most of their information from social media, as opposed to television and newspapers (News Alert, 2025). This change reflects the popularization of citizen journalism in Pakistan, but also questions the issues of accuracy and fact-checking.

In this way, incidental news consumption has fostered the perception of "News Finds Me" (NFM), defined by the scholars as when viewers feel they can indirectly access news content via their online social network without actively searching for it (Schaetz et al., 2024). This is a convenient way to deliver news at low cognitive cost, but it also helps entrench the power imbalance between platforms and users and could result in ideological echo chambers.

According to a report by Pulse Consultant in March 2024, the mobile viewership in Pakistan has also reached the Television level (The News, 2025). The company interprets this as an indication that advertising tactics are changing as well, particularly in light of the changing media preferences of the younger generation. However, there is a huge gap in understanding these trends in Pakistan as it is not included in major international studies of news consumption, such as the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025 (Dawn, 2025). The topic of regulating freedom of expression and freedom of the press.

Press freedom in Pakistan has suffered a huge blow as it has been placed at 158th position in the press freedom Index 2025 by the Reporters Without Borders. It has improved its ranking by 16 from the 200 position it was in in 2019 and six ranks from its previous position of 152. According to the RSF report, these are the significant causes for Pakistan's downward trend: Freedoms being curtailed (including the right to freedom of expression), increasing state control, and economic pressure (Minute Mirror, 2025).

The Pakistani government has been persistently targeting journalists for their reporting on sensitive issues, especially those related to the military, intelligence agencies, and political elites, which has led to harassment, legal threats, and violence against them (Minute Mirror, 2025). According to Pakistan Press Freedom (PPF), during the period of January – October 2025, at least 137 incidents affecting journalists and media practitioners have been reported, of which 35 cases involved physical attacks, five were cases of detentions, two abductions and eight arrests (PPF, 2025). Legal pressure also grew as 30 FIRs (First Information Reports) were filed, 22 of which were under the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) which included the controversial amendments in 2025 (IFJ, 2025).

The recent changes in the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2025 have been cited as a major contributing reason to the aggravation of the situation. The changes are being accused of censorious measures and limiting independent reporting (ANI, 2025). The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) has criticized the amendments as "black laws" to curb the freedom

of the press (The News, 2025). The amended PECA law also gives a new regulatory body broad authority to delete material that is found "contrary" to the undefined and politically sensitive "ideology of Pakistan," which has been strongly attacked by civil society and human rights groups (ANI, 2025).

Media outlets that have shown criticality towards the state institutions have been punished and silenced on several occasions by media regulatory bodies like the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) (Minute Mirror, 2025). Pakistani citizens were shocked to learn that two major TV networks have been banned in October 2025, exposing the fragility of the media organizations in Pakistan (Pakistan Press Foundation, 2025). In Pakistan, the UN Human Rights Committee has expressed concern about freedom of expression, particularly citing the directive issued by Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) which allegedly superseded its mandate and could be read as a justification for censorship under the pretense of regulating authentic news (Pakistan Impunity Watch, 2024).

The government has also for more than a year prohibited access to the social media platform X (formerly Twitter) to a big platform that facilitates political discussion and journalism (Steady Erosion, 2025). Digital rights activists say they are witnessing a climate in which all means are being employed to discourage opposition. Digital rights activists believe that they are seeing a situation where all tactics are being deployed to deter opposition (Geo TV, 2024).

How government media are being undermined by citizen journalists

The digital era has created an opportunity for Pakistanis to become active players in the news production process and anyone with a mobile can now be a news taker (Onwe, 2018). In cases of surprise events such as accidents, natural disasters, or protests, "citizen journalism" may break news before the mainstream media (Onwe, 2018).

A significant case was when a young Pakistani journalist, Mehrunnisa went viral with her dramatic reporting during the floods of the Ravi River in 2025. Her emotional reporting from a small boat, crying out "Aap Hmare Lie Dua Kre" (Please pray for us), was a call that struck a chord with millions of people across social media platforms, similar to the stirring 'Chand Nawab' video from Karachi, which was released by Indian Express in 2025. It is an example of how the digital environment can magnify the voice of individual journalists and citizen reporters to go beyond the traditional media.

This, however, is a problem for the professionalisation of journalism. While citizen journalists can produce fragmented information or information that lacks verification or bias, they do not have the expertise nor the code of ethics that are found in professional journalists, nor do they have institutional autonomy. However, the absence of the traditional editor in citizen journalism has helped misinformation proliferate (Wikipedia 2026, Zhou 2025).

The lack of media literacy and the fragility of trust in institutions in Pakistan can have serious implications in the context of citizen journalism. False reports can cause violence, panic in an emergency, and harm reputations without cause. Citizen contributors can amplify stories that are not often heard by professionals, but their contributions are often considered shallow and do not provide sufficient depth to the story to grasp the complicated occurrences (Zhou, 2025; Chaudhary et al., 2025).

Misinformation and Disinformation

The phenomenon of fake news on social media platforms is rapidly becoming one of the biggest issues of the digital era in Pakistan. In December 2025, Minister for Information and Broadcasting Attaullah Tarar warned that misinformation constitutes the biggest threat of the digital era, stressing the need for responsible online behaviour and a balanced approach amid fast changing technologies (Pakistan Today, 2025).

The government of Pakistan revealed a well-organised and commercially-motivated ecosystem of fake social media profiles, mostly based overseas, and involved in coordinated paid operations to influence public opinion and peddle misinformation (Dawn, 2025). State Minister for Interior Talal Chaudhry presented evidence that suggests how a trend can be created and "sold" on platforms such as WhatsApp and X (The News, 2025).

The investigations revealed that people were paid a few pennies for each message posted or shared, sometimes hundreds of times a day, to make it look like there is genuine public opinion (The News, 2025). A great number of the accounts are not registered in Pakistan and controlled by companies with fake names. The anonymous accounts often are written using "falsified" names and often use terms that are disguised as a news agency or certain provinces/cities to seem realistic. Most importantly, the same networks were also discovered spreading content for organizations banned as terrorists while simultaneously sharing other more mainstream, international causes, suggesting the operations are commercial and financial, not ideological (Dawn, 2025).

The government has warned that those who knowingly engage in any activity that has a trend against the country will face legal punishment (The News, 2025). But critics worry that such coverage – and the sweeping language of PECA – can be taken to its extreme and be used to crack down on "legitimate political opposition" and independent reporting.

In January 2025, Pakistan declared online disinformation as a crime, a move which faces implementation challenges. According to AFP fact checkers (2025), the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) did not give the social media group owners the order to remove foreign members from their groups. This event is an example of how misinformation can come from a variety of sources, including from those with malicious intent who may try to sow confusion and distrust. Journalism for Pakistan is not a gender-neutral profession. Journalism in Pakistan is not gender neutral. Digital Journalism transformation in Pakistan has not led to gender parity. The Global Media Monitoring Project 2025 states that in Pakistan, the percentage of female reporters has dropped from 16 per cent in 2020 to four per cent in 2025 (Dawn, 2025). This dramatic drop reflects stalling situation of gender equality in news in Pakistan as well as in 94 other countries measured in the survey. On 06th May 2025, the GMMP 2025 was observed globally, where Pakistan's news agenda was filled with India Pakistan military tensions. The conflict of the day changed the media, and there was little room for gender-related reporting. The statement, made ahead of the GMMP report (Uks Research Centre, 2025), noted that as of May 6, there were "zero women journalists" on television, radio or internet news who were counted. The statement also revealed that women were only 13 percent of news subjects, compared with 18 per cent in 2020. Males reported all stories that had a female subject. Most women's representation remained the same, with the exception of social/legal news, where they are now 20 percent (2020) compared to 14 percent (Dawn, 2025). The number of female journalists in Pakistan is extremely low, and is reported to be under five per cent (WIONews, 2025). They work in a very patriarchy-driven setting, where they encounter harassment, discrimination and are experiencing a number of challenges in the workplace. The disparities in gender wage, working assignments, opportunities, training opportunities and biased promotion policies are some of the gender inequalities (VU Journal, 2025). The deficiency of women's representation is a sign of structural issues in media houses in Pakistan. In a gender audit of Pakistani media organisations, it was found that there were fewer women journalists in newsrooms and the absence of gender sensitive policies (Outcome Harvesting, 2025). The results of the Global Media Monitoring Project reveal a stagnant environment in which change has been very limited and current strategies are not resulting in a

significant improvement in gender equality (Dawn, 2025). Educational & Professional Development. The higher education institutions of Pakistan have taken steps to meet this challenge by revamping their courses on Journalism and Media Studies. However, there are programs focused on digital media now at universities throughout the nation. Beaconhouse National University provides BS Journalism and Media Studies in specialization of Broadcast Media, Digital Media, Public Relations & Advertising (BNU, 2025). Superior University provides a BS in Digital Media and Broadcast Journalism that combines the latest technologies with journalistic principles (Superior University, 2025). The University of Central Punjab has a BS program in Media and Communication for the field of online journalism, visual communication and news writing (UCP, 2025). Media and Communication Studies is a BS program at Air University that combines theory with real-world practice, allowing students to develop into proficient journalists, broadcasters, digital content creators, and public relations professionals (Air University, 2025). The Department of Journalism Studies at the University of the Punjab has been continuing to churn out students for the media industry, and the admission for Fall 2025 semester is a testament to the continued demand for journalism education (PU, 2025). But there's still a disconnect between school and work. IMS, Mediastan and IRADA (IRADA, 2025) have developed a 16-point roadmap for structural reforms, curriculum changes, faculty development and resources for media degree programs, based on a survey of 92 media studies programs. The report makes clear that journalism education must be made relevant to the digital, multi platform news production realities. To revolutionize newsroom processes in Pakistan, Media Matters for Democracy (MM4D) introduced a groundbreaking initiative called Sahafat.AI, which focuses on using artificial intelligence (AI) responsibly (Daily Times, 2025). In partnership with three of Pakistan's most reputed newsrooms, MMfD will be designing and implementing customised AI enterprise solutions for each newsroom based on their unique editorial processes, content priorities, and institutional structures (Daily Times, 2025).

Discussion Speed vs. Accuracy The hallmark of digital journalism is that it is so much faster than ever. News is reported very often in real time, within minutes after the event has happened. This can lead to "digital dilemma" as it is difficult to maintain the priority of timely reporting in the name of being the first to break the news while ensuring the accuracy of the information. Even if corrected, inaccurate reporting irreparably tarnishes a newsroom's credibility and may have real-world consequences. This dilemma is exacerbated in Pakistan due to platform dynamics of social media. Rushing to make content go viral, sensational, and exciting sometimes leads to superficial and unverifiable material. There are many journalists who realize that the race to be first sometimes leads to the most superficial version of a story (Palomino-Flores et al., 2025). Research indicates that people look for speed, but they look for accuracy. This was starkly visible during the 2025 India-Pakistan military stand-off. With news of the shelling from across the border spreading like wildfire, social media was awash with unverified claims, manipulated videos and report conflict. Competing with citizen journalist with raw, unfiltered and sometimes false content, professional journalist found it difficult to verify information. That day women's stories were virtually not heard—the overwhelming coverage of conflict had made them almost invisible in the news cycle, with no women journalists recorded (Uks Research Centre, 2025). A collection of stories on trust and the spread of misinformation, and on the slow journalism that has replaced it. Good news has a low value of trust worldwide and in Pakistan too. Only some 40 per cent of the global population are most trusting of most news most of the time (Newman et al., 2025). The fake news, government propaganda and impression of media being aligned with the political parties further undermines trust in Pakistan.

This is why the "slow journalism" movement has become an ethical stance against the speed and superficiality of mainstream digital media (Rodríguez, 2026). Slow journalism is not about going viral, it's about being accurate, analytical and in depth in the narrative. It frames slowness as a tool and provides the opportunity for content that is well researched and promotes critical thinking (Palomino-Flores et al., 2025). Slow journalism is giving birth in niche digital platforms and independent journalism projects in Pakistan. Social media platforms and digital media have enabled freelance journalists to provide indigenous Pashtun journalists with opportunities to counter longstanding state narratives (Media Diversity Institute, 2025). The independent journalists are those who take time to research, verify and go the extra mile, not the ones that rush to be first. But slow journalism is tough to make economically in a click-happy economy. As Palomino-Flores et al. (2025) point out, slow journalism is a still-embryonic approach, and is also now being adopted by independent news but is still not the dominant model as they seek to regain credibility and connect with communities. Algorithmic Gatekeeping and Transparency The shift from editors to algorithms in the gatekeeping process has raised concerns about 'algorithmic bias' and transparency (Dariush, 2025). Algorithms organize information according to calculations set in place that can be used to represent biases present in society (van Dalen, 2024; Dariush, 2025). In order to be given this power, trust and legitimacy are necessary (van Dalen, 2024). Algorithmic gatekeeping holds greater significance in Pakistan because the country is heavily dependent on platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok for disseminating news. From these platforms, which are based in California, decisions are made regarding content moderation, recommendations and monetization, which have a significant impact on the Pakistani media. Many Pakistani creators lost access to the platform because of the change in its policies regarding monetization, which took effect in March, 2025, highlighting the sudden and severe economic impact of such changes in platform policies (The News, 2025). As a new objectivity for the digital age, transparency is often suggested (Sambrook, 2018). This can include giving the audience the "provenance" of the news, such as the author of the article, the date of its last update, and the sources used. Some researchers believe that the most effective way is to integrate algorithms with human writers (van Dalen, 2024). In Pakistan, the Standards for AI in Journalism, which were introduced in November 2025, are an attempt to institutionalize transparency and accountability in algorithmic systems (Dawn, 2025). The standards highlight the need for human oversight, integrity and accuracy in newsrooms, as they adopt AI. But it is not mandatory and it is uncertain that the big Pakistani media companies will completely follow these norms. Future models and Economic Sustainability This is an economic crisis that Pakistani journalism desperately needs to be addressed. Traditional media outlets are still losing advertising dollars to global platforms while the digital native media outlets struggle to monetize their audiences. The government advertising has become so entrenched that it has eroded editorial independence and is no longer a viable long-term business model. There are a number of possible solutions. In some countries paywalls have been instituted at a "break neck speed," but many have fallen prey to heavy competition (Franklin, 2014). Paywalls, if any, are not common in Pakistan and the market for digital subscriptions is small. Other examples involve micropayments, whereby users are charged small fees for single publications, and crowdfunding, which is based on direct funding from the audience for individual investigative projects (EFJ, 2019; Franklin, 2014). But these models need customers' confidence and e-payment system, which are problematic in Pakistan. Another possible alternative is to provide access to multiple titles and lifestyle content through news bundles to help meet the needs of price-sensitive audiences (Newman et al., 2025). However, for the success of such a package, the cooperation between competing media will be difficult to obtain and in the

Pakistani media landscape, it is tough to secure. Some analysts believe that the digital model that will work in Pakistan is just to price anything that can be printed (The Friday Times, 2025). This is similar to the print era subscription models but has yet to be proven at scale. Conclusion The shift in journalism in Pakistan with the advent of digital media is a process that cannot be reversed and is multifaceted. It has revolutionized information sharing, given citizens a voice in producing news and enabled multimedia and AI storytelling. Digital technology has provided the voice of previously marginalized communities, speeded up reporting during crises and put independent media reporting beyond the control of traditional media outlets. But there are serious problems. Authoritarianism and the abuse of cybercrime laws have pushed Pakistan's press freedom ranking from 139th place in 2013 to 158th place among 180 countries. The economic crisis has made it easy for conventional media to crumble, and it is not unusual to see editorial independence downplayed and staff cuts at newspapers and magazines. Effectively, misinformation and coordinated misinformation operations can affect the public's trust of any news source. The number of women working in journalism has plummeted from 16 percent in 2020 to 4 percent in 2025, as a result of structural barriers and a hostile working environment. Aside from the gatekeeping effect of institutions, a new dependency and power imbalance has emerged as a result of algorithmic curation, one that needs to be addressed now through greater media literacy and transparency. The lack of Pakistan's representation in studies on global media consumption and use, such as the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, is a gap which needs to be bridged with local research and data collection. In Pakistan, the delicate balance of speed and accuracy is a challenge for journalism's democratic function. In a digital age defined by speed, there is still a strong appetite for depth, context and truth, even in the wake of slow journalism, ethical AI guidelines and independent digital publications. While the Standards for AI in Journalism were established at the Sahafi Summit 2025, there is a need for ongoing cooperation and dedication from newsrooms, civil society organisations and educational institutions to implement them. What's needed now is a blend of these strategies and a hybrid approach to news reporting in Pakistan that adopts technology's innovations while maintaining the core principles of verification, transparency and public service. This is why the "slow journalism" movement has become an ethical stance against the speed and superficiality of mainstream digital media (Rodríguez, 2026). Slow journalism is not about going viral, it's about being accurate, analytical and in depth in the narrative. It frames slowness as a tool and provides the opportunity for content that is well researched and promotes critical thinking (Palomino-Flores et al., 2025). Slow journalism is giving birth in niche digital platforms and independent journalism projects in Pakistan. Social media platforms and digital media have enabled freelance journalists to provide indigenous Pashtun journalists with opportunities to counter longstanding state narratives (Media Diversity Institute, 2025). The independent journalists are those who take time to research, verify and go the extra mile, not the ones that rush to be first. But slow journalism is tough to make economically in a click-happy economy. As Palomino-Flores et al. (2025) point out, slow journalism is a still-embryonic approach, and is also now being adopted by independent news but is still not the dominant model as they seek to regain credibility and connect with communities. Algorithmic Gatekeeping and Transparency The shift from editors to algorithms in the gatekeeping process has raised concerns about 'algorithmic bias' and transparency (Dariush, 2025). Algorithms organize information according to calculations set in place that can be used to represent biases present in society (van Dalen, 2024; Dariush, 2025). In order to be given this power, trust and legitimacy are necessary (van Dalen, 2024). Algorithmic gatekeeping holds greater significance in Pakistan because the country is heavily dependent on platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and TikTok for

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Future models and Economic Sustainability

This is an economic crisis that Pakistani journalism desperately needs to be addressed. Traditional media outlets are still losing advertising dollars to global platforms while the digital native media outlets struggle to monetize their audiences. The government advertising has become so entrenched that it has eroded editorial independence and is no longer a viable long-term business model. There are a number of possible solutions. In some countries paywalls have been instituted at a "break neck speed," but many have fallen prey to heavy competition (Franklin, 2014). Paywalls, if any, are not common in Pakistan and the market for digital subscriptions is small. Other examples involve micropayments, whereby users are charged small fees for single publications, and crowdfunding, which is based on direct funding from the audience for individual investigative projects (EFJ, 2019; Franklin, 2014). But these models need customers' confidence and e-payment system, which are problematic in Pakistan. Another possible alternative is to provide access to multiple titles and lifestyle content through news bundles to help meet the needs of price-sensitive audiences (Newman et al., 2025). However, for the success of such a package, the cooperation between competing media will be difficult to obtain and in the Pakistani media landscape, it is tough to secure. Some analysts believe that the digital model that will work in Pakistan is just to price anything that can be printed (The Friday Times, 2025). This is similar to the print era subscription models but has yet to be proven at scale.

Conclusion

The shift in journalism in Pakistan with the advent of digital media is a process that cannot be reversed and is multifaceted. It has revolutionized information sharing, given citizens a voice in producing news and enabled multimedia and AI storytelling. Digital technology has provided the voice of previously marginalized communities, speeded up reporting during crises and put independent media reporting beyond the control of traditional media outlets. But there are serious problems. Authoritarianism and the abuse of cybercrime laws have pushed Pakistan's press freedom ranking from 139th place in 2013 to 158th place among 180 countries. The economic crisis has made it easy for conventional media to crumble, and it is not unusual to see editorial independence downplayed and staff cuts at newspapers and magazines. Effectively, misinformation and coordinated misinformation operations can affect the public's trust of any news source. The number of women working in journalism has plummeted from 16 percent in 2020 to 4 percent in 2025, as a result of structural barriers and a hostile working environment. Aside from the gatekeeping effect of institutions, a new dependency and power

imbalance has emerged as a result of algorithmic curation, one that needs to be addressed now through greater media literacy and transparency. The lack of Pakistan's representation in studies on global media consumption and use, such as the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, is a gap which needs to be bridged with local research and data collection. In Pakistan, the delicate balance of speed and accuracy is a challenge for journalism's democratic function. In a digital age defined by speed, there is still a strong appetite for depth, context and truth, even in the wake of slow journalism, ethical AI guidelines and independent digital publications. While the Standards for AI in Journalism were established at the Sahafi Summit 2025, there is a need for ongoing cooperation and dedication from newsrooms, civil society organisations and educational institutions to implement them. What's needed now is a blend of these strategies and a hybrid approach to news reporting in Pakistan that adopts technology's innovations while maintaining the core principles of verification, transparency and public service. Collective efforts of various stakeholders are needed to develop the future of digital journalism in Pakistan. Media organisations need to invest in digital transformation but also not compromise on ethical approaches. The curricula need to be revised to equip students to learn digital and multi platform news production. Civil society has a role to play in continuing to champion press freedom and journalist safety. Government has a constitutional responsibility to ensure the protection of free speech, but to also do so in a transparent, and accountable way in combating misinformation.

Otherwise, Pakistan could be headed towards more democratic degradation as its independent media is being undermined and people turn to unverifiable content on opaque platforms that is algorithmically generated. The prizes are big. Journalism is not just a job, it is a public good that is vital to informed citizens, accountable government and democratic resilience. It is imperative that these values must be followed in order to achieve the promise of journalists going digital in Pakistan.

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