

## The Digital Revolution: Media Shapes Political Culture in Pakistan

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**Abstract:** Political culture refers to the beliefs, values, customs, and practices that influence political behaviour in a society. In Pakistan, the media has had a significant impact on political culture. The digital revolution has had a huge impact on Pakistani political culture through the power of the media. Traditional and social media play important roles in shaping the country's public opinion and political debate. The rise of digital platforms has transformed how information is transmitted and consumed, allowing citizens to interact and participate more actively in political affairs. The media serves as a conduit between the government and the people, giving a forum for citizens to express their views, debate policy issues, and hold officials accountable. This study explores the intricate ways in which the digital revolution shapes Pakistani political culture by investigating the function of social media platforms as catalysts for political mobilization and the propagation of political narratives. The research takes a comprehensive approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies. The study examines the impact of digital media on political awareness, political opinion formation, and the dynamics of political involvement among Pakistanis using content analysis, surveys, and in-depth interviews. Furthermore, the study investigates the impact of this digital transition on traditional media outlets, political institutions, and governance systems. Its goal is to provide insights into the changing relationships between citizens, media, and political actors, offering light on the digital revolution's possible democratizing consequences and problems.

**Key Words:** Power of Media, Echo Chamber, Epistemic Bubble, Political Culture, Digital Revolution, Political Awareness, Political Actors

### Introduction

Pakistan, a nation known for its rich history, diverse culture, and complex political landscape, is experiencing a transformative wave brought about by the digital revolution. In recent years, advancements in technology and the widespread accessibility of the Internet have significantly altered the way information is disseminated, consumed, and shared.

The country has witnessed a rapid evolution in its media landscape, with digital platforms playing a pivotal role by replacing traditional media. In past, citizens relied on newspapers, radio or TV which could be easily manipulated and controlled by the state. The flow of information was not reliable and public opinion was not an important matter for the politicians or policy makers. The advancement of technology and accessibility of mobile and the internet changed everything. A person with a smartphone can rapidly interact and share his/her point of view through social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.) This paradigm shift has not only impacted daily life but has also played a crucial role in determining the political culture of the country. In Pakistan's dynamic political scene, the role of the media has expanded beyond traditional reporting to become a powerful factor in shaping political activism. Over time, media platforms have developed as critical catalysts for connecting citizens, amplifying voices, and driving change.

In this digital age, social media provide access to the

international community and an event in any continent can become a reason behind political and social movements. The flow of information is more rapid therefore voters can monitor and respond to their administrations on social media and also show their intent in upcoming elections through it. Consequently, political parties took these indications more seriously and started to form social media strategies to manipulate public perception in their favour. Recent elections around the globe indicate that without a comprehensive social media policy a political party cannot win polls. Pakistan is the fifth largest populist country and during the first decade of this century, electronic media (private news channels) emerged which played a decisive role in the removal of the regime of General Pervez Musharraf. During the last decade, broader access to smartphones and the internet changed the social and political landscape of the country. Social media sites have become more popular among the masses. Initially, the youth and literate community spent more time on platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Myspace, and other social and political blogs. But with time other sites like TikTok and Instagram became more popular and excessive not only for youth but also for the second generation of this nation. Hence, political parties formed their social media strategies and engaged the voters through it. "Since 2013 Pakistan started to pay extra attention to the process of digitization. It was also reflected in the election manifestos of almost all the political parties. The first digitization policy surfaced in 2013. It aimed to kickstart the debate about

technological change; therefore, its scope remained limited. It laid the foundation for Pakistan's efforts to bring the economy to par with developed economies. Initially, it was limited to engagement with stakeholders and creating jobs for IT experts." (Magsi, 2023)

### **Fifth Generation Warfare**

"In this fifth-generation warfare, the neighbouring hostile countries used various mass media and social media tools such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp etc to spread well-designed and targeted messages against the state of Pakistan as well as social ethnic and cultural integrity of the people. Unfortunately, our response to this misinformation and propaganda was not that much sufficient to counter the onslaught. This should be countered in both ways which are keeping a check on the flow of information to the masses and building a counter-narrative to safeguard the ideological integration as well as strong social fabric in Pakistan." (Maseehullah, 2023 (6:1)) In 2013, the term "Fifth Generation" emerged, dramatically altering the landscape of the 2018 elections. If we carefully analyze the elections of 2013 and especially the 2018 general elections. Those parties who cleverly used digital media gained a lot of success during and after the elections. According to 2013 Internet World Stats, the country ranks eighth among Asia's top ten Internet users.

This article delves into Pakistan's contemporary digital revolution, highlighting its impact on politics, with a particular emphasis on the influential role of media—both traditional and digital—as powerful instruments shaping public opinion and steering political discourse in the current electoral scenario.

### **Research Objectives**

- Examine how digital media, especially social platforms, affects political awareness in Pakistan.
- Assess the role of digital platforms in spreading political information and promoting informed citizenship.
- Analyze how digital media influences political beliefs and attitudes in Pakistan.
- Investigate the influence of internet material, conversations, and narratives on public perceptions.
- Determine the extent to which digital platforms facilitate political participation, activism, and civic engagement in Pakistan.
- Explore how citizens engage and participate in political affairs using digital media.

### **Research Methodology**

This research project will take a combination of methods to extensively investigate the impact of digital

media on Pakistani political culture. An analysis of content on digital media platforms will be conducted to determine how political information and narratives are spread. Surveys will also be performed to provide qualitative data on the dynamics of political activity in the Internet sphere. Significant consideration will be given to selecting digital media sources and the survey sample procedure to guarantee that the data is representative.

### **The Digital Landscape in Pakistan**

Pakistan has witnessed a remarkable increase in internet penetration and mobile connectivity in the past decade. The proliferation of affordable smartphones and the expansion of 4G networks have made it easier for a significant portion of the population to access the digital realm. According to the Internet World Stats report of 2023 over 50% population use the Internet. Millions of Pakistanis now rely on social networking sites such as Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook in their everyday lives. These platforms provide a space for individuals to share opinions, engage in discussions, and stay informed about current events. The impact of social media on politics is undeniable, with political actors, parties, and citizens actively participating in online conversations. According to Datareportal; "There were 87.35 million internet users in Pakistan at the start of 2023 when internet penetration stood at 36.7 per cent. Pakistan was home to 71.70 million social media users in January 2023, equating to 30.1 per cent of the total population. A total of 191.8 million cellular mobile connections were active in Pakistan in early 2023, with this figure equivalent to 80.5 per cent of the total population." (Kemp, 2023)

### **Traditional Media vs. Digital Media**

Traditional media outlets in Pakistan contribute significantly to shaping the public agenda and framing political narratives. Through editorial choices, coverage focus, and tone, media organizations can influence public perceptions of political events and issues. The ability to set agendas and frame discussions allows the media to direct attention toward specific topics, thereby influencing the priorities of political activists and the broader public.

While traditional media, including television, radio, and newspapers, continues to play a crucial role in shaping public opinion, the digital revolution has altered the dynamics. News organizations have adapted to the digital age, with many establishing online platforms to reach a broader audience. Digital journalism has gained prominence in Pakistan, allowing for real-time reporting and analysis. Online news portals and blogs cover a wide range of topics, providing diverse perspectives that may not always be present in mainstream media. Within digital media, social media become the driving force behind political mobilization.

## Social Media and Political Mobilization

Social media has proven to be a powerful tool for political mobilization, enabling the rise of grassroots movements and activism. Media has played a pivotal role in bringing political issues to the forefront, empowering citizens with the knowledge needed to engage meaningfully in political discourse. Events like the Lawyers' Movement and the Aurat March have gained momentum through online platforms, allowing citizens to unite for common causes. The media's coverage of political movements is instrumental in amplifying the voices of activists and drawing attention to their causes. From street protests to advocacy campaigns, media coverage serves as a bridge between political activists and the wider audience. Political parties and candidates leverage social media for campaigning, reaching a younger demographic and engaging with voters directly. The use of targeted advertising, online rallies, and interactive content has become commonplace, reshaping the dynamics of political campaigning. The 2018 general elections in Pakistan witnessed a notable surge in online political activism, highlighting the growing role of digital media in shaping electoral outcomes. It entirely shifted the traditional campaign strategies.

## Role of Media in Influencing Government

The media respond to social issues and represent society in front of policymakers. During the last decade, digital media influenced policy and law-making. For example, Zainab murder case became a reason behind the new legislation on child rape and murder cases. The rising cases of forceful conversions were also highlighted on digital media. Social media platforms also became reliable tools against the political elite who seem to be untouchable under the recent state of affairs. Due to reporting and public uproar on digital media culprits of cases like the Noor Muqadam and Fatima murder cases were arrested and trialled under the spotlight. Digital media also shape external policy. For instance, the coverage of the conflict between Palestine and Israel as well as the controversial and slandered acts against Islam in Norway, France and other European states affected the masses and policymakers in Islamabad.

## Digital Media Strategies of Political Parties

According to recent data political parties in Pakistan rely more on digital and social media for their political campaign. The most followed political party on Facebook or Twitter is PTI followed by Jammāt e Islami and then Pakistan Muslim League. The most important reason behind the media strategy is the wider access to the internet and through these platforms, political parties can easily gain popular support and can achieve their political goals. Meta (Facebook's parent company) has evolved as the main internet platform for political advertising over the

years due to its low cost and excellent facilities for accurately targeting certain populations. During the 2018 elections in Pakistan, mainstream Political parties took social media seriously for their election campaign. During the 2023 local bodies election in Karachi II, they have effectively marketed their election campaign through digital media. "The party claimed that ads on social media were publicized to at least 5 to 6.5 million persons located in Karachi. Meta's Ad Library report shows that since July 2022, a total of 25,138 ads related to social issues, elections, and politics were launched, and more than Rs.69,112,403 was spent on them by advertisers in Pakistan." (Baig, 2023) Through these ads, Political parties targeted specific age groups, areas and issues to gain support.

The core reason is the young population also known as Generation Z which is more active on digital media. The role of these young voters will be significant in the 2024 elections. Because the majority of them will vote first time and social media is the primary source of news for them. Recent trends highlight a shift in political campaigns on social media. Instead of old slogans like food, clothing and shelter political parties are changing their approach towards voters by "targeting sentiments". For example, young voters are looking for scholarships, skill development, loans for business, laptops and vocational training. Political parties are targeting them through ads and convincing them to vote for them to achieve their desires.

This kind of micro-targeting enables candidates to interact with voters on a more personal and sympathetic level, making their campaigns more effective at reaching specific demographics and interests. Nowadays, political parties form digital media teams to handle election campaigns, as well as hundreds of volunteers who actively distribute their information through numerous social media groups. Furthermore, individuals from media, sports, social media influencers and journalists play critical roles in moulding public opinion in favour of a specific political party.

A recent study highlighted that digital media volunteers and supporters of political parties filter material to fit in with the party platform, reducing exposure to alternative perspectives and increasing polarization. These strategies are responsible for intolerance and extremism in a society where society is divided and incidents like the killing of a family member based on different political opinions or support occur.

"A [policy paper](#) by UNDP and USAID pointed out that people tend to favour information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs while dismissing dissenting views. Social media platforms employ algorithms that are based on their past interactions, creating virtual echo chambers where like-minded individuals repeatedly encounter content and opinions that reinforce their

own.” (Baig, 2023) This algorithmic customization eliminates varied opinions, making users less likely to encounter opposing viewpoints.

As a result, these secluded digital areas promote polarisation and manipulation, exacerbating political and social divisions. The echo chamber effect is not limited to a single location; it is a worldwide phenomenon that affects both mature democracies and developing countries, significantly influencing political processes and outcomes. The impact of digital media was highlighted during events such as Brexit in the UK, demonstrating the far-reaching relevance of echo chambering on politics and the future of the United Kingdom.

However, it is believed that political ads are not sufficient to convince people to support a specific political party. These commercials can be effective in persuading indecisive voters, but their influence on users may vary depending on a variety of criteria, including content and messaging, among others.

There is a new trend in digital media where unverified news pages promote specific political thoughts. These developments are troubling, as an unauthentic web page sponsors a political group while masquerading as a news/media firm and concealing its genuine goal. Such websites spend a significant amount of money promoting, potentially circumventing the system's transparency mechanisms. It requires a stricter measure against these practices to make sure that information remains reliable and the integrity of elections can't be questioned.

### Survey

As part of our research, we surveyed media professionals. The goal was to raise awareness of people in a broader context. They all believe that social media platforms have played an important role in political mobilization in Pakistan. They have stated their thoughts, that the impact of digital media on politics has been substantial, as it has provided a platform for the dissemination of information, public discussions, and political activism. It enables fast communication, but it also raises concerns about the spread of misinformation. To navigate this new landscape, users should critically assess their sources, while policymakers need to address issues such as online privacy and the proliferation of fake news.

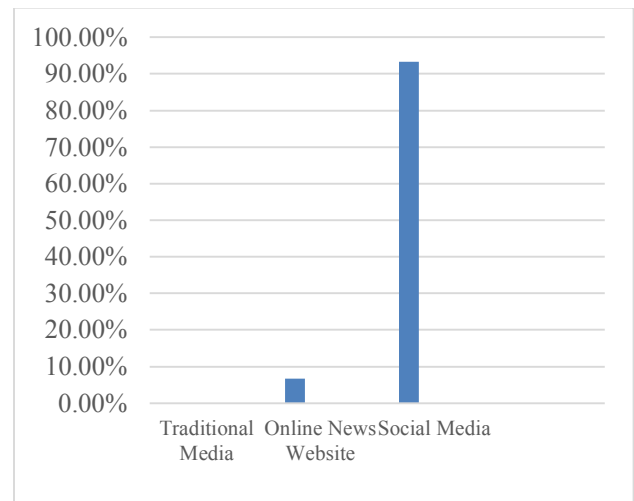
This phenomenon is not a revolution, but rather a disaster that manipulates human thinking, experiences, and opinions, which can be dangerous for individuals. Research should focus on understanding the effects of changing mindsets. In the political scenario of Pakistan, only one party, PTI, has actively engaged with this issue and has achieved some results.

In the next decade, digital media is expected to completely replace traditional media, with social platforms becoming the primary source of news.

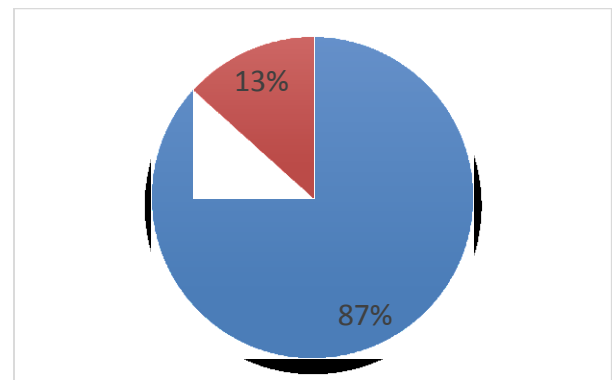
The political landscape in Pakistan has seen substantial changes as a result of the digital revolution. One of the most noticeable changes is the increasing availability of information, which enables citizens to stay informed about political events and trends. Furthermore, social media platforms have developed as powerful tools for moulding political culture, giving people a place to express their opinions and rally support. This can be observed in Palestine, where social media has played a critical role in amplifying voices and drawing attention to pressing issues. Furthermore, the digital era has enabled citizens to actively participate in political activities, allowing them to express their views, rally support, and question established narratives.

### Findings

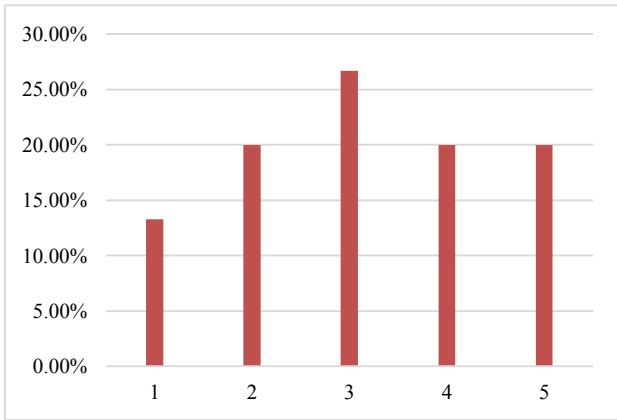
*Which media platforms do you believe have the most influence on shaping public opinion in Pakistan?*



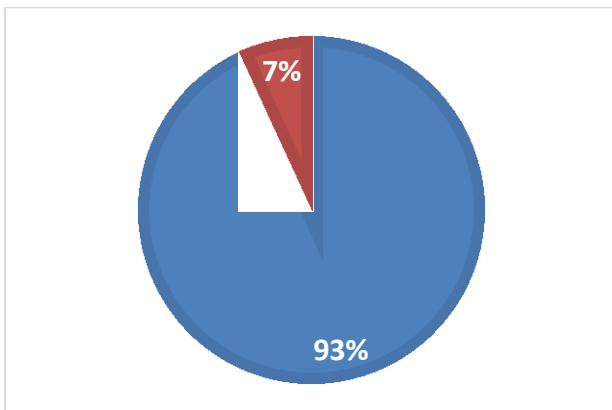
*How do you believe social media has influenced Pakistan's political narrative?*



*How has the rise of digital platforms affected citizen participation in Pakistani politics?*



Have you personally witnessed any instances where social media has influenced political narratives in Pakistan?



### Challenges and Opportunities

The digital revolution has also brought forth challenges, with the rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation. False narratives and fake news can significantly impact public perception, leading to potential consequences for political stability. While the media contributes significantly to political activism, it also faces challenges. Censorship, intimidation of journalists, and economic pressures can stifle the media's ability to act as a watchdog. "As for the public, with so much information coming in from diverse sources, it is easy to fall into the trap of misinformation. Circulation of unverified and fake political news has become a norm. It is imperative to be mindful of the fact that not all information being circulated is correct and may be motivated by dangerous objectives. The blind absorption of available narratives can lead to immense political polarisation contributing to internal insecurity in the long run." (Arif S. , 2022) Navigating these challenges becomes crucial for sustaining a robust environment for political activism in Pakistan.

Digital platforms were widely used in the run-up to general elections to influence young voters, with analysts pointing out that politics and social media had become inextricably linked in today's Internet age.

"According to Pakistan's election commission, young voters constitute 45 per cent of the nearly 129 million electorate this year. To connect with around 73 million social media users, political parties and independent candidates leveraged digital platforms to convey their messages and influence potential voters. This trend was particularly evident in Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party, which frequently complained of a lack of a level playing field, citing the arrests of its leaders and supporters in recent months that led to restrictions on its public gatherings. As a result, the PTI relied on virtual rallies by utilizing social media platforms and, for the first time, used artificial intelligence (AI) to disseminate messages from Khan, who has been incarcerated in a high-security prison in Rawalpindi." (Shabbir, 2024)

### Cyber Crime

Cybercrime has become a major concern, ranging from website hacking for forgery to financial fraud. Cyberstalking tops the list of reported offences, accounting for more than 80% of complaints to the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA). Victims, primarily young women, experience harassment, blackmail, and extortion, which affects not just them but also their families. Incidents are frequently reported on social networking sites, particularly Facebook and Twitter. Morphed and real photographs, along with contact information, are sometimes submitted to prominent online marketing websites.

False identification, often known as phoney IDs, has been a problem since the beginning of social media. Photo editing software and high-quality printing have made it quite simple to create phoney IDs. While several nations have strict regulations against fraudulent IDs, Pakistan currently lacks particular cyber legislation because they are still being implemented.

Pakistan has seen an increase in bogus accounts on social media, causing substantial problems for victims. Fake accounts specifically target celebrities, causing the propagation of fake news and rumours. Cybercrime, such as the creation of phoney profiles and sites, is causing celebrities grief, tarnishing their image, and confusing the public. "Pakistani celebrities are demanding to FIA and the government take action against these cyber-crimes which are becoming a cause of trouble in their life as fake IDs and fake pages of celebrities are misleading people and also harming their images. The government should take action against cybercrime to get rid of people from this misleading trend." (Memon, Mahar, Dhomeja, & Pirzado, 2015)

On the positive side, the digital revolution has opened avenues for increased civic engagement. Citizens can voice their opinions, participate in discussions, and hold authorities accountable, fostering a more participatory political culture. The State of Digital

Journalism 2022 report, produced by the Institute for Research, Advocacy and Development (IRADA); “The study finds that Pakistani digital-native news outlets are fighting an existential battle due to a lack of resources, financial insecurity and safety risks but, at the same time, they are also exploring avenues of audience development, fact-checking and social media monetisation to win the trust of online audiences and ensure viability for their news operations.” (IRADA, 2023)

### Future Trends and Implications

The future of the digital revolution in Pakistan holds exciting possibilities, with emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and augmented reality likely to further transform the media landscape. Understanding these trends is crucial for anticipating their impact on political culture.

Policymakers must adapt to the evolving media landscape, formulating regulations that balance freedom of expression with the need to combat misinformation. Additionally, investments in digital literacy initiatives can empower citizens to navigate the digital realm critically.

### Conclusion

The Constitution of Pakistan Article 19 states that “Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression, and there shall be freedom of the press, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof, friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, [commission of] or incitement to an offence.” (The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, 1973)

The digital revolution in Pakistan has significantly profited from this point. It has ushered in a new era where media, in all its forms, plays a pivotal role in shaping the country's political culture. From the rise of social media as a catalyst for political activism to the evolving landscape of digital journalism, the impact of these changes is profound. While challenges such as misinformation persist, the opportunities for increased civic engagement and political discourse are equally significant. As Pakistan continues on its digital journey, understanding the interplay between media and politics will be crucial for building a more informed and participatory society.

The role of social media is important. Recently due to censorship and governmental surveillance of electronic media. A new trend emerged in which social media platforms especially Facebook and Twitter played an important part in countering governmental obligations. A great number of journalists were facing job crises due to their non-supportive role towards regimes and

institutions. They actively participated in social media platforms, especially on YouTube. Many shared their knowledge and opinions with people but it became evident that the flow of information was not authentic and in this politically polarized society, the nation was divided and digital media became a propaganda tool. The social media influencer emerged under these circumstances who failed to oblige any morality but their desired goal was to gain maximum financial and influential benefit out of it. So far the integrity of the state has been damaged due to the misuse of media and propaganda by the state and individuals. It strengthened the international propaganda towards Pakistan that it is a failed state and its economic and security integrity was questioned on international platforms.

“In an environment where polarization and the influence of social media on political discourse are significant concerns, both online platforms and government authorities must address these challenges. The absence of specific rules and spending limits for political campaigns on social media is a notable gap in regulating modern political campaigns. Given the growing importance of social media in political messaging and influence, regulatory bodies must adapt and establish guidelines that ensure fairness, transparency, and information integrity in elections.” (Baig, 2023)

Governments and appropriate agencies should collaborate with online platforms to develop a structure that effectively monitors digital political advertising, establishes explicit spending limits, and enforces laws to prevent these platforms from being misused for political objectives. It is critical to address these challenges to protect the electoral procedure's integrity and provide voters with factual and balanced information, thereby reducing polarization and fostering a healthier political discourse.

Effective use of technology is critical in minimizing violence, but it cannot provide a complete answer. Legislation and security measures are also critical in effectively addressing these problems. However, the need for awareness training is sometimes ignored, and viewed as a superfluous expense rather than an important requirement. It is critical to recognise that security awareness training is essential to protecting user data. These training sessions should attempt to teach people about proper usage, personal responsibilities, and the safety and security of sensitive information. The ultimate goal is to ensure the confidentiality, integrity, and availability of information resources and systems, hence avoiding misuse or unauthorised access.

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