

A Desk Research on Citizen & Investigative Journalism in Pakistan: Scope and Need

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1. Introduction

1.1 Executive Summary

1.2 Desk Review Introduction/Background

Media plays a key role in any society as it provides us with the understanding of the world that we live in. However, with this authority of giving perspectives and opinions to masses about the world, comes the responsibility of disseminating information objectively and honestly. Hence, the term free media becomes synonymous with responsible media.

To become truly the fourth pillar of the state, media still requires certain professional and ethical standards of journalism that ought to be strictly followed. The rise of sensationalist media and yellow journalism in Pakistan has led to the emergence of a debate in various circles in the country about the accountability of media and the journalistic profession.¹

This sensationalist aspect of the newspapers and private news television channels raises increasing concerns among the public. It is clear that tainted with sensationalism, the practice merely serves the agenda of generating more revenue for the corporation while compromising on the objectivity and reliability of the information. Moreover, both the electronic and print media organizations often indulge in a war for dominance thereby inciting distorted and tarnished facts that result in creating panic among the masses.

Sensationalism cannot be addressed properly if one hasn't addressed the scope and application of investigative journalism. It is more demanding and hence requires journalists with skills as well as the capacity to make sound and balanced political and social judgments.

In Pakistan the challenges of standards and quality are far greater as the quality of reports requires patience, skill and responsibility.²

A notable incident of lack of proper investigative reporting could be that of Thar Famine 2014. Suddenly, the media's lens focused on thatched huts of the ignored people of Tharparkar, sand dunes, their lifestyle, poor health facilities and the non-availability of drinking water (owing to drought conditions). Every news item regarding Thar was packaged to present the famine as an emerging phenomenon; one that was being experienced by the impoverished people of the desert recently. Quite on the contrary, malnutrition and lack of clean drinking water are two issues that have plagued Tharparkar for decades now. Reports generated by the World Health Organization (WHO) and various civil society organizations over the last 25 years or so are testimonies of this lingering issue. Accordingly, prior to reporting, it would have been much more sensible to refer to authentic facts and figures so that the real challenges

¹ Sumbal, Malik Ayub. "The Curse of Yellow Journalism in Pakistan." *Pakistan Media Watch*. March 26, 2011. Accessed June 14, 2016. <http://pakistanmediawatch.com/2011/03/26/the-curse-of-yellow-journalism-in-pakistan/>.

² State of Investigative Journalism in Pakistan. *IndividualLand*. IndividualLand. May 14, 2012. Accessed June 14, 2016. <file:///C:/Users/DELL/PC/Downloads/State-of-Investigative-Journalism-in-Pakistan.pdf>.

plugging the area could have been highlighted instead of being overshadowed by the dramatic and manufactured ones.

The second most important aspect of investigative journalism is social media itself. There are a number of people, including professional journalists who have started putting out credible information on their blogs and websites when the mainstream media fails to report and investigate an issue.³

This goes on to show the rising influence of citizen journalism in Pakistan. Access to social media has empowered not only the influential but also the general public who are now in a better position to exercise their right to freedom of expression.

With over 30 million active internet users and internet penetration standing at 16%, Pakistan has one of the fastest growing internet usage rates in Asia. The advent of 3G and 4G technology has further boosted Pakistan's internet connectivity statistics with more than 13 million active 3G/4G users as of June 2015. The bulk of internet users (i.e. about 70%) are below 30 years of age and the majority of social media users boost similar demographics (e.g. Facebook: 70% users between 18 – 34 years of age).

These facts and figures emphasize that there is both need and immense potential to promote citizen journalism in Pakistan – especially among the youth which forms more than 60% of the country's population.

Bearing these facts in mind, Pakistan Youth Change Advocates (PYCA) with generous support from the Open Society Foundations (OSF) has commenced a year-long initiative, "Fostering Investigative and Citizen Journalism Among Youth." The primary goal of the project is to "Enhance the plurality and diversity of Pakistani media through strengthened capacity of university youth and establishment of an effective platform for reliable information sharing with a wider audience."

The findings of this desk research will inform the implementation of "Fostering Investigative and Citizen Journalism among Youth" by:

1. Providing baseline data on regional information flows to national media;
2. Tracking public perceptions and requirements for media products (and)
3. Mapping the internet accessibility in the communities.

By doing so, this desk research generates important evidence highlighting the importance of and need for citizen journalism and identifies avenues through which PYCA and other organizations can bring the voice of the citizens to the forefront.

3 Lamia Zia. "Who Will Stand up for Investigative Journalism?" *Express Tribune (Karachi)*, May 22, 2014, Opinion sec. May 22, 2014. Accessed June 14, 2016. <http://tribune.com.pk/story/711803/who-will-stand-up-for-investigative-journalism/>

1.3 Methodology

The content of this desk review is based on information collected through a systematic review of the available documents relevant to Pakistan in the light of citizen and investigative journalism. Furthermore, this document also incorporates information collected through web research and one Focus Group Discussion (FGD) alongside an In-Depth Interview (IDI) involving youth and media experts.

Qualitative research and the techniques that were employed for the desk review

Literature review by analyzing secondary data: During the development of this document data around current journalistic practices in Pakistan, people's perceptions regarding media and their expectations as well as outreach of information through the World Wide Web has been reviewed.

Validity was ensured in order to guarantee credibility of the review. Therefore, reference check, conformability and balance was observed during the process.. The literature review covered global as well as national publications for reference.

As a qualitative data collection method, focus group discussions were utilized to help the research team to learn about the public perceptions regarding conventional media (i.e. print and electronic) and to understand the growing extent of influence vis-à-vis internet and social media portals.

Results of Focus Group Discussion have been generated by careful documentation of the important information that came forth during the FGD.

1.4 Limitations

Information collected through the above listed techniques might be missing details, components or might have results where specific issues have been under reported as limited funds did not allow for a more detailed study that could possibly have included a quantitative data collection component.

2. Findings across Specific Objectives

2.1 Regional Information Flows to National Media

The last two decades have seen the field of media and communications evolve rapidly the world over. While Pakistan was initially slow in responding to the new dynamics of communication technology, the country saw a media revolution of sorts at the beginning of the 21st century.⁴ On one hand the print media gained a much greater degree of freedom and on the other hand private television networks witnessed a mushroom growth finally ending the state's one-television channel policy.⁵

4 Window on Pakistani Media. Center for Civic Education. CivicEducation.org. Accessed June 14, 2016.
<http://www.civiceducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Window-on-Pakistani-Media.pdf>.

5 Ibid

While this boom was a welcome development in terms of allowing a freer flow of information to the citizens, however the fierce competitive environment that followed commercial interests became paramount and quality journalism gave way to sensationalism.⁶

On the other hand media content in Pakistan is also known to be distorted owing to coercion, pressure, bribery and propaganda from outside actors.⁷ This section will discuss the various channels of information flow to and from national media and highlight the factors that influence this information flow.

Influence of Outside Actors

One of the earliest examples of influence from outside actors on Pakistani media can be traced back to the 1950s⁸ when the government in Punjab used the media to promote radical views against the Ahmadi community.

*“The newspaper Nawa-e-Waqt was among the papers receiving money from the Punjab government to incite public anger against the Ahmadis. Since then radical groups and political parties have infiltrated the mainstream media or strengthened and expanded their own media platform. Moreover, the radical organisations have grown strong enough to threaten violence with such leverage that the mainstream media often give in to their agenda”.*⁹

A survey by the Pakistan Institute of Peace Studies found that 69% of 16 journalists and editors thought that radicalisation was crippling freedom of expression. 50% found that the radical media had an impact on mainstream media, and 57% thought that the media was concealing facts about radicalisation.¹⁰

Popular News vs. Real News

Another issue that often adversely influences media is the desire of journalists, TV anchors and reporters wanting to be popular and media houses aiming to increase their channel’s ratings. This often leads them to cover events and issues that they believe are popular rather than highlighting issues that are an actual concern to the common citizen. This is true at both the large TV stations as well as at small newspapers.

Information Vacuum

Flows of information to the national media are also hampered by a lack of access to information or only receipt of information that is one-sided and/or manipulated.

This is especially true for the population living in areas of FATA and remote, tribal communities of Khyber Pukhtoonkhawa. Mainstream newspapers are not available as many villages are difficult to access and selling publications can be dangerous. Since only very few people can afford television sets radio transmissions are the main sources

⁶ Window on Pakistani Media. Center for Civic Education. CivicEducation.org. Accessed June 14, 2016. <http://www.civiceducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Window-on-Pakistani-Media.pdf>.

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Muhammad Azam, *Radicalization and Media, Conflict and Peace Studies*, vol. 1 2008, PIPS, p. 37.

of information. This often leads to a scenario where radical hate-speech and propaganda dominate the airwaves even though some unbiased FM radios transmit in the region as well. Accordingly, information flow to and from these areas is limited and often the information received by national media coming from these areas relies on unverified sources.

Quality of media and journalists

Pakistan has many excellent and professional journalists, who are known to produce high quality content under extremely difficult conditions. However, the major challenges for media related to the ongoing conflict vary widely from the best trained, educated and most professional journalists to the uneducated, untrained and unprofessional. Even the most professional journalists often work under conditions that make it hard to maintain a high journalistic standard. The boom in electronic media has led to a surge in the number of journalists working in Pakistan in recent years. Some experienced TV journalists have left the state broadcaster Pakistan Television (PTV) to work at the new TV channels, but the bulk of the new TV reporters have come from the print media. TV channels offer better salaries and the prospect of gaining celebrity status as well as attractive work places for young journalists. Still it is note-worthy that sufficient training and education of TV professionals have not accompanied the sudden boom of TV channels.

Sensationalism

Major TV channels and reporters are criticized for sensationalism and too heavy a focus on breaking news. News events are followed on minute-by-minute basis with reporters on the spot but these contain little background information, analysis or follow up that could put events in a context. "Few journalists care about the quality of the news and have little knowledge of issues," says Farrukh Tanveer Malik, Senior Assignment Editor at Geo TV in Islamabad. "They just report on what is happening."

As cited in a report published by International Media Support, Khalid Jameel, Bureau Chief of Aaj News in Islamabad shares that five or six moderators on the TV channels dominated national debate.¹¹ "Acting as hosts to a group of retired army personnel and professional opinion makers, these program anchors sometimes espouse ungrounded speculations and unfounded conspiracy theories."¹² It won't be incorrect to state that this constant need to sensationalize news items stems from the emergence of ambitious journalists trying to experiment with the recently acquired power of the electronic medium.

In the same report, Farrukh Tanveer Malik, at Geo News, thinks that too few a journalists care about the quality of the news and have knowledge of the issues.¹³ In Malik's opinion, TV journalists come from three backgrounds:

"Former print media journalists who have gone into TV reporting so that they are able to secure a much higher salary, better working conditions and a higher status; young journalists or newcomers that have begun their career in television. The third group is of the few seasoned television reporters, or senior newspaper journalists, who often fill the editorial and

¹¹ Media in Pakistan. IMS. Mediasupport.org. July 2009. Accessed June 14, 2016. <https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/ims-media-pakistan-radicalisation-2009.pdf>.

¹² Ibid.
¹³ Ibid.

management positions or function as anchors. Political talk shows on TV are crammed with guest analysts and retired army officers who often are biased and are not being challenged about their personal agendas. The same goes for the opinion pages in the newspapers which sometimes print erroneous and untruthful manipulative content. This is often the case for foreign affairs news reporting. The Pakistani media's coverage of foreign affairs is limited, superficial and, at times, misleading."

2.1.1 Discussion

Commercial interests, hidden political agendas and attempts to coerce media are often the motivations behind airing biased information in newspapers, TV reports, interviews and talk shows. Still, journalists have so far not been able to unite and raise their concerns about the lack of objectivity and balanced journalism with the powerful media owners. Furthermore, training and education is not part of the media budgets. "Few journalists do mid-career training or refreshment courses. They are trying to do their best, but are not up to mark," says Farrukh Tanveer Malik from Geo TV.

2.2 Public Perceptions and Requirements for Media Products

In the current age mass media plays an important role in influencing public perception in virtually every aspect of life. From shaping consumer behavior to influencing political world views media serves as the primary actor vis-à-vis perception management.

However, in an age where nearly everything is open for debate and citizens around the globe are becoming more vocal about their expectations from various products, media must also constantly adapt to meet the requirements of the audiences.¹⁴

Public Perception regarding Media Products in Pakistan

While the initial media boom in the early 2000s was unanimously welcomed by the public, the initial elation has since given way to widespread skepticism. The leading cause of the growing disillusionment with conventional media stems from its inability to maintain objective reporting. The vast majority of news groups in the country explicitly identify with either the right or the left wing.¹⁵ Most news channels in a bid to "play for the gallery" push a right-wing agenda while a small sub-section

Irresponsible reporting

LAHORE: When I heard the news of the terror attack at the park in Lahore, I was extremely distressed. Immediately, a clip showcasing the identity card of a man was played on various news channels labelling him as the terrorist involved in the attack. Then, about two days later, on the basis of a press release by ISPR, it was officially declared that the man was not the terrorist. Rather, he was an innocent citizen who was a victim of the massacre himself.

I want to request our Pakistani news channels to please practise some responsibility. A clip labelling an innocent martyr a terrorist, moments after the blast, should have not been broadcast on television. Firstly, verification was to be made as to whether he was a terrorist or not, then the news was to be broadcast. It is very disheartening that some renowned media houses are forgetting their sense of responsibility to compete in the ratings race.

Fajar Butt

Published in *The Express Tribune*, April 8th, 2016.

¹⁴ Window on Pakistani Media. Center for Civic Education. CivicEducation.org. Accessed June 14, 2016. <http://www.civiceducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/Window-on-Pakistani-Media.pdf>.

¹⁵ Shoaib Taimur. "Biased Media: We Are All to Blame." *The Express Tribune* (blog), January 18, 2011. Accessed June 14, 2016. <http://blogs.tribune.com.pk/story/3992/biased-media-we-are-all-to-blame/>

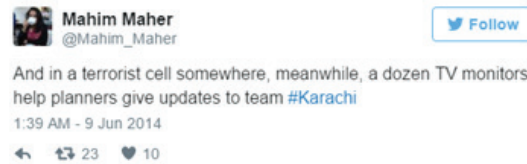
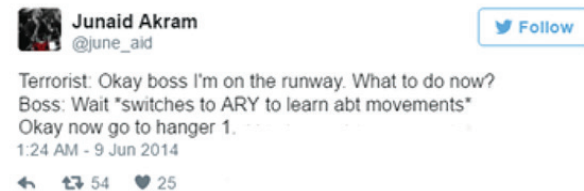
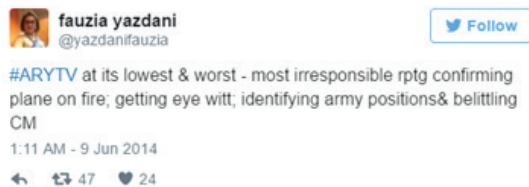
promotes the liberal agenda. Consequently, both the parties end-up compromising the integrity of their products by refusing to present the other side of the story.¹⁶

Over the passage of time, there has also been an uproar in most sections of the society regarding what is labeled as “irresponsible media reporting” in times of terrorist attacks. Displaying inaccurate information in a hurry to “break the news,” compromising the positions of security personnel during live reporting of terror attacks and providing space to established extremist elements to denounce victims of terror attacks are some of the concerns that have led to public outrage time and time again.

Role of Social Media in Gauging Public Perception of Mass Media

While previously discussions concerning media ethics were restricted to drawing rooms and at best the “Letters to the Editor” section in the newspapers; of late social media has become an important platform allowing Pakistanis to register their concerns with respective media houses as and when they surface.

An important case study in this regard would be the attack on Karachi Airport in 2014. Pakistanis took to Twitter to immediately condemn what they believed was “irresponsible reporting.”¹⁷ Screen shots of live tweets given below provide a recap of the public sentiment regarding media’s role during the Karachi Airport Attack.



¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Shoaib Taimur, "Biased Media: We Are All to Blame." *The Express Tribune (blog)*, January 18, 2011. Accessed June 14, 2016. <http://blogs.tribune.com.pk/story/3992/biased-media-we-are-all-to-blame/>.

This public outrage then became pretext for propelling media houses and noted journalists to condemn their own behavior.¹⁸



¹⁹ Noted Journalist, Hamid Mir's Tweet highlighting irresponsible media reporting of the Karachi Airport Attack

An editorial published in Dawn the morning after the Karachi airport attack read:

"...While several aspects of the coverage deserve strong censure, it was the focus of the cameras and reporters on the movement of security personnel that was most disturbing: The channels ignored the fact that this was an ongoing incident with uncertain outcomes. One channel after another provided 'details' that could have jeopardised the operation and put lives in danger."²⁰

2.2.1 Discussion

Public perception regarding media – especially news related media has evolved overtime from avid interest to explicit skepticism. With numerous news channels, newspapers and magazines at their disposal for well-over a decade, people now no longer want mere information but demand media outlets to live up to ethical and responsible standards of journalism.

Social media platforms such as Twitter have provided the masses with an outlet to offer live commentary on media products as and when they are made available to public.

This has forced media houses to provide space for self-criticism (if not revamp its standard operating procedures entirely) in a bid to appease public sentiment.

¹⁸ Zafar Abbas. "Irresponsible Reporting." Dawn, June 10, 2014. Accessed June 14, 2016. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1111607>.

¹⁹ Mir, Hamid. Tweet. Digital image. Twitter. June 10, 2014. Accessed June 14, 2016. <https://twitter.com/hamidmirgeo/status/476211247042404353>.

²⁰ Ibid

2.3 Internet Accessibility in the Communities

Facts and Figures

Basic email and internet services (through dial-up) were introduced in Pakistan during early 1990s but it was only in 2001 that broadband services (DSL) were introduced for the first time in Pakistan.²¹ In 2006 FTTH services arrived in the country and in 2007 internet users had access to wireless broadband services.

The year 2014-15 saw phenomenal growth in the number of internet users after the auction of 3G/4G licenses. Broadband penetration, from mere 2.07 percent in 2014 jumped to 12% in 2015.

At the end of Nov 2015, the total number of broadband subscribers reached 24.78 million out of which 21.68 million broadband users were on 3G/4G technology while remaining 1.5 million broadband users were on DSL and another 1.3 million on EvDO.

Pakistan has a total of 30 million internet users and 15 million (or 50%) of them access the World Wide Web via their cell phones.

As of 2014, Pakistan ranked second vis-à-vis the growth rate of internet users among SAARC countries. Pakistan's growth rate stands at 16.8% compared to 28.3% that of Maldives.²²

According to Simon Kemp, Managing Director of We Are Social, "Despite financial challenges Pakistanis are embracing connected devices and the content that they offer."

Pakistan might not boast very impressive numbers in terms of internet users (20 million internet users form about 10% of the country's total population), however what gives Pakistan an edge over other countries and regions having better internet outreach is the demographic of its users.²³ Pakistan's percentage of young population is comparable with (or even higher than) the transition countries in the MENA region. Accordingly, people aged under 30 years typically constitute the largest user group within the country, thereby ensuring rapid proliferation of ICT in the coming years.

Internet Traffic Trends

According to an estimate about 8 million people in Pakistan are active users of Facebook while those active on blogs generated on Wordpress stand at 3.5 million. Twitter still has a long way to go in Pakistan with 2 million²⁴ active twitter handles, however it is important to note that Pakistani brands tweet more (average tweets 57)

21 Aamir, Atta. "2015 in Review: Broadband Industry of Pakistan." *ProPakistani.pk*. January 2016. Accessed June 14, 2016. <http://propakistani.pk/2016/01/01/2015-in-review-broadband-industry-of-pakistan/>.

22 Amin, Yasir. "Pakistan Has Highest Growth Rate of Internet Users in SAARC." *MediaPoint.pk*. November 3, 2014. Accessed June 14, 2016. <http://www.mediapoint.pk/pakistan-has-highest-growth-rate-of-internet-users-in-saarc/>.

23 Michaelsen, Marcus. *New Media vs. Old Politics The Internet, Social Media, and Democratisation in Pakistan*. Fesmedia Asia. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. July 2011. Accessed June 14, 2016. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/08748.pdf>.

24 Desk, Web. "30m Internet Users in Pakistan, Half on Mobile: Report." *The Express Tribune*, June 24, 2013. Accessed June 14, 2016.

than Facebook postings (average posts 47). This identifies with Pakistan having one of the fastest twitter-using populations in the world.²⁵ According to Jehan Ara, president of the Software Houses Association P@SHA, Twitter has not only become an important outlet for initiating or steering debates but also for fund-raising and knowledge sharing.²⁶

The most visited news websites are those of Jang Newspaper, Express, and GEO TV – all in Urdu. The Urdu edition of the BBC website also counts among the most visited news sources on the internet.²⁷

Influence of Social Media

In Pakistan, the initial impact of social media became evident during the lawyer's movement after traditional media was curbed; lawyers and civil society mobilized through social networking sites and came out to protest against former President Pervez Musharraf.

The 2010 floods provide another example for how civic activism in Pakistan has been sustained by online communication and social media networks. In summer 2010, heavy monsoon rains caused devastating floods along the river Indus covering one fifth of the country's surface and affecting about 20 million people. The extensive destruction of houses and agricultural lands coincided with rising food prices particularly harming the poor population of the rural areas. Corruption and inefficient bureaucracy intensified the reluctance among international organizations as well as ordinary Pakistani citizens in giving money to official institutions for organizing aid in the affected areas. Neither did the Islamist groups that stepped into the void to deploy relief for the flood victims engender confidence among most of the middle and upper classes. As a consequence, aside from the many NGOs active in the field, educated and professional Pakistanis started numerous private initiatives for fund-raising and distributing shelter, clothing and food directly in the affected areas. In certain parts these initiatives were organized using the benefits of online communication and social media networks. Some people solicited donations from friends and family both inside the country and abroad through their Facebook profiles. Others established new Facebook groups to raise funds and share information on the floods. One website visualized reports from the affected areas sent in by SMS or email on a Google map following the model of Ushahidi in order to keep track of the flooding and coordinate relief activities. The blogger Awab Alvi, who had previously organized relief for people fleeing the conflict between the army and the militants in 2009 by using online networks collected funds through his blog and social media. Activists involved in the relief work documented the collection and distribution of the goods online, thereby increasing accountability and keeping individual donors involved. They posted videos of food distributions on YouTube or updated the progress of the relief expeditions in the affected areas through Twitter messages.

<http://tribune.com.pk/story/567649/30m-internet-users-in-pakistan-half-on-mobile-report/>.

25 Pakistan Social Media Report – Feb 2014. PAS. Pakistan Advertisers' Society. 2014. Accessed June 14, 2016.

<http://www.pas.org.pk/pakistan-social-media-report-feb-2014/>.

26 Michaelsen, Marcus. *New Media vs. Old Politics The Internet, Social Media, and Democratization in Pakistan*. Fesmedia Asia. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. July 2011. Accessed June 14, 2016. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/08748.pdf>.

27 Ibid

2.3.1 Discussion

Sensationalistic practices have often left important news items under-reported (or even unreported). This happens due to the media's preference for news items that are likely to create sensationalism. An unfortunate example of this was the 2013 incident of Hazara mourners who staged a sit-in with the coffins of their loved ones lost in a deadly terrorist attack. Unfortunately, for the first 36 hours there was only a passing reference to the incident in mainstream media because the media houses favored covering Tahir-ul-Qadri's sensational long march in an effort to secure higher ratings. Hence, the plight of thousands of mourners braving Quetta's damp winters to demand an end to systematic terrorist attacks on their minority community was ignored.

The news only found its way into the mainstream after images of the sit-in went viral on social media and scores of Twitterati across the country resorted to shaming mainstream media for blacking-out the plight of Hazara mourners.

This example signifies two important aspects; (a) mainstream media requires check and balances to practice objective reporting and (b) citizen journalism is by far the best form of check and balance that can be applied without compromising the freedom of media – quite on the contrary promotion of citizen journalism can go a long way in complimenting freedom of speech in Pakistan.

With more than 60% of the country's population comprising of young people, it is especially important to equip the youth with the necessary skills to understand the importance of investigative journalism and in turn be able to practice citizen journalism. This is important in promoting diversity of information sharing and ensuring that issues that are significant for communities are highlighted.

This goes to show the rising influence of citizen journalism in Pakistan. Access to social media has empowered not only the influential but general public in their freedom of expression.

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

The media landscape has dramatically changed over the past decade, with traditional media (e.g., newspapers, television) now supplemented by social media (e.g., blogs, discussion forums).²⁸ Over the passage of the last two decades, the World Wide Web has slowly transformed the world and revolutionized the storage, publication, research and consumption of information. Today, the internet is not merely a tool that facilitates businesses but has had a significant spill-over into politics, social welfare – and media itself blurring borders and breaching cultural boundaries.

Jennifer Alejandro in her paper, "Journalism in the Age of Social Media" states that the "...great wave of web innovation since Google in 1998 has been in social media." Indeed, with user friendly interfaces that allow for instant communication with users across the globe through text, images and videos, social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube have forever changed the face of human interaction.

28 Stephen, Andrew T. and Galak, Jeff, *The Effects of Traditional and Social Earned Media on Sales: A Study of a Microlending Marketplace* (April 4, 2012). *Journal of Marketing Research*, 49 (October).. Available at SSRN:<http://ssrn.com/abstract=1480088>

What counts as especially interesting for students of journalism is the increasing use of social media “as a communication and news-breaking tool”.²⁹ For instance, in May 2011, Shoaib Athar, a resident of Abbotabad live tweeted the Osama bin Laden raid much before the news was broken by conventional media.³⁰

Similarly, the importance of social media vis-à-vis international relations can sufficiently be gauged from the fact that “...in June 2009, the U.S. State Department asked Twitter to delay scheduled maintenance on the service because it was being used by protestors angered by the results of Iran's disputed presidential election.”³¹

What makes social media particularly popular among citizens is its ability to provide anyone and everyone with access to an internet connection with the opportunity to express him/herself and possibly be heard by hundreds of thousands of people across the world.

This emerging power of social media is further strengthened owing to smart devices. With millions of Pakistanis connected to the internet 24/7 through 3G and 4G technology, mobile phones are no longer a mere tool for conversations with friends and family or playing games but have become an important means to exchange information and coordinate, mobilize, educate and even fundraise.

Accordingly, leading media outlets taking heed of the importance of social media do not only have presence on websites such as Facebook, Twitter etc. but as one participant during the FGD pointed out, “Some television anchors and news stories carry reactions of the Twiterrati on a specific issue to offer a sample of public of sentiment.” Journalists themselves have confirmed that they are beginning to depend on social media to “gather stories and are using news aggregators and subscribing to RSS feeds and blogs to assist them in their work.”³² This trend then validates the argument that social media has now become synonymous as being the “voice of citizens” and an important source of influencing news and even outcomes in the political arena.

This brings us to the point that this new found voice has given confidence to the citizens in Pakistan to have their opinions heard to those who matter. In 2015 when speculation regarding Pakistan’s possible support of a Saudi-led coalition against Syria became rife, scores of people took to the social media to express their concern over Pakistan’s involvement in a foreign war. People did not merely speak their minds on their own timelines but directly wrote on the Facebook pages of related government departments and Twitter handles of noted politicians and civil-military bureaucrats urging them to distance Pakistan from the coalition. The public sentiment serving as an important deterrent propelled the government to later announce that Pakistan would not be taking part in the Saudi Arabia-led military coalition.

Finally, among the leading causes for making social media so popular among Pakistanis is ironically the growing disillusionment of general citizens with conventional media. During a Focus Group Discussion held with youth in Islamabad, most

²⁹ Ibid

³⁰ Olson, Parmy. “Man Inadvertently Live Tweets Osama Bin Laden Raid.” *Forbes*. May 2, 2011. Accessed June 14, 2016. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/parmyolson/2011/05/02/man-inadvertently-live-tweets-osama-bin-laden-raid/#161a1ae47c44>.

³¹ Alejandro, Jennifer. *JOURNALISM IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA*. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford University. 2010. Accessed June 14, 2016. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/Journalism%20in%20the%20Age%20of%20Social%20Media.pdf>.

³² Ibid

participants felt that newspapers and television channels in Pakistan offered biased reporting and mostly covered issues that could possibly create controversy and boost their ratings rather than focusing on issues that dealt with social welfare and were more relevant to the citizens. “More people in Pakistan are turning towards social media because conventional media houses are corporate organizations and they often propagate news that is likely to earn them greater revenue,” shared a participant during the FGD.

Users thus, feel that internet can now likely serve as a watchdog over conventional media to ensure greater objectivity and transparency. As put forth by a participant, “Social media sites offer a lot of space where we can even critique stories published or aired on conventional media. But we need a more holistic platform where citizens are able to coherently highlight their issues much like conventional media outlets develop stories.”

In a crux the new age of information technology and its consequent impact on communication has effectively provided citizens in Pakistan – and the world over – with a medium to express their views and with increasing frequency influence the tone of conventional media. While internationally renowned webportals led by citizens such as the Daily Beast and Huffington Post have gained immense popularity among users; there is a need in Pakistan for similar initiatives to encourage the citizens to articulate issues that they feel are important to them and are being ignored by conventional media. Such a platform would then serve three key purposes:

- Provide a space to the citizens to highlight issues that plague their social and physical environment.
- Use the platform to consolidate their voices to coherently articulate and consequently influence agenda setting.
- Serve as a watchdog over conventional media to ensure that their voices are included in the mainstream.

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