

CHALLENGES OF VIABILITY, SUSTAINABILITY AND RESILIENCE OF INDIE DIGITAL JOURNALISM PLATFORMS IN PAKISTAN

ANNUAL STATE OF DIGITAL JOURNALISM IN PAKISTAN REPORT 2022



Adnan Rehmat and Muhammad Aftab Alam

IRADA

Institute for Research, Advocacy and Development

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WHY THIS REPORT – BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Pakistan has the dubious distinction of being one of the most dangerous places on the planet for journalists to practice journalism. International media rights watchdogs such as Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF) and national civil liberties groups such as Freedom Network (FN) in their annual reports in recent years have been bracketing Pakistan among the worst performers on their press freedom and impunity indexes.

And yet, thanks to technological convergences, Pakistan in recent years has also found itself becoming part of sweeping changes to the way media practises journalism and how journalists practise freedom of expression. A whole new exciting ecosystem of online journalism platforms and independent media start-ups not linked to legacy media outlets have sprung up that is reshaping public interest narratives in Pakistan's socio-political landscape.

Even while these media start-ups have begun to make their presence felt, they are facing challenges relating to viability, sustainability and resilience. This comes in Pakistan's peculiar national economic and political context. Pakistan is one of the most digitalized societies in the world and yet impacted by unhelpful official policies on free speech and accessibility that continue to stymie its potential to be an optimally flourishing digital media community.

Since the advent of the millennium, Pakistan has undergone a digital communications revolution, including the media, the telecom and internet sectors. By start 2023, according

to the Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA), there were 194 million mobile phone users in Pakistan of which 121 million were 3G/4G users. Under a new policy, Pakistan is preparing to test and introduce 5G. At the end of 2022, over a third of Pakistanis – more than 60 million – were using social media including over 50 million Facebook users (making Pakistan among the top 10 communities of its users globally) and tens of millions using other popular social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Twitter and others.

Yet, despite this Pakistan figures low on global rankings of internet freedoms, which is also affecting the media start-ups seeking to offer the brand of independent journalism that the legacy media is struggling with. According to the 2022 Freedom of the Net report by Freedom House, Pakistan scored 26 on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free) for internet freedoms thanks to repeated attempts by the state in recent years to toughen up draconian controls on free speech online that have been fiercely resisted by media and civil society.

The downside is that this and other crackdowns have had a chilling effect on legacy media and even their digital footprints and the overall online free speech environment. The upside is the emergence of a new crop of non-legacy, digital media start-ups that practice community journalism, focusing on public interest issues not covered by conventional media. In 2020, a group of these media start-ups banded together to establish the Digital Media Alliance of Pakistan (DigiMAP) aiming to

represent community-focused socio-political and ethno-cultural pluralisms of Pakistan to professionalize a distinct public interest media landscape online.

This IRADA study – the latest in a series of annual reports that examine the changing state of digital journalism in Pakistan – aims to determine a snapshot view of the growing challenges to viability, sustainability and resilience of the indie digital journalism start-ups and how they are coping. Rather than a scientific mapping of the challenges, this year’s report is an attempt to view the independent journalism start-ups landscape from the perspectives of its practitioners, analysts and media development supporters.

The result is an interesting look into both the challenges, as defined by its practitioners, as well as how the independent public interest journalism start-ups of Pakistan tackle them head-on. Some of the specific themes around

which perspectives have been mapped in the context of Pakistan include the changing nature of digital journalism, the peculiar challenges of freedom of expression and right to information, gender equality in the start-up digital journalism sector, use of social media in news agenda influencing, the incidence and impact of disinformation that is tainting this sector, and the dearth of innovative and adequate strategies on viability, sustainability and resilience of these media start-ups.

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CHAPTER 1

THE CHANGING FACE OF DIGITAL JOURNALISM IN PAKISTAN



SABOOKH SYED

*President Digital Media Alliance of Pakistan,
Chief Executive IBC*

Q1: What are the top three key characteristics or trends that have emerged in Pakistan's digital media landscape in recent years?

A lot of progress has been made in the Pakistani digital media landscape in recent years. Even mainstream media has expanded its footprint on digital media. The CEO of one of Pakistan's largest media conglomerates, Jang Group, termed digital media "gutter media" in a Supreme Court hearing even though he is now himself on social media and has hired highly paid experts, including Omar Saif, who was special advisor to Shehbaz Sharif when he was chief minister of Punjab, as his social media advisor. Some years ago, Dunya News tried to establish a setup for social media but shut it down because the management was not convinced about its importance, but now every news channel invests and runs digital media platforms, including Dunya. Similarly, independent media houses such as Voice of America, Independent Urdu, and

BBC have significant social media footprints in Pakistan. In 2015 we launched a news platform with the name of IBC, and in 2016 Hum Sub was launched. And then there was a proliferation of indie news websites. There were some reasons that these platforms turned towards social media. Some of the key factors that drove this trend, and which still hold true, included not waiting to watch your favourite TV current affairs show at a fixed time but accessing it online at any time at their convenience; allowing viewers to skip to clips of their interest within programs instead of being forced to watch full shows; and allowing a degree of freedom to digital media which did not face the same relentless pressure from government and other quarters that electronic and print media did; plus allowing digital

“Small-scale independent journalism platforms in Pakistan are facing different types of challenges. They have viability and survival issues. The market is not fully fleshed out and is still bent in favour of larger websites against the indie public interest digital media only platforms. – Sabookh Syed”

media to be free of traditional form of news and break news and scandals in any way they liked. All this has made digital media popular.

Q2: What are the main challenges before small-scale, independent digital journalism platforms in Pakistan in getting due recognition and improving their influencing power?

Small-scale independent journalism platforms in Pakistan are facing different types of challenges. They have viability and survival issues. The market is not fully fleshed out and is still bent in favour of larger websites, often the digital platforms run by legacy media, instead of encouraging indie public interest digital media only platforms. Then the indie platforms themselves are not business savvy and have not yet figured out a winning formula that can ensure both professional journalism and profits, leading to compromises in professionalism. And yet, while social media platforms have allowed indie media outlets to exist, they have also given an opportunity to entrepreneurs. Instead of approaching these media houses for advertisements, they prefer to pay YouTube and other platforms who become middlemen for distribution in ways that may not be fair.

“Many important issues of public interest are being ignored by mainstream media, especially issues like health, minorities, transgenders, enforced disappearances and marginalization. – Sabookh Syed”

Security is a major challenge – bigger media platforms may get support from their audience bases, but most others are all on their own if they end up antagonizing various quarters due to coverage that may seem to hurt their interests. Another challenge is professionalism – most of the indie news operations are well-meaning but due to a lack of resources, they are not skilled or trained in being optimally professional and may end up squandering journalism potential.

Q3: DigiMAP seeks to represent Pakistan’s smartest non-legacy independent journalism platforms that focus on public interest and human rights issues. How is this mandate different from that of legacy media representative associations like PBA [Pakistan Broadcasters Association], APNS [All Pakistan Newspaper Society] and CPNE [Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors]?

Many important issues of public interest are being ignored by mainstream media, especially issues like health, minorities, transgender persons, enforced disappearances and marginalization. Legacy media barely gives attention to these issues despite having resources. Indie digital news platforms often take on these issues with gusto. Their content producers can mask individual identities unlike TV channels and print media. Associations such as PBA and APNS are important industry bodies but mostly are represented by owner-editors focused on business interests rather than editorial standards and public interest journalism. Whereas DigiMAP is an association of independent non-legacy digital media platforms united under a consensus charter focused on public interest journalism. We see us as public interest journalism and them as personal interest journalism operations.



AMBER RAHIM SHAMSI

Director Centre of Excellence in Journalism (CEJ), Institute of Business Administration (IBA), former TV journalist

Q1: It is generally perceived that digital media offers a better promise of practising public interest journalism compared to legacy media. How true is this in Pakistan’s current context?

Both legacy media and digital media are businesses – both kinds of media need to make money to create content. For legacy media, revenue through advertising – government and private – is often supplemented through other commercial interests and partnerships. All three – advertising, other commercial interests, and partnerships – impact the coverage of public interest issues. Digital media faces similar problems, even if they vary on the scale and stream of revenue input. The value given to public interest journalism also depends on the core values practiced within the media organization, be it legacy or digital. Meanwhile, the importance given to public interest journalism also depends on how well it is firewalled from business interests. The key difference is that digital media can potentially offer more public interest journalism since it is smaller in scale, or if it builds communities and an audience that consumes that kind of journalism. Digital media companies looking to scale up can be confronted with the choice of compromising in order to remain viable.

Q2: How true is the assertion that digital media in Pakistan offers comparatively greater opportunities for women journalists in pursuing professional journalism careers? Or is this perception misplaced?

This perception appears to be misplaced since the systemic barriers to the entry and practice of journalism remain the same for women journalists everywhere, rooted as they are in the nature of journalism, which offers little work-life balance, and patriarchal structures and values. If digital media organizations prioritize hiring equity and flexible work hours, this could address the problem. What they may not be in a position to offer is the infrastructure support, such as transport, a creche, or maternity leave, to improve the numbers of women in their newsrooms.

Another opportunity in the digital media space is for more women to be facilitated to launch their own start-ups. Moreover, there is an untapped audience of women who would like to see more stories from a feminine perspective that can be reached through digital platforms – a recent study by UNESCO and MMFD [Media Matters for Democracy] found that news consumers across the class and gender divide believe that women, minorities and rural audiences are not being served by the mainstream or legacy media.

“Most educational institutions still focus on theory-based journalism programs, leaning towards media studies or mass communication rather than practical skills-based programs – Amber Rahim Shamsi”

Q3: In general, how well placed are educational institutions that teach journalism in Pakistan to cater to the burgeoning independent journalism sector in the country? What can they do to improve journalism education standards in Pakistan?

Most educational institutions still focus on theory-based journalism programs, leaning towards media studies or mass communication rather than practical skills-based programs. The Higher Education Commission's requirement for PhD faculty compounds the problem. Colleges and universities that revise curricula and stay updated on the latest trends can potentially educate and train students looking to become independent journalists. Moreover, there is a potential for diploma courses, which can be more agile and responsive to newer trends. Ultimately, the HEC needs to demonstrate flexibility and a willingness to incorporate the needs of media organizations when setting the requirements and assessments for postgraduate programs.



HAROON RASHID

Managing Editor Independent Urdu; digital journalist

Q1: Why is it relatively easier for digital media in Pakistan to practice public interest journalism, including greater thematic variety in its coverage, compared to legacy media?

Digital media is vast in scope as compared to legacy media. Apart from established news

“New technologies, platforms, and tools are sure to pop up over the years, and the best news platforms in Pakistan will find ways to work them to their benefit. – Haroon Rashid”

organizations, a large number of individuals can and do practice public interest journalism online as and when it happens or as and when they want. There are few restrictions within digital media attached as far as production is concerned, only if the content is good, has variety and comprises a good mix. Also, digital media is transparent. As far as social media is concerned, digital media content popularity or dissemination can be gauged from figures. No hiding circulation figures as in the past by print media and now analog TV. No doubt, some employ fake followers and likes as well but generally it is better than legacy media in transparency around media consumers.

Q2: Good journalism content requires good journalists. How can even small independent digital platforms in Pakistan find such good journalists?

In Pakistan we have not experimented adequately with different business models for digital media. We are heavily relying on earnings from social media platforms or our own advertisers. We will have to think out of the box for alternative solutions to generate enough resources to hire good journalists. Being more flexible than legacy media, digital media platforms are going to have to continue to adapt. New technologies, platforms, and tools are sure to pop up over the years, and the best news platforms in Pakistan will find ways to work them to their benefit.

While journalists may face an uncertain future in Pakistan, avenues for entrepreneurial people with an understanding of technology and humanity to tell compelling stories will always exist.

Q3: How are international digital platforms different from their Pakistani counterparts? And how can standards of the local platforms come on a par with their international counterparts?

International digital platforms have relatively

good financial resources, can hire professionals, and hence are able to generate quality content. They somewhat know the difference between digital and TV. So far Pakistani digital platforms need to first find sustainable financial models and then pay attention to good content. Some of the local digital platforms are hangovers of their TV channels, which must change. They must pay attention to ethical and good journalism. No one else can help these local digital platforms if they don't help themselves by encompassing good practices and strengthen the relevancy between their content and their audiences.

CHAPTER 2

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND RIGHT TO INFORMATION ON DIGITAL JOURNALISM IN PAKISTAN



HAMID MIR

Host of Capital Talk, Geo TV, Chairman Pakistan Journalist Safety Coalition (PJSC)

Q1: Is Pakistan’s independent digital journalism freer in practicing freedom of expression as compared to legacy media such as TV channels and newspapers? How?

Digital media in Pakistan is comparatively enjoying more freedom than electronic and print media for some years but there is a price to pay. Many people working in digital media are target of state institutions because they dare defy the official line on many issues.

Q2: What role has social media platforms such as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook played in Pakistan in allowing continued freedom of expression by professional and well-known journalists who have been censored by their TV channels and newspapers?

Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are

comparatively free but state institutions in Pakistan often use pressure tactics to censor those who are active on social media, especially those who are vocal against state’s stance on issues. I only use Twitter regularly. The government of Pakistan and the government of India approached Twitter many times to silence my voice. On the flip side, many social media users in Pakistan are misusing these platforms in terms of journalism professionalism or ethics. There are few checks and balances on the type of journalism practised in Pakistan via Facebook and YouTube. There are people running fake accounts on Facebook in my name. I have complained many times to these platforms, but they have not suspended these fake accounts. Some persons in the garb of journalism have openly used YouTube to spread hatred against me and others, creating problems for my security and yet YouTube continues to give them the right to abuse their

“It is the responsibility of social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter to enforce a system of check and balance to allow free speech but not hate speech – Hamid Mir”

right to freedom of expression and dabble in hate speech.

Q3: Have restrictions on legacy media in Pakistan helped the State curb freedom of expression on digital media or is it using a crackdown on digital media to restrict freedom of expression on legacy media?

State institutions in Pakistan are on record using YouTube channels to harass legacy media and then also harassing YouTubers through legacy media. It is the responsibility of social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter to enforce a system of check and balance to allow free speech but not hate speech because it is easy to target anyone by using social media through fake accounts and real accounts.



FARHATULLAH BABAR

Politician, former senator and former journalist

Q1: In general, political parties in Pakistan have not shied away from restricting media freedoms, including digital media. Why do you think this is so and how can media become jointly invested with political parties in public interest narratives?

Media freedom has not been the top priority of any government in Pakistan. By and large political parties also have upheld freedom of expression as long as they are in the opposition but once they come into power, they tend to view media freedoms differently. One reason for this is the adversarial nature

“By and large political parties also have upheld freedom of expression as long as they are in the opposition but once they come into power, they tend to view media freedoms differently. – Farhatullah Babar”

of the relationship between media and the government. Media’s job is to tear apart the shroud of secrecy and ensure transparency leading to accountability. But no one wants to be held accountable. All power disdains transparency and accountability. In fact, all power is encroaching. The more one has it the more one craves it and encroaches illegally. Powerful individuals and institutions, therefore, reject transparency in their actions for fear of exposing the illegalities.

The parliament, the judiciary and the executive all are averse to accountability. Even media houses are not open to the spotlight. Media uses its power and privilege to turn the spotlight on others but not on itself. This is the paradox of power itself. Power by its very nature is both encroaching and secretive and the media as a powerhouse is no exception. The media, including the burgeoning digital media sector in Pakistan, and political parties can jointly and fruitfully invest in public interest narratives. This calls for a dialogue between media and political parties to revisit media-related laws and statutes on the one hand and strengthen media’s internal accountability mechanisms and ensure the safety and security of media workers on the other.

The rise of digital media and citizen journalism

has made the need for such an exercise even greater. Now every citizen familiar with smartphones is a potential reporter, editor, broadcaster, and filmmaker with the power to reach out to hundreds of thousands of people almost instantly. The state on the other hand raises new barriers against it and resorts to coercive legislation instead of enabling legislation. The shift in focus from coercive to enabling legislation requires developing consensus through discussion and debate among all stakeholders.

Q2: Are the official propaganda machinery including ministries of information and public relation offices of the military and their digital media operations an impediment to promoting fact-based journalism? If so, how can they restore citizens' trust in State?

Yes, they are an impediment in the way of fact-based journalism. They have obstructed the free flow of information in different ways. In 2019 the Supreme Court in the Faizabad Dharna Case called these “nebulous” tactics to silence free speech and free media. In fact, a case can be made that in the post-truth world some state information outfits have even indulged in manufacturing fake news. In December 2010 some leading Pakistani newspapers published excerpts supposedly from WikiLeaks eulogizing Pakistani generals and intelligence agencies and denigrating Indian army generals. These supposedly WikiLeaks excerpts were first published by a news agency known for close links with state organizations. Later it turned out that the report was planted. The news agency apologized for it and the newspapers issued clarifications.

Unfortunately, the ministries of information and public relation offices of the military do not enjoy a high degree of trust. There is a disconnect between the state and the citizens and it is increasing by the day. It is largely due to the reason that state agencies are beyond

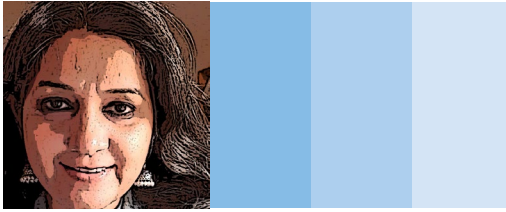
the law and tend to operate as a state within a state.

Q3: Article 19 of Pakistan's Constitution simultaneously guarantees and restricts free speech which also impacts digital media. What can the political parties and Parliament do to undo this paradox?

The formulation of Article 19 indeed is problematic and needs to be revisited. It states: “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”

This is problematic as it requires “restrictions imposed by law in the interest of” This formulation lays emphasis on “restrictions” rather than freedom of expression. The formulation of Article 19 should be such that “freedom of expression” is emphasized instead of “restrictions imposed by law.” A thought that readily comes to mind about the possible reformulation of Article 19 is that it should read like this: “No law shall be enacted that impinges on a citizen's right to freedom of speech and expression....”

The parliament should discuss the Supreme Court ruling in the Faizabad Dharna Case and debate the new challenges to freedom of expression described by the Court as ‘nebulous tactics’ as well as the media-related laws like the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) of 2016, which criminalizes dissent online. In fact, the Islamabad High Court has already referred the PECA rules back to the federal government asking it to place it before the parliament for discussion and debate. This provides an opening to discuss Article 19 as well and improve its formulation. In 2006 there was the Charter of Democracy. Now there is talk of a charter of economy. We need a charter of human rights, the central pillar of which must be freedom of speech and expression.



FARAH ZIA

*Director Human Rights Commission of Pakistan,
former editor of The News on Sunday*

Q1: Looking at the current media landscape of Pakistan, is it factual to assert that the current media is a vanguard of freedom of expression in Pakistan? How?

More than anything else, the current media landscape of Pakistan is fighting a war of survival. Government policies and technological advancements in the last two decades have rendered the media landscape so big and unruly that a large part of it, today, is struggling to stay relevant and solvent. It can and will resort to anything that helps it survive, anything that sells. With the change of form, expectations about content have changed as well. Let us also look at the demand side. Who needs freedom of expression on their smart phones? Sensationalism is a good substitute, as is trivia. But it is also a fact that there will always be people in need of media asserting its independence and giving them facts-based investigative stories.

On its part, the state has not given up on its red

“With traditional media becoming corporatized or serving national interests of states, digital is gaining more traction worldwide because of the possibilities and freedoms it offers. – Farah Zia”

lines for the media. The controls on print had always been there but the control of electronic media is complete, to say the least. The invisible hand is all too visible when you carefully see the content on electronic media. Ironically, it is the social media where you see unhindered freedom of expression — everyone has a voice — but that is where you also see lack of ethics, fake news, etc.

Q2: Is the initial promise of expanding freedom of expression boundaries on digital media in Pakistan a lost cause or can it still protect the ground lost by the legacy media?

All kinds of media have existed at different times of history in Pakistan. Digital seems to be today's medium. With traditional media becoming corporatized or serving national interests of states, digital is gaining more traction worldwide because of the possibilities and freedoms it offers. In Pakistan's context I have a cynical view. If and when the digital media becomes big and independent enough to challenge the core interests of the state, it will have to face the same curbs as the so-called legacy media.

Q3: Are State restrictions on freedom of expression responsible for inadequate diversity and pluralism in Pakistani media narratives or is the media sector a culprit? Or both? How?

I would say both are responsible in their own way. For instance, you will not see the Ahmadi issues covered in vernacular press or television, because the state has legalised and legitimised oppression against that community. Issues like diversity and pluralism are not priority for large parts of the media. There is a consistent slide in professional standards, and a general lack of understanding of issues among the professionals who are running the show. In a profession that relied on ustadi shagirdi, there are no ustads or seniors left to teach the young entrants.

CHAPTER 3

WOMEN IN DIGITAL JOURNALISM IN PAKISTAN



XARI JALIL

Co-founder of independent human rights news website Voicepk.net

Q1: You are one of the co-founders of Voicepk.net, an independent public interest journalism platform, and have editorial responsibilities for managing it. This makes you a rare breed in Pakistani journalism: a woman editor. How different, in your perceptions and experiences, is this task for you, compared to the abundant male editors managing journalism operations in Pakistan?

Throughout Pakistan's history of journalism, all we have seen and heard about are male editors. It seems as if women were rarely in a gateway position or in authoritative roles. But there are smaller positions which are still positions of authority, such as being an editor of a supplement, or the Sunday pages in an Urdu national paper, or a magazine, and women do have these jobs. Yet they are rarely remembered, celebrated or recognized by the journalists' community and that is because this too is male dominated. It is a man's world out there! Unfortunately, a perception is dominant that women do not work as hard as men in

journalism, or do not make bold decisions. And yet, my experience of working with women is totally different. I believe women exude much more sensitivity and empathy and have more principled stances in general. Male editors, however good they may be, still mostly come from a privileged position and do not tend to empathize beyond a certain point. Personally, I would like my role to be centered beyond my gender identity. But I must say it is always more inspiring to follow strong women journalists, who have had to make important and bold decisions in their professional lives in a country where practicing independent journalism carries enormous risks, and do some excellent work, which has never been given as much recognition in Pakistan as it should be.

“It is a man's world out there! Unfortunately, a perception is dominant that women do not work as hard as men in journalism, or do not make bold decisions. And yet, my experience of working with women is totally different. I believe women exude much more sensitivity and empathy and have more principled stances in general. – Xari Jalil”

Q2: Fewer than 5% of Pakistan’s estimated 20,000 journalists are women. This makes most content in Pakistani journalism the product of an overwhelmingly male gaze. Short of making the gender balance in the numbers of media practitioners somehow a reality, how can journalism in Pakistan become more sensitive to women’s interests?

This is a question we at Voicepk.net struggle with every day, as a digital platform. It is a myth that women or female audiences are only interested in frothy content. This is untrue. There is a great thirst for knowledge among women, including young women, and many of them are now what they call “woke” or more aware. But the sad part is that women have little access to the media, even digital media, an outcome of social discrimination against women in general. And women continue to be pawns of the ratings game (as do men) which means they will end up producing content which will sell easier than cover difficult topics. At Voicepk.net we have tried to represent women through their own stories (as opposed to men telling stories about women), and we have tried to reach more women as well. The biggest challenge is finding more women online to read or watch these stories. Otherwise, this journalism is going to disappear in a black hole. Within the media industry in Pakistan and its journalism content, inclusivity is integral. Women must be given more space in both the content and in the Newsroom. Only then will they be fairly represented and only then can there be more sensitivity towards their issues.

Q3: Having abandoned their principal function of being the guardian of public interest, legacy media in Pakistan is facing a crisis of credibility. How are independent, non-legacy digital journalism platforms becoming more representative of public interest priorities?

The ‘new media’ has a window of opportunity to be a better distributor of news, and of

“Women must be given more space in both the content and in the Newsroom. – Xari Jalil”

grabbing advertisements. Today in the advertisement industry as well, the quantum of adverts for social media and online-based media is increasing, putting legacy media under pressure. One important aspect is that because it is easier to access in real-time, non-legacy digital media is quicker to break news and act as a watchdog on society compared to say a TV channel which goes through a longer information process comparatively.



SADDIA MAZHAR

Founding editor of digital platform Journalists for Human Rights (JFHR)

Q1: Why are there so few women-led digital journalism platforms in Pakistan? What are the key reasons for this?

Leading a digital media platform is not like posting updates on social media platforms but rather like leading a company or an organization – only those with resources can manage it. For mid-career journalists the establishment of a digital media platform is an acute challenge considering not just resources but a career change and technical skills like how to manage, design and develop a functional website, marketing, building a team, coordination with

“Financial instability and lack of adequate knowledge about digital resources can also kill dreams (of women journalists to run their own digital platforms) – Saddia Mazhar”

field staff or volunteers, on her own. Financial instability and lack of adequate knowledge about digital resources can also kill dreams because of which many women journalists who are otherwise professional and sharp as media practitioners cannot run their own digital platforms in Pakistan. Families also are often not convinced this is a meaningful or rewarding career.

Q2: You have picked up the courage to launch Journalists for Human Rights (JFHR) – a digital journalism platform aiming to promote women’s perspective in public interest narratives along with a team of committed but volunteer journalists. What key challenges have you faced in this endeavour that perhaps men journalists do not face?

Being exposed to some enterprising women journalists during a media fellowship in Singapore a few years ago became my inspiration. It took me three years to simply come up with a workable digital platform. Being based in a relatively small city in central Punjab meant that it was tough finding and dealing with web developers who could take a woman journalist seriously. I also undertook a digital marketing course to familiarize myself with media viability challenges. We also did not have adequate financial resources but persisted and slowly created a platform for which a dedicated team of volunteers now generate journalism content with a focus on

human rights so that we could practise public interest journalism, which we find largely missing in mainstream media.

Q3: In your view, what can independent digital journalism platforms in Pakistan do to become champions of gender transformation?

Despite claims to the contrary and even good intent, most Pakistani media houses are not adequately supportive or safe spaces for women to practise their journalism craft or to find opportunities to excel. Independent digital journalism platforms are one answer to this problem: an opportunity to freely implement priorities, policies and practices that promote professional journalism. This sector in Pakistan has the potential to transform not just how journalism can become more public interest oriented but where greater voices and perspectives of women in journalism content can be represented and greater numbers of women can join the media, and both find their own voice and that of women in society in general. Gender does not matter more than qualifications, skills and passion for public interest journalism but only when opportunities are equal. Independent journalism platforms can provide these opportunities.



NAJIA ASHA'AR

Founder of digital platform 'Taar'; digital and broadcast journalist

Q1: You have established “Taar” – a rare digital journalism initiative led by a woman.

“**Digital journalism platforms can create gender-transformative and gender-sensitive content by challenging stereotypical gender portrayals – Najia Asha’ar**”

What have been your main successes and challenges in operating it from a gender lens?

With women’s leadership and diversity in media so limited and challenged in Pakistan it is tiring to identify and lead a team that respects, shares, and wants to promote your vision of diversity, pluralism, and equality. Simultaneously, both capacity and experience of developing, and publishing sensitized gender-focused content is lacking in the media industry, due to which the Taar team remains small but punchy. It is a matter of honour for me and my team to have reached here using ethical practices and without adhering to the clickbait and sensationalizing tactics while reporting on gender issues. However, bringing news consumers’ focus on local stories and social issues is difficult as they are more interested in viral content.

Q2: What are the key challenges in accessing expert women sources while practicing digital media journalism in Pakistan?

To access expert women sources for journalism content, it is important that they exist first. In Pakistan, female labour force participation has been hovering at 10% for the last 20 years, according to the World Bank. In such a patriarchal society, it is difficult to not only find expert women sources but even harder

to convince them to share their stories on digital media platforms. On top of that, gender inequality is highlighted in the news only 6% of the time, according to another recent research report. Women’s experiences in Pakistan are generally deemed invalid and the barriers and challenges they face, are ignored. Like traditional newsrooms, digital newsrooms also lack representation of women in Pakistan. With a seat at the table, women will more likely be able to dig up and access expert women’s sources worth highlighting in media.

Q3: What can digital journalism platforms in Pakistan do to promote gender inclusive working environment?

Digital journalism platforms in Pakistan have a major role to play in making work environments gender inclusive because their efforts can be two-fold – through their content and through their organizational practices. Content alone is not enough, and vice versa. For a work environment to be truly gender inclusive, it is important for top management to show a strong commitment to the cause. This entails making the hiring process more inclusive, identifying and removing gendered practices and language from workplace communications and job descriptions, offering gender-neutral benefits, and leading by example to create an environment where allyship is encouraged and celebrated. On the other hand, digital media, like every other form of media, has the power to influence and reform public perceptions. The transformative role that digital media must play in achieving is undeniable. Digital journalism platforms can create gender-transformative and gender-sensitive content by challenging stereotypical gender portrayals, highlighting issues of women and other marginalized gender groups, and calling attention to women in the leadership role as general practice, not exceptions.

CHAPTER 4

SOCIAL MEDIA AND NEWS AGENDA INFLUENCING IN PAKISTAN



MATIULLAH JAN

Host MJTV on YouTube

Q1: Why has YouTube become a popular means of uncensored journalism among some of the most well-known journalists of Pakistan?

This is because YouTube is a reliable, inexpensive and credible source of earning for established journalists in Pakistan who are either deprived of timely salary payments or their jobs due to censorship. The journalists without a job are particularly free to give uncensored news and opinion. In doing so they increase pressure on mainstream media also to tell the whole truth on an issue. Social media in Pakistan is fast becoming the mainstream media now and YouTube has empowered individuals and challenged mainstream media's monopoly over information. Also, YouTube cannot be censored locally which encourages journalists to rely more and more on this platform.

Q2: Critics say, "YouTube journalism is more often than not sensationalist, unverified and exaggerative." How true is this assertion in your opinion?

YouTube journalism empowers individuals (citizens) and individual journalists with little editorial oversight. But this exactly is the scheme – of social media platforms to allow unhindered freedom of expression and let the people exercise their right to choose between reliable and unreliable information and journalists. Social media should only be regulated by the government for hate speech. Fake news and other propaganda must be regulated through common laws of defamation to be invoked by citizens and not the state. Exaggeration and unverified news are problems that can be resolved through more information and strong public opinion rather than government checks and control.

“Fake news and other propaganda must be regulated through common laws of defamation to be invoked by citizens and not the state. – Matiullah Jan”

Q3: If YouTube journalism is to have a future in Pakistan, how can it be done professionally?

YouTube journalism has a great future in Pakistan especially when it has opened its doors to every citizen and not just journalists. Common people deserve information even if it comes from non-journalist sources. While journalists are cautious about their credibility the common citizens will also tend to become more professional in giving news through self-regulation and not government controls – except in cases of hate speech to be regulated by the government and fake news via defamation laws.



BENAZIR SHAH

Co-founder of Aurat Card; journalist

Q1: Is social media a better medium for women journalists in Pakistan in terms of space for freedom of expression compared to traditional media like TV and print? How?

It certainly is a better platform. Women journalists in Pakistan are in fewer numbers in the conventional media and even fewer, if any, are in decision making roles in media organizations or on screen. This means that the voices of women take a back seat to that of men. Social media helps change this to provide

“Women are then not only targeted for doing their jobs, but they are also targeted for being women and thus face gendered abuse – Benazir Shah”

a platform for female journalists to be heard and to interact directly with their audiences.

Q2: How is it apparently easier to target women journalists on social media in Pakistan compared to their male counterparts?

Since social media is an important tool for women journalists to be heard and to voice their opinions in Pakistan, women here use these platforms more frequently than their male counterparts. This makes them more visible on social media and paints a bullseye on them. Women are then not only targeted for doing their jobs, but they are also targeted for being women and thus face gendered abuse. This is pretty widespread.

Q3: Based on the social media activity of journalists in Pakistan, how do you see the blurred distinction between professional journalism and political activism?

Like in many places, journalists in Pakistan can also be activists. There should be no distinction. The media has a responsibility in a democratic society to uphold the principles of democracy and accountability. You must take a side. If, and when, democracy is threatened, journalists are duty-bound to fight it, armed with facts.



ASAD TOOR

Digital journalist, and YouTube current affairs show host

Q1: Why has an active social media profile become necessary for many journalists in Pakistan who make their living through formal media?

Social media profiles like those on Twitter give journalists recognition and bring live feedback from digital media audiences. You can directly interact with your readers and viewers. At the same time, it enhances your reach when your primary audiences share your posts and work further. Social media is also useful in the context of getting real time/live news and opinions of politicians and journalists.

Q2: You run a popular YouTube channel. How has social media changed audience interaction with journalists and media in Pakistan?

On mainstream media we journalists face so much censorship because of Pakistan's abnormal political landscape and security establishment's influence over media

“YouTube, currently in Pakistan, is a relatively more sustainable model compared to conventional media – Asad Toor”

narratives. YouTube provides me a forum to give my followers information that will in all probability be held back if I offer it to mainstream media. Social media platforms get me more loyal followers and supporters and extends my reach way beyond any conventional media could provide me.

Q3: Social media platforms like YouTube, Twitter and Facebook may provide greater space for freedom of expression but how sustainable is this as a substitute for formal professional media, in Pakistan's context?

YouTube, currently in Pakistan, is a relatively more sustainable model compared to conventional media in that if you are out of favour of powerful quarters and facing an unannounced ban, it (YouTube) keeps you relevant in journalism and alive for your viewers. You can also, if you're technically savvy, earn some money which will help you sustain the pressure of forces who want to censor you and later help you return to mainstream because your work on YouTube has not let your name fade out from journalism.



ZAIGHAM KHAN

Journalist, media analyst and political commentator

Q1: They say, “social media in Pakistan is becoming influential and impactful, in terms of news and current affairs.” What are the myths and realities? How significant is the ability of social media to influence the news agendas of more formal media?

Social media is certainly influencing the way Pakistanis get their news and it is heavily influencing the news media landscapes. You can make out the following key characteristics:

- Increasingly citizens are getting their news from social media, rather than mainstream media. To stay relevant, media organizations use social media as parallel channels. They also do it in the hope of diverting readers and viewers back to their channels.
- Activists and citizen journalists use social media to share their stories. Mainstream journalists keep track of social media to get their information. Some further

“Though social media is also facing censorship in Pakistan and YouTubers have faced threats, harassments and attacks, authorities appear keener on regulating the mainstream media. – Zaigham Khan ”

investigate stories and share it with their audiences.

- Popular social media posts have become legitimate stories in themselves, and mainstream media regularly reports about viral digital media posts.
- Mainstream media shares almost all of their content on social media, particularly YouTube, in the hope of getting advertisement revenue and to stay relevant.

Q2: How do you think some journalists in Pakistan are forced to submit to censorship on mainstream media and yet exercise free speech on social media?

Though social media is also facing censorship in Pakistan and YouTubers have faced threats, harassments and attacks, authorities appear keener on regulating the mainstream media. The reasons for this attitude can only be speculated. It appears that in their view mainstream media still enjoys more credibility among citizens and reaches to citizens who are not on social media.

Q3: If news audiences in Pakistan are migrating online then does this mean that social media will lead national narrative thereby reducing the influence of mainstream media in future? How?

Media consumption habits are changing everywhere, and it has thrown a huge challenge to content producers in Pakistan who are finding it hard to pay the cost of content production and earn profits. Their financial models are facing a huge challenge. Nobody knows how it will influence the news industry in future. New realities will emerge over time. National narratives in Pakistan, though, are not reliant on a particular type of media. We have seen how nation states have made use of social media even more effectively to peddle their nation narratives.

CHAPTER 5

DISINFORMATION ON DIGITAL MEDIA IN PAKISTAN



SADAF KHAN

Co-founder of Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD), digital media analyst

Q1: When the credibility of media is at stake, like in Pakistan, why is it so disinterested in bridging the trust deficit with its audiences by operating special disinformation initiatives?

In my opinion, the media in Pakistan, including digital media, has never really invested in its audiences. If we look at the trajectory of the media, we don't find any prominent and effective instances of audience engagement by media organizations – the ratings have always been seen as signs of approval even though they have been based on a false premise, in Pakistan. At any given time, the broadcast audience has a choice of watching dozens of news channels, and yet all the news channels use the same program or news bulletin formats and almost the same stories! The audience thus rallies only around political leanings. Secondly, the media industry in Pakistan is sustained in big part through government advertisement

and the rest of the revenue comes through corporate advertisers. Thus, the polarization we see on TV is also an economic decision, channels align with the political forces they see or want to see coming into the government so that they can benefit financially through advertisements when it happens. Within this economy, where media has no direct financial stake within the audience, credibility doesn't remain important. And so, we see a complete lack of self-accountability when it comes to spreading misinformation, especially of a political nature.

Q2: What are the important ways in which digital journalists in Pakistan are presently combating, or can combat, disinformation?

Fact-checking is important but so is having the ability to present fact-checked information in a way that attracts an audience. Digital journalists in Pakistan have a tough task at hand. They compete often with clickbait that has the potential to go viral - ethically they

“Fact-checking is important but so is having the ability to present fact-checked information in a way that attracts an audience. – Sadaf Khan”

can't use the same techniques to manipulate and attract the audience. Thus, they need to find skills that make their information more palatable to the digital audiences. Another important thing to do is to curate authentic information in an easy-to-understand manner as a lot of misinformation is simply information presented out of context. Curating both background and follow-ups can help readers understand a piece of information in context and make informed decisions.

Q3: How can media development actors in Pakistan strengthen independent digital media platforms in countering disinformation?

Capacity building is the core approach that media development actors in Pakistan can take to achieve this. But perhaps it is also important to invest in helping media platforms build organizational structures and newsroom policies, etc., that help them streamline their fact-checking operations. Also, the media development sector can help create insights about audience behaviour and engagement through applied research, that can help media outlets by highlighting ways that effectively reach and impact their audience.



RAMSHA JAHANGIR

Journalist and digital media analyst

Q1: How is the media regulatory framework, especially policies relating to disinformation, in Pakistan endangering digital journalism?

The media regulatory framework in Pakistan is

“Since there is no legal definition of “disinformation” in the laws, authorities have used the broad language from PECA to accuse anyone of spreading disinformation. Given this non-transparent media regulatory landscape, everything has become a red line in journalism, including on the digital media landscape of Pakistan. – Ramsha Jahangir”

currently broad, vague and non-transparent. The draconian Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) of 2016 has been misused to crack down on journalists and online speech especially by extending its vague clauses to label critical speech as hate speech, defamation or even threat to national security/institutions. Since there is no legal definition of “disinformation” in the laws, authorities have used the broad language from PECA to accuse anyone of spreading disinformation. Given this non-transparent media regulatory landscape, everything has become a red line in journalism, including on the digital media landscape of Pakistan. In an online ecosystem rife with accusations and scepticism, every baseless accusation of fake news erodes faith in the press and pushes Pakistan closer to becoming a place where only the State’s narratives count.

Q2: How can journalists in Pakistan combat accusations of alleged fake news by detractors including state authorities and political parties?

Journalists should place a clear premium on

original and independent reporting. There has been a lot of effort in recent years to “expose” the media and build distrust in their practices. Political teams have been dedicated to casting reporters as peddlers of “fake news.” The media, too, needs a dedicated effort to show how political parties spread disinformation targeting journalists. The answer to disinformation is exposing how it works. Media houses should consider a policy on issuing clarifications on social media and also protecting their reporters online.

Q3: Big Tech companies are paradoxically complicit in spreading, and to an extent combating, disinformation. How is Pakistan’s digital media landscape affected by this?

There’s a dearth of fact-checking and moderation intention for Pakistan that contributes to the spread of harmful content. YouTube, which is the biggest platform for digital content in terms of journalism, is host to all types of problematic content that goes unchecked by Google. TikTok is also emerging to be a hotbed for misinformation as digital content creators shift to the platform and despite the high takedown of content by TikTok in Pakistan – political disinformation is still rampant.



ALI WARSI

Web editor NayaDaur, journalist

Q1: How big is the disinformation threat to the burgeoning independent digital media landscape in Pakistan? How is it affecting its credibility?

“In Pakistan if you feed them lies favouring their preferred political party, they would often lap all of them up without thinking twice. And even if you prove it to them with evidence that this is fake news, they tend to challenge the credibility of the evidence rather than change their opinion. – Ali Warsi”

Disinformation is big! The people believe what they believe. In Pakistan if you feed them lies favouring their preferred political party, they would often lap all of them up without thinking twice. And even if you prove it to them with evidence that this is fake news, they tend to challenge the credibility of the evidence rather than change their opinion. But look deeper into this and you will realize that they act like they do because they have been fed enormous amounts of fake news over a long period of time, rather like slow poisoning. It is not just about the independent digital media but the mainstream media too. Post-modernism has reached a point where little counts as truth or fact – credible news outlets, government figures, independent research, foreign observers, international missions, documents, audit reports, video evidence, forensics, anything. This is certainly not good for media outlets in Pakistan – small or big – because investigating facts, and spending hours and hours on testing information appears to be in vain since no one is taking you seriously anyway. On the other hand, pretenders are making millions out of peddling fake news day in and day out. This is how it is affecting independent digital media’s credibility. We are

not left with any in the eyes of the people in Pakistan, at least.

Q2: How are independent digital media platforms like Naya Daur faring in their special fact-check initiatives?

We are doing our best to fact-check as much as we can. But again, what is the return? In 2022 we did a story exposing the wrongdoing of a foundation. The story was read by over 12,000 people. But the number of followers on the foundation’s account has grown by at least 100,000 thereafter. So, fact-check to what effect? We will keep doing our job, of course, but we feel our efforts are being frustrated because ‘independent’ media houses with skeletal resources can only do so much. It is up to the authorities, who themselves are in the business of peddling fake news, the state, also often a collaborator or originator of fake news, and the political parties, judiciary, police and civil society to all come together to agree on how to deter disinformation.

Q3: What key steps need to be taken for media in Pakistan, especially digital media, to embrace countering disinformation as a priority industry agenda?

Step 1) Media needs to stop producing fake news itself – establish in-house guidelines and mechanisms.

“Pretenders are making millions out of peddling fake news day in and day out. This is how it is affecting independent digital media’s credibility. – Ali Warsi”

Step 2) Media needs to stop discussing fake news, organizing talk shows on hypothetical scenarios, based on fake news – again revert to ethical guidelines.

Step 3) Media needs to properly fact-check information coming from well-established sources of fake news – in-house policies are required on this.

Step 4) Media needs to stop its hypocrisy of focusing on disinformation by international populist leaders but pandering to untruths peddled by local leaders.

Without proper effort being put in by Pakistani media outlets to counter fake news, acting in the larger interest of society, the fake news and disinformation culture will devour whatever freedoms we enjoy in Pakistan before we even know what’s happening.

CHAPTER 6

VIABILITY OF DIGITAL JOURNALISM IN PAKISTAN



MUHAMMAD BADAR ALAM

Senior journalist; former editor of Herald and Sujag

Q1: In what way is viability a challenge for independent digital media platforms in Pakistan?

The viability of independent digital news platform in Pakistan is dependent on two basic factors – where will the money come from; and how to get to your target audience. Since both are interconnected, it is difficult to say which one of them poses a greater challenge to viability. If you can't reach the right audience, you cannot think of developing any sustainable revenue stream – be it subscription, membership or advertisements. But if you don't have enough money to continue to invest in your news operation before you can reach your target audience then, of course, you cannot survive, let alone be viable. So, the challenge of viability consists of addressing this dilemma: which one should come first, revenue or readers?

Q2: How are some of the more exciting public interest independent digital journalism start-ups strategizing to ensure their viability?

Innovation is the key. You have to find ideas to generate money before you can turn your readers into a source of revenue – as subscribers, as members or as the targets of advertisers. From what I've seen, and from my own experience being part of such initiatives, some of the better public interest indie digital journalism platforms in Pakistan are trying to achieve this by doing the following:

1. Seeking help from foreign donors for the production of news content about the marginalized issues, communities and individuals.
2. Providing commercial services to various clients for the production of digital content such as reports, briefs, campaign materials, documentaries, video posts, and social media products; and

“If you can't reach the right audience, you cannot think of developing any sustainable revenue stream – Muhammad Badar Alam”

3. Instituting a membership model whereby a few thousand individuals each pay a fixed annual fee to become members so that they get premium access to news content and also have a voice and presence on the news platform.

Q3: How can digital journalism start-ups in Pakistan avoid compromising their public interest journalism mission on the road to viability?

This can be achieved by focusing on finding money that does not force them to lower their journalism standards. If you get corporate advertising, receive government funding or are surviving on foreign assistance that has editorial strings attached, then, of course, your news operations will be anything but independent.



TALHA AHAD

Founder and CEO of digital news network The Centrum Media

Q1: The Centrum Media, your organization, is one of the few independent digital journalism platforms in Pakistan that operates a successful business model. What makes you tick?

Our whole strategy from the start was to build a long-term sustainable journalism platform despite knowing that the monetization models are very difficult to figure out and understand in Pakistan. So, what we did was that we

“Start-ups in Pakistan usually spend a lot of money at the inception phase and do not focus on long-term planning. – Talha Ahad”

established multiple revenue streams and did not rely on just one. And we believed in building slowly but steadily a solid foundation for our platform and building the brand which could be easily monetizable.

Q2: How can developing a content or brand niche help in operating a sustainable digital journalism enterprise in Pakistan?

The most important thing is to understand the audience, the needs of the audience and the needs of the market that lies between them and digital journalism enterprises. Another important thing is to know where the gaps are and how to fill them – that is the main model. Also, coming up with creative ways of monetization model and not relying on sponsors and brands is crucial. There are dozens of ways to monetize your brand through services, consultations and e-commerce, among others.

Q3: Most digital journalism start-ups in Pakistan struggle with viability. What key advice would you give them to become sustainable?

Start-ups in Pakistan usually spend a lot of money at the inception phase and do not focus on long-term planning. Whenever you start a business, you need to think of its long-term goal; whether initially you start with only part-time or full-time efforts, so you don't exhaust all the capital venture in your initial burst of enterprising. For the entire digital journalism

model, we need to think it in a way that content and monetization go hand in hand. So, think of it as a business rather than just as content and evolve yourself on a daily basis.



CLARE COOK

Head of Journalism and Media Viability, IMS (International Media Support)

Q1: Irrespective of geographic limits, are there key commonalities that enable digital journalism start-ups to become viable?

Viability is understood as the potential or existing ability of individual media partners to cover the cost of producing and distributing public interest journalism without having to compromise their values and ethical standards. They fulfil a demand or perceived need for content.

Sustainability in economic and business terms is the ability of firms to continue their activities and endure over time. Media organisations and practitioners sustain the production of public interest content in the medium-to-long term, withstanding short-term shocks along the way.

Resilience adds to sustainability the possibility of making a profit or growing. It refers to a business' ability to adapt in the longer term, particularly by dealing with no universally applicable or permanent solution, and having strategies to withstand shocks.

Digital journalism start-ups everywhere, including Pakistan, face significant challenges

around revenue, staffing, costs and the social media giants yet are often built by determined media founders, willing to take on corrupt governments and the limitations of politically pressured contexts despite limited resources.

Key commonalities in viability are the need for a clear vision, mission and values. This is the cornerstone of business and organisational development which ties content, impact, monetization and audiences together. Management fundamentals is a universal challenge as many journalism start-ups are founded by staff with journalism or activist backgrounds. The shift to strategic thinking that is required for sustainability and multichannel distribution is critical, as is the constant user-centred and design thinking approaches for resilience. Deep audience research and insights are key. As digital journalism start-ups often exist in a niche, limited options for growth can be offset by opportunities to build trust with communities and engagement.

Q2: What are common revenue stream models adopted by some of the more successful digital journalism start-ups in the global south? How do you see the potential of this in warped media markets like Pakistan?

“Partnerships and networks between digital start-ups in Pakistan and their counterparts abroad can drive exchange on common barriers, pinpointing gaps in technical assistance, or challenges, which can then be used to create a seat at the table in necessary international forums. – Clare Cook”

Knowledge about the need to diversify revenue is more common but operationalisation is more complex. Advertising remains a cornerstone of revenues, and online independent news are often unfairly disadvantaged. The revenue model must therefore be developed, including in Pakistan, through niche adaptation, exploring a range of options from direct pay reader revenues (crowdfunding, subscription, membership, paid newsletters, micropayments), indirect (advertising, direct sell display, programmatic and native), alternative services and adjacencies, and grants (tech, government, non-government, foundations).

There is no one size fits all. Lack of resources and skills gaps on the business side of operations (sales, marketing, data, technology) need to be addressed early on in the development of a start-up. Having a paid salesperson on

staff or a dedicated tech or innovation lead is known through international research to have a positive impact on revenues.

Q3: How can struggling digital journalism platforms such as those in Pakistan access international resources, assistance and other help to learn from their successful counterparts?

Insights on what is working through research or knowledge sharing are a cornerstone of sector development. Partnerships and networks between digital start-ups in Pakistan and their counterparts abroad can drive exchange on common barriers, pinpointing gaps in technical assistance, or challenges (algorithmic changes, language challenges, workflow challenges) which can then be used to create a seat at the table in necessary international forums.

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2. Strengthening local empowerment *through* devolution of powers
3. Strengthening governance through accountability and transparency
4. Strengthening justice *through* fundamental rights

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