

# Pakistan: The alternative is digital

Thursday 13 August 2020 (Date first published: 9 August 2020).

## **Journalism is starting to flourish online in Pakistan through alternative and independent platforms**

Never the freest in the world in terms of media for most of this century or the past one, Pakistan is now a dismal case study in eroding freedom of expression and right to information – two rights guaranteed as universally fundamental in the national constitution – ever since the incumbent government came to power.

Closing spaces for debate, opinion and news has come to define the country as censorship has grown across the broad civil society spectrum – including media, academia and even the bazaar gossip-sphere – and especially, conventional news media such as television and newspaper.

The main topics of the day – those impacting the ordinary Pakistanis the most – especially public interest issues like transparency of the budget process, the incompetence of our economic managers, the dwindling allocations for education and health, the growing influence of security priorities of the Establishment in policymaking, enforced disappearances of people pushing for their rights, dwindling livelihoods and stagnating justice, have all but disappeared from the focus of conventional news media.

The conventional media have been coerced into silence on the very news themes that constitute professional journalism. This has forced audiences to migrate to online spaces where public interest information and debates have found accommodation and new forms.

The shift was inevitable given the enforced emaciation of conventional media and the engineered erosion of its size and scale – thousands of journalists and media workers have lost their jobs over the past two years as dozens of media outlets – both large and small – have closed. This includes print titles as well as news TV channels.

While an ecosystem of news and opinion has already been quietly taking shape online over the past few years in Pakistan – first, the rise to power in 2018 of a government openly hostile to media and then, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic which has made getting news and information difficult from sources other than generally unreliable official sources – there has been an acceleration in both demand and supply of independent sources of information.

The result is a discernibly three-dimensional info-sphere online. First, there is the formidable online presence of conventional media such as newspapers and TV news channels which have a sizeable but routine audience share. This is limited in influence now, though, because what you get here is what has already been published or broadcast offline by them – which is often defined by what news and information is not available rather than what is.

Secondly, there is a growing list of influential journalists and opinion makers – former independent-minded anchorpersons – who have been force-removed from mainstream media as part of the closing spaces policy.

These journalists are now mostly running popular YouTube channels with an independence of opinion – now that regulatory compulsions are circumventable – that makes policymakers sweat. Their subscribers often run into hundreds of thousands – sometimes even in millions. However, their staple offering is opinion and analysis rather than information or hard news.

Thirdly – and perhaps, most importantly – there is a growing number of independent online-only outlets, mostly websites, that are doing some of the best journalism in Pakistan.

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This is because even as the government and the security establishment have been trying hard for the past two years to rein in online media and cyberspace through a string of censorship laws masquerading as cybercrime laws or other sundry regulations that criminalise dissent online, it is still possible to peddle news and information that interests people.

How are they doing it? These current affairs platforms are successfully focusing on people's need for information rather than on the policymakers' need for propaganda. Already plugged into the information needs of focused local communities before the onset of either Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf or coronavirus, they have now found greater interest generated by an angry proletariat unable to find representation of either their views or interests in conventional media.

These online news and information platforms come in many shapes, sizes, formats, focuses and mediums. Whether it is *Sujag*, that focuses on Punjab districts around themes of development, inclusivity and rights through a mainly multi-media news format, or *Hum Sub*, a mainly opinion platform that is arguably the largest repository of perspectives from a broad spectrum of political, social and class pluralism of Pakistan that can freely express their fears and sorrows – and even joy, these platforms are the new shape of journalism in Pakistan.

Furthering this pluralism are diverse journalism-oriented platforms such as *Jeddojehad* that use a rights framework, marrying working class sensibilities with a progressive interpretation of politics; and the urban ethos of the impatient upwardly mobile classes that runs through the content of *Naya Daur* or the *Tribal News Network*, which represents the aspirations for empowerment in the newly mainstreamed tribal areas through an astonishing palette of progressive community views through online radio news and features.

Too numerous to list here, there are many more platforms, of course, from all provinces and communities, reflective of the frontier spirit of news and information in Pakistan's burgeoning cyberspace that almost always reflects peoples' interests rather than the narratives of power circles that conventional media have been reduced to representing.

These online platforms face challenges of financial viability and the ever-present Damocles sword of the state's regulatory overreach hanging over their digital heads, of course, but for now they are finding both a voice and a resonance through their public-interest ethos – precisely the element surrendered by the conventional media.

Their audiences are growing. These platforms often deftly use social media such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram to amplify their reach and interactivity with their audiences, something the conventional media fails at.

More than the emergence of a new kind of journalism in a repressive environment, Pakistan's digital

news media start-ups represent a great democratisation of both expression and access to information that is subverting the formula and edge of censorship that is proving harder to exercise online, for now at least.

But then that is precisely the job of the media – as guardian of public interest it has to win people's trust in its representation, and armed with it keep the citizenry informed while battling repressive regimes, as is the case now in Pakistan. Journalism is starting to flourish online in the country through these alternative and independent platforms for news and views.

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