



#speakup
BAROMETER

PAKISTAN

ASSESSING DIGITAL PARTICIPATION

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#speakup barometer

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PUBLISHER

DW Akademie
53110 Bonn, Germany

PROJECT LEAD

Petra Berner,
Steffen Leidel

AUTHOR

Qurratulain Zaman

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EDITORS

Deanne Corbett,
Matthew Moore,
Julia Sittmann

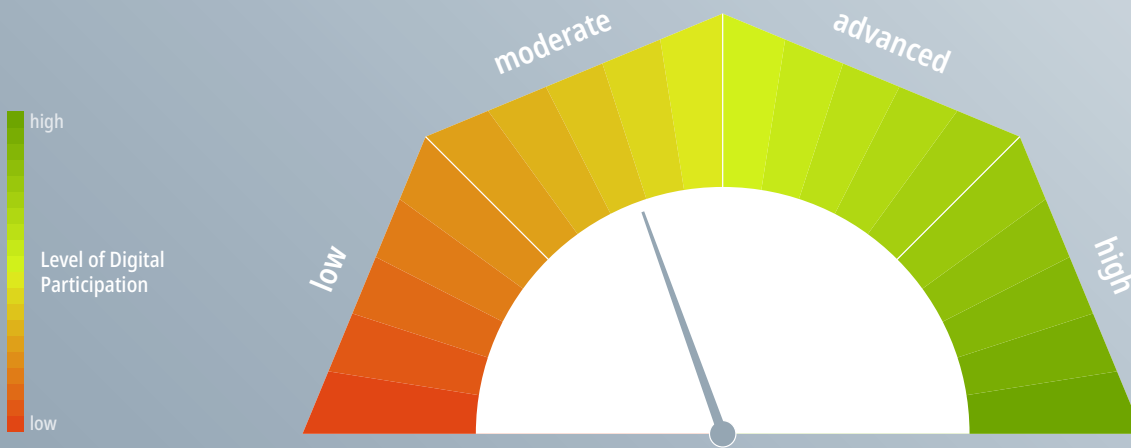
RESPONSIBLE

Carsten von Nahmen

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Pakistan



The overall results of the #speakup barometer research suggest that the level of digital participation in Pakistan is at an moderate level as the needle is pointing into the orange section of the barometer.

Key Findings

Despite Pakistan’s vibrant television industry and culture of political debate, digital participation is significantly limited by poor infrastructure. Internet penetration is very low, and a lack of e-commerce infrastructure means there are few business models for sustainable innovation in civic engagement and digital journalism. Before society was able to fully make use of the limited opportunities for free expression online, the government moved to regulate social media with vague laws that are open to misuse against dissenting voices. This has created a toxic online environment for many people, in particular women and minorities.



ACCESS

Higher taxes pose a challenge to digital participation in Pakistan. Beyond a long-term denial of service in marginalized areas, authorities also disable mobile access during times of political or religious sensitivity.



SOCIETY

Low digital literacy, a crackdown on dissent, and Internet laws that pander to bigotry leave Pakistan’s much loved political debates to take place offline.



DIGITAL RIGHTS

Broad legal limitations on free speech on the Internet are applied without transparency or oversight. Data protection and right to information laws are a work in progress.



INNOVATION

The country has slowly begun to invest in innovation ecosystems, but there are, as of yet, no sustainable digital participation initiatives. Newsrooms do not have the capacity and the resources to foster civic innovation.



MEDIA AND JOURNALISM

Islamabad is extending media regulations and censorship to the digital realm, while mainstream news organizations have yet to find sustainable ways to use new opportunities for freedom of speech.

Pakistan



Specific results for various factors influencing digital participation in Pakistan. The better the results in a specific cluster, the more the color field extends to the greener, outer edge of the web. Despite Pakistan's vibrant television industry and culture of political debate, digital participation is significantly limited by poor infrastructure.



Access: Double taxation and frequent shutdowns limit digital participation in Pakistan

Higher taxes pose a challenge to digital participation in Pakistan. Beyond a long-term denial of service in marginalized areas, authorities also disable mobile access during times of political or religious sensitivity.

Summary

- Internet penetration, although growing, is still low
- The tax rates for Internet access are very high
- Parts of country still don't have Internet access, while others face regular shutdowns
- E-commerce and access to digital payment is still not easy

Access

low
moderate
 advanced
 high



The overall Level of Digital Participation for Access: **moderate**

By April 2018, Pakistan, with a population of over 200 million, had an overall Internet penetration rate of 21 percent, with 44.6 million (Pakistan Today 2018) users. And although that's a low rate, it is nonetheless a drastic increase for Pakistan over the course of the last few years. According to figures from the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), there were around 150 million mobile subscribers (74 percent of the total popu-

lation), while mobile broadband penetration was just over 28 percent. Although the improvement in mobile Internet has enabled access to people from rural areas, wireless technologies remain concentrated in urban areas, according to the Freedom on the Net 2018 report by Freedom House. In addition to the underdeveloped infrastructure, high taxation also poses a major challenge to Internet penetration. While the overall cost of In-

Internet access has fallen in recent years, a 19.5 percent sales tax imposed by the government of Punjab, Pakistan's largest province, makes it difficult for many to access the Internet. Similarly, the KP government in Pakistan's northwestern region imposed a 19.5 percent tax on Internet services, which was challenged by Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (Dawn 2017), but later reinstated by the provincial high court. Shahzad Ahmed, Director at Bytes For All, said the high tax rates were a major impediment for the Internet penetration in Pakistan.

Internet shutdowns and access restrictions

Pakistan's government also continues to shut down the Internet during times of political and religious crises. According to Access Now, Pakistan was second only to India in terms of Internet shutdowns from January 2016 to May 2018. "There were 19 shutdowns recorded during this time period, of which 11 happened in 2018 alone," said Shahzad Ahmed. In October 2018, the Internet was shut down three times in various parts of Pakistan to silence a human rights movement (Access Now 2018), to commemorate a public holiday, and to keep people belonging to a far-right religious party off the street. However, the number of unannounced and unreported shutdowns could be far higher, stresses Ahmed. These shutdowns happen despite the fact that such action by the government was declared illegal (Bytes For All 2018) by the Islamabad High Court in February 2018—a decision that was welcomed by the digital rights community. However, that decision was revoked (Tribune 2018) only a month later by the court and the case is still pending. Sophia Hasnain of Linked Things said the frequent shutdowns, especially at the human rights protest rallies, were a threat to free expression. "The government denying Internet access to the protestors is nothing short of denying them their basic rights," she said.

Digital Rights Foundation and NetBlock also reported the suspension of social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook and Instagram during protests by the far-right Islamist groups against the alleged blasphemy committed by the previous government. Research conducted by the Bytes For All advocacy group noted that the network shutdown process lacked transparency and caused panic among the public as people stranded outside their homes during the times of crises are unable to communicate with their families. Ahmed is disappointed with the continued practice of Internet shutdowns. "I do not see things changing for better in the near future," he said.

Stagnant growth in infrastructure

The expansion of Internet infrastructure remains stagnant. Pakistan ranks 102nd in global mobile Internet speed and 114th in fixed broadband speed according to Ookla, a speed-testing company. The average mobile download speed is 13.56 megabits per second, which is much lower than the global average. Meanwhile, since 2017, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) has promised the testing of 5G technologies. A recent draft released by the PTA announced a plan to test 5G technology (Tech Juice 2018) in certain areas in 2019, ahead of

allowing it for commercial use in 2020. Pakistan also lags behind in access to e-commerce and digital payments. "There is no access to PayPal. People use cash payment on delivery that also leads to a black economy as there is no track record of these payment, and hardly any taxes are paid on these transactions," said Saad Hamid.

There are many other initiatives which are nearing completion, such as the Silk and Belt Road Initiative (Pak-China Fiber Optic Project) which is running optical fiber from China to Rawalpindi (Daily Times 2016). The project was launched in 2017 and the government of Pakistan claims it could significantly increase Internet speeds and boost the development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the country. However, digital rights activists have expressed concerns over possible new forms of censorship, based on the Chinese model. "This project, which is shrouded in secrecy, could have devastating effects on the already deteriorating freedoms in Pakistan," said Shahzad Ahmed. In the Gilgit-Baltistan region of Pakistan, the military-operated Special Communication Organization (SCO) provides telecommunication services. SCO has been trying to gain a license to operate commercially in the country, which could also result in curbing of free expression, digital rights experts fear.

Recommendations

End Internet shutdowns and kill switches

The government and Internet service providers (ISPs) must ensure unrestricted access to the Internet across the country. "Shutting down cellular and Internet services create more fear and panic among the public, which should be avoided, said Shahzad Ahmed.

Access in rural areas

"Concrete steps must be taken to bridge the gap between rural and urban access to the Internet, and by extension, to ICTs," said Sophia Hasnain. Bridging this divide is a first step towards building a society based on equal opportunities—both social and economic.

Less taxation

Government should promote policies where telecommunication companies and ecosystem players collaborate to extend their reach, said Sophia Hasnain. "The government must avoid engaging in double taxation of the same service."

Invest in the digital economy

Following the example of neighboring countries, "the government must move towards providing platforms for digital transactions, which would ultimately help the country's sluggish economy," said Saad Hamid.



Digital Rights: Vague laws and lack of transparency pose major threats to digital rights in Pakistan

Broad legal limitations on free speech on the Internet are applied without transparency or oversight. Data protection and right to information laws are a work in progress.

Summary

- A recent law sets conditions for surveillance and censorship, but the offences are ill-defined
- The application of Internet laws is arbitrary and opaque, and may endanger users
- Despite major breaches, there is still no data protection law
- Online harassment and troll armies also threaten digital expression

Digital Rights

low
moderate
 advanced
 high



The overall Level of Digital Participation for Digital Rights: **moderate**

In the first half of 2018, Pakistan made more content restriction requests to Facebook than any other country in the world. In recent months, international Twitter users (AFP 2018) as well as local rights campaigners (Reuters 2018) were told by Twitter that their tweets violated Pakistani law. When a leading lawyer asked precisely which law she had broken, the Information Minister denied (Dawn 2019) his government had made the complaint.

The country's electronic crimes law, adopted in 2016, criminalizes content that is "against the glory of Islam, against the integrity, security and defense of Pakistan, public order, contempt of court, against decency and morality and incitement of any offences." These broad offences are to be determined by a regulatory body, which operates without a publicly available set of criteria or an open list of blocked websites. According to Sadaf Khan, a journalist and media development professional, the regulatory body does not report to parliament, although it is required to. "Journalists have reported intimidating phone calls by the FIA — the agency assigned to probe such offences — accusing them of anti-military propaganda," digital rights activist Fareiha Aziz said. The powerful military intelligence agency, the ISI, dealing with violent extremism, is also mandated to investigate online violations (Geo TV 2016). In 2017, widescale arrests (Dawn 2017) to counter "an organized campaign" against the military largely targeted workers of a rival political party.

The vague offences are also linked to other more serious ones, such as blasphemy and terrorism. "Even the blasphemy laws are quite subjective and open to interpretation," said Khan, "and leave people of minority faiths especially vulnerable." Two Christian siblings were sentenced to death (The Telegraph 2018) for violating Pakistan's anti-blasphemy laws online in December 2018. This was not the first incident of its kind. In June

2017, a man from the minority Shia sect was given the death penalty for committing blasphemy on Facebook (The Guardian 2017) during a debate with an undercover law enforcement official. Government departments sent out mass text messages (RT 2017) and ran newspaper campaigns (The Nation 2017) urging citizens to be vigilant of "blasphemers" on social media and report them, following a court order in March 2017, in the face of concerns against "state-sponsored vigilantism (Lobe Log 2017)."

Months later, a group of university students clubbed and shot their classmate to death (RT 2017) after a false accusation of blasphemy on Facebook. In October 2018, an opposition politician accused of contempt of court in a webcast was also charged with terrorism (Dawn 2018). "This could be interpreted as an abuse of law to ensure he gets arrested," Aziz said.

“Even the blasphemy laws are quite subjective and open to interpretation.

Sadaf Khan, Media Matters for Democracy

Online harassment and gendered surveillance

Vicious troll armies who frequently harass journalists online have exacerbated the chilling effect. Often, trolls are organized by bickering political parties (Herald 2019) seeking to push certain narratives online. In one instance, four bloggers claimed to have been abducted by the ISI before being subjected to a brutal hate campaign online (Dawn 2017), using doctored images to accuse them of blasphemy. Female journalists are especially vulnerable to gender-based surveillance, sexualized threats and harassment (Digital Rights Foundation 2017). Female users in this conservative society are also generally more susceptible

to harassment, blackmail, hacking and leaks. One report by the Digital Rights Foundation says 40 percent (The Wire 2017) of female Internet users in the country have suffered harassment online. “Women feel more vulnerable online than men. The attacks on them are more targeted, gendered. There is more at stake for them if, for example, their intimate data is leaked,” said Nighat Dad, digital rights activist.

Legal recourse is limited. “Internet laws are implemented in an opaque manner, and access to justice in Pakistan’s judicial system is a long and expensive ordeal,” Aziz said. It leaves the victims of online offences, especially women, reluctant to pursue cases. “This has repercussions for women calling out their harassers online as well, because the men report them for defamation,” Khan said.

“ Women feel more vulnerable online than men. The attacks on them are more targeted, gendered. There is more at stake for them if, for example, their intimate data is leaked.

Nighat Dad, Rights Foundation

Lack of legal resources for citizens’ data protection

Censorship is not the only major rights concern for citizens. As of February 2019, the country has no data protection laws, despite several recent breaches of user data, including at a major ride hailing company (Dawn 2018) and “almost all” of Pakistan’s banks (Dawn 2018). Dad said a draft of a new law she was privy to included data protection regulations for private entities but did not include government departments. “Data protection law talks about an individual against another individual but there is no consideration of an individual against an institution, such as NADRA or safe city project that has access to citizens private data,” said Dad. That’s despite recent incidents, such as the May 2017 ransomware attack that led to the suspension of all land record services (Dawn 2017) in Punjab province. The country maintains an extensive biometric database of all citizens, which is also linked to their Internet and phone use, and a number of departments have large digital files of user data. Internet service providers are required to keep user activity data for a year or more according to the new law, but access to the data and subsequent surveillance requires a court warrant.

Pakistan is a signatory to the open government partnership project, but it is still developing a concrete plan. A number of government departments now provide access to open data. Right to information laws have been implemented in parts of the country; in others, it is a work in progress. Making a request is still a cumbersome process. “You can have some success in getting some information, but not always what you want,” said Aziz. There are no net neutrality laws in the country and service providers sometimes offer free or cheaper access to certain

services. There is no structured way in which the government can involve stakeholders. Rights groups help citizens fight online harassment, provide legal support, or carry out research and activism. But they have limited influence, and there is no formal mechanism for them to talk to the government. There is also little protection for whistleblowers.

Recommendations

Transparency in the application of Internet laws

Restrictions to free digital expression amount to criminalization of different kinds of expression. The focus should be on facilitating expression, and any legal limitations should be clearly defined.

Data protection laws

Despite the hoarding of vast troves of biometric user data by government agencies and private companies, there are no data protection laws in Pakistan. Experts believe there should be strict accountability of who has your data, what they do with it, and what actions you can take to protect it.

More open governance and open data initiatives

The government needs to participate more in open governance and open data initiatives with global partners, and create a mechanism to work with local organizations.



Media and Journalism: Pakistan’s media on the brink of a digital transition, but struggling to find viable business models

Islamabad is extending media regulations and censorship to the digital realm, while mainstream news organizations have yet to find sustainable ways to use new opportunities for freedom of speech.

Summary

- There is little diversity of platforms and perspectives in Pakistani media and journalism
- Digital and traditional media share similar content and increasingly similar types of regulation
- Journalism initiatives by citizens are limited in scope and viability
- There are no sustainable business models for a transition to online journalism

Media and Journalism

low
moderate
 advanced
 high



The overall Level of Digital Participation for Media and Journalism: **moderate**

Pakistan’s television-dominated media industry is on the brink of a digital transition but is being held back by a lack of sustainable business models for investigative or citizen journalism online, that would allow for a greater diversity of voices and opinions. The country’s digital landscape has remained largely unregulated so far: New laws may end hate speech, defamation and harassment online—but they may also lead to more state censorship and control, impacting dissenting or marginalized voices.

The digital media landscape is dominated by major national television broadcasters and news publishers. They make use of popular Internet platforms such as Facebook, with 33 million reported users, as well as, to a lesser extent, Twitter and WhatsApp. Citizen journalism initiatives are rare, resulting in a lack of representation for marginalized voices. “There is barely any content representing women, minorities, and people

“There is barely any content representing women, minorities, and people speaking local languages.

Jahanzaib Haque, Dawn Media Group

speaking local languages,” said Jahanzaib Haque, chief digital strategist and editor at the Dawn media group. He said up to 90 percent of visitors to news websites and 70 percent of people on Facebook are male. Audiences who can read English have

more options and opportunities, Haque said. “There is an urban-rural divide as well,” said Asad Baig, founder and executive editor of Media Matters for Democracy. With their television audience concentrated in larger cities, news organizations report very little local news, especially from areas where access is difficult and the audience is of little interest to advertisers. Journalist groups have little female or minority representation, said Zebunnisa Burki, deputy editor Op-Ed at the News. “Women are no doubt under-represented in press clubs and unions.” New social media platforms, specifically Twitter, have incorporated a feedback mechanism that allows some semblance of a dialogue between journalists and citizens.

State and self-censorship

Except in the case of traditional newspapers, which largely follow accuracy and fairness standards and have taken to publishing their print content online, the quality of media content is mostly poor. This is especially true for content produced for the Urdu-speaking market, Haque said. Since most of the online content produced by the major media houses originates from print and television, they’re missing an opportunity to reach out to new audiences. However, it also means their digital content follows the same editorial standards as television and print.

This also means that digital content is affected by the same kind of censorship seen in traditional media, said Raza Rumi, former editor at the Daily Times and founder of the new independent news platform, Naya Daur. Journalists are also prone to being targeted by Pakistan’s vague electronic crimes law (Heinrich

Boell Foundation 2018). Rights groups also remain apprehensive after the government proposed a new regulatory body (News Line Magazine 2019) for all media, including digital. In 2017, independent bloggers were abducted and tortured after a life-threatening social media campaign falsely accusing them of blasphemy (Dawn 2017). “There was a time when the Internet was unregulated, and you could talk about everything. It is not that easy any longer,” said Haque.

Despite these concerns, Zebunnisa Burki sees a huge potential in the field of digital journalism. “Independent V-logs, blogs and media startups are trying to make their voices heard. They pick up smaller stories that might not seem that important in Pakistan’s political chaos. And within today’s censorship issues I am not sure how much they will be able to push as far as content is concerned.”

No viable monetization models available

There are, however, doubts about their long-term sustainability in the absence of viable monetization methods, said Asad Baig, adding that journalist unions do not recognize independent reporters. Projects are often funded or carried out by activist organizations. In the absence of citizen journalism, blogging is limited to opinion and analyses, Haque said, with successful bloggers eventually joining large media organizations as columnists. “Community initiatives by citizens can play a key role in setting a people-friendly progressive and pluralistic news agenda,” said Rumi, who runs one such multilingual initiative.

“Community initiatives by citizens can play a key role in setting a people-friendly progressive and pluralistic news agenda.

Raza Rumi, Policy Analyst

With only one state-run public broadcaster that is often used as a propaganda tool by the government, the demand for private news channels is high in Pakistan. But their business models largely depend on advertising by various government departments, Haque said. With the new government in Islamabad withdrawing advertising campaigns to save money, some predict a doomsday scenario for the country’s media industry (Nayadaur TV 2019). But according to Asad Baig, many owners of media outlets are not in the business to make a profit. Rather, these businessmen want more influence and are ready to spend money and use their news machinery to increase their personal clout. Because of this, such outlets are, at times, unprofessional, and also engage in censorship. Baig sums up the contradictions of Pakistan’s media industry as follows: “Pakistani media outlets are simultaneously fiercely independent and not independent at all.”

Recommendations

Citizen initiatives

Amid doubts as to large media organizations’ interest in sustainability and as to their business plans’ dependence on the representation of a diversity of voices, our experts say viable independent initiatives by citizens are the way forward. “If citizens and trusted reporters and editors set the news agenda, it will be a matter of who gets it right, and not who gets it first,” said Raza Rumi. “Such a scenario will also allow a variety of perspectives and opinions, including those of the marginalized.”

Media viability

The experts stressed the need for more research and investment in finding new and sustainable ways of doing journalism online. Zebunnisa Burki said universities and the government should invest in such initiatives because the future of Pakistani journalism will determine the future of Pakistani politics and society. Jahanzaib Haque believes media organizations should also invest in innovation, because their own viability depends on acknowledging the changing media landscape in Pakistan.

Quality and scope of journalism

For citizens to pay for news online, independent journalists and media groups need to make a serious effort towards improving the quality of the content they produce. According to Asad Baig, this includes broadening the scope of content to address people who may not be the primary audience for print and television, but have access to the Internet and are underrepresented.



Society: Missed opportunities for Pakistan’s digital society

Low digital literacy, a crackdown on dissent, and Internet laws that pander to bigotry leave Pakistan’s much loved political debates to take place offline.

Summary

- Women and minorities cannot fully participate online because of cultural norms, abuse and harassment
- Internet laws that promote and reinforce bigotry stifle creativity rather than open discussions
- A digital divide hampers participation by marginalized people

Society

low
moderate
advanced
high



The overall Level of Digital Participation for Society: **moderate**

For millions of Pakistanis, digital media promised to provide a space where they could have the discussions that are simply impossible on traditional media, but sweeping Internet speech laws have brought out the worst in society: nationalist and religious bigotry.

“If you are a religious minority, if you are not a hyper-nationalist, you are the target of abuse on social media,” says journalist Marvi Sirmed. People from the persecuted Ahmadiyya community for example “prefer not express themselves on social media, because the moment they identify themselves as Ahmadi in public spaces, they risk facing abuse and even violence.” Free and open debates that were once enabled by online anonymity are increasingly no longer possible (The Guardian 2017).

Social norms are especially prohibitive for women. Men are in charge of the household. They control women’s access to communication devices and ensure that women act in line with traditional gender-role restrictions. For a woman to have an account on Facebook is taboo in some parts of the country, elsewhere sharing pictures is a no-no. When they are allowed to share personal information online, they are at risk of harassment (Buzz Feed 2019). “It is quite common for women from middle and lower income households in Pakistan to set up social media accounts using aliases and unrelated profile pictures,” says Nida Kirmani, a sociologist working on gender and urban marginality in South Asia. This anonymity allows women to participate in online discussions and may be liberating in the short term, but it is important for them to have female role models whom they can relate to, argues journalist Sahabat Zakariya. Their use of social media is often monitored by family, and offline, too, Pakistan’s patriarchal society has a history of gender-based social surveillance, whereby women’s behavior and movements are monitored by family members. In a society that is unwelcoming

to contrary opinions and where strict laws threaten free speech, women are more likely than men to suffer abuse for sharing unpopular opinions (The Diplomat 2018).

Lack of media literacy and increase in fake news

Traditional media, in particular television news channels, are widely viewed as essential to Pakistan’s democratic politics, despite concerns about fairness and fact-checking standards. Social media news channels are no exception. In fact, it is also often the case that issues overlooked by mainstream media because of censorship (Global Voices Advocacy 2018) or poor judgment sometimes receive long-running exposure on social media.

“People deactivated their accounts because they thought Twitter or Facebook would not protect their privacy and might actually help the government.

Marvi Sirmed, Journalist and Human Rights Activist

But people are usually not able or willing to critically examine the credibility of certain “news.” “I am always surprised at how much people trust anything they see on their mobile phones,” says Kirmani, “despite the fact that there is so much mistrust in the society.” This blind trust tends to run along partisan lines. “There is a culture of discussion, but it is becoming a culture of argument,” Zakariya explains. People believe in information that is in line with their worldview. “Every difference of opinion and every dissenting view is seen as being anti-religion or anti-state,” says Sirmed. That results in polarization, and the tone of debates is often self-righteous. “The prime minister told journalists they must take sides to support him because supporting him was the same as supporting Pakistan.”

Facebook and Twitter working against digital activists

There is growing cause for alarm among activists because Twitter (The Diplomat 2019) and Facebook (The News 2018) are now actively cooperating with the government to implement vague censorship laws that include a death penalty for blasphemy. "If you express certain kinds of ideas, they may actually come for you, and you may land in jail," says Zakariya. She says there is a cultural acceptance of such surveillance. After recent crackdowns, Sirmed says, "people deactivated their accounts because they thought Twitter or Facebook would not protect their privacy and might actually help the government."

The safest bet for content generators therefore is entertainment. "Fashion, traveling and lifestyle are popular topics," according to Zakariya. "There is very little political or intellectual content," she says. "It often re-enforces the conservative social norms, is of poor quality, and there is no innovation." Crowdfunding sites cannot legally operate in Pakistan, and there are no community initiatives making a significant social impact.

Poor digital literacy (Pakistan Today 2018) means citizens rarely reach beyond their online echo chamber. "People who cannot write a complete sentence in the Urdu language, mostly young men and boys, learn to use social media because it is a source of entertainment. They are especially prone to being misled by fake news," Sirmed explains. The digital divide especially affects the marginalized people in the less affluent Balochistan province and the restive tribal areas in the north, where social media may be the only way to participate in public discourse. There are no large-scale digital literacy or digital inclusion programs in the country. Research in new media studies in universities is rare and of poor quality, says Kirmani, an associate professor herself.

Recommendations

Improve digital literacy

Digital literacy is key to raising the digital participation levels of women, minorities, the poor and the marginalized people in society. From identifying fact from fiction to giving a voice to the ignored, the benefits of digital literacy are vast. Authorities must invest more in digital education.

Allow more freedom of speech online

Pakistan's leaders must stand firm against those who use bigotry to silence critics and stand up for a culture of free expression on the Internet. Exposing citizens to news ideas and inculcating tolerance towards diversity is a cornerstone of social progress.

Address the digital divide

The digital divide in Pakistan must be closed for the marginalized to participate fully in online discourse. Experts agree that ensuring that those living in Pakistan's remotest communities are not left out of the digital revolution should be a primary policy goal for the government.



Innovation: A new enthusiasm for innovation in Pakistan has done little to enhance digital participation

The country has slowly begun to invest in innovation ecosystems, but there are, as of yet, no sustainable digital participation initiatives. Newsrooms do not have the capacity and the resources to foster civic innovation.

Summary

- Pakistan has a thriving software development scene and a number of startup incubators have sprung up, but civic innovation remains limited
- Newsrooms have a very limited capacity to take advantage of their meager opportunities
- Universities are not investing in digital participation programs and research
- Political discourse is limited to television and some social media platforms

Innovation

low
moderate
 advanced
 high



The overall Level of Digital Participation for Innovation: **moderate**

Pakistan’s flourishing software development scene has done little to contribute towards innovation in digital participation. News organizations do not have the resources or confidence to invest in innovation in their field; journalists do not have the time, the training or the support from the academics or innovators to communicate in new ways. While millions of politically active citizens discuss politics in the face of growing censorship on traditional social media platforms, they are missing out on new ways to participate in the public discourse.

According to Sophia Hasnain, founder and CEO of Linked Things, an Internet-of-things solutions provider, startup incubators—including a series of government-backed National Incubation Centers—have sprung up in Pakistan’s larger cities, to encourage technology startups to promote innovation (Ideagist Pakistan 2018). There are co-working spaces in each

citizens and journalists. “There is no interaction between the technology networks and newsrooms. There is no knowledge exchange,” said Shaheryar Popalzai, a newsroom innovator who has worked with several major media organizations in Pakistan.

Jahanzaib Haque, chief digital strategist and editor at Dawn media group, agrees. “There is a lack of expertise, and a lack of knowledge of how to even begin to conceptualize an innovation project in journalism,” Haque said. He says most journalists and editors are not tech savvy, and that news organizations sometimes have to hire people with no journalism background to work with technology. Similarly, according to Popalzai, newsrooms are under-resourced and do not have the equipment to allow already overworked reporters to innovate. In the absence of short-term returns, media groups are not interested in investing in technology.

“There is no interaction between the technology networks and newsrooms. There is no knowledge exchange.

Shaheryar Popalzai, digital strategist

of the three major cities, including one for women (We Create Center Pakistan 2019), said Saad Hamid, a digital entrepreneur and who leads the innovation consultancy and training group, Demo. Civic innovation is no longer a foreign concept (Daily Pakistan 2018), he said, as open data initiatives have begun to arise. But the increasing enthusiasm for innovation and entrepreneurship has not increased digital participation by

Data journalism and research is non-existent

What’s worse, on the education side, innovation is not part of the curriculum in journalism programs at the universities and there is little research on new avenues for public discourse. “Sometimes we see single courses called digital journalism, but what does that even mean? We need to teach students about using data, about user experience research, and project management,” Popalzai said. “There are some courses offered here and there, but media studies programs are more concerned with TV production,” confirmed Haque. “Research into digital journalism is practically non-existent.” Digital rights groups conduct some research (Digital Rights Foundation 2019) on their own, but experts agree the country’s universities are lagging behind.

Media organizations thus have difficulty conceiving of how to monetize a digital journalism project, according to Haque. Therefore, while other types of digital ventures may develop international linkages and secure funding, digital civic participation projects are not very common and newsrooms have no sustainable innovation plans. “They’re firing reporters because they are not able to create new business models,” said Hamid of

“They’re firing reporters because they are not able to create new business models.

Saad Hamid, Google

the innovation consultancy, Demo. Several infotainment start-ups have raised money and made it big (Aurora 2016), but political discourse is limited to traditional social media platforms. In his view, that means media companies are “missing out on the opportunity to reach out to 120 million young readers.”

Recommendations

Building capacity in news organizations

“It’s a question of capacity,” Jahanzaib Haque said of the role of journalists in fostering civic participation using new technology. Reporters should be trained to work with new technologies, and newsrooms require resources to allow in-house innovation, Shaheryar Popalzai said. Newsrooms should see the long-term potential of investing in new, sustainable ways of civic participation, Saad Hamid said.

Education, training and research

Media departments should look forward and change the focus of their teaching and research from an emphasis on television and print journalism toward civic participation using newly available data and tools, the experts said. “Journalism is a different ballgame now,” said Shaheryar Popalzai. He argues that reporters should be taught how to use data, be familiar with user experience research, and be trained in digital project management in order to innovate and thereby meet civic participation challenges.

Developing and investing in sustainable innovation projects

Journalists at the forefront of civic participation face significant challenges from their own marketing departments, who do not know how to create sustainable business models for the organization to invest in, Jahanzaib Haque said. According to Saad Hamid, “Money is available. Yes, it is hard to convince investors and donors, but if you have solid plans, it is possible to get funding.” If media organizations are open to new ideas and can build on them, Shaheryar Popalzai thinks that they can expect significant rewards.

Community efforts

While software developers and entrepreneurs have formed large, thriving communities in Pakistan, there are no similar initiatives by citizens, reporters and innovators interested in civic participation, said Jahanzaib Haque, who runs the only major online community of digital journalists. Sophia Hasnain believes journalists should set up their own innovation hubs to develop new participation models and secure funding for them.

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