

REPORT

# Evolving News Media Landscapes in India and Pakistan:

## Implications for regional peace and stability

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

India and Pakistan recognize the utility of the press in contemporary conflicts, and seek to deploy it as an offensive weapon in a larger information war. Both countries have utilized digital, print, and broadcast media to shape international perceptions and public opinion domestically. With every new border skirmish, New Delhi and Islamabad ramp up a nationalist narrative, with news media outlets and journalists riling up jingoistic fervor with every newscast. Understanding India and Pakistan's laws and policies regarding mass media explains today's government-media nexus.

Between 2018 and 2020, the region witnessed a surge in violations of press freedom. High levels of threats, intimidation, and attacks on journalists and their media outlets have led to both India and Pakistan languishing at the bottom of the 2020 Press Freedom Index.<sup>1</sup> This report is a culmination of a two-year effort to convene journalists from both India and Pakistan for cross-border exchanges and dialogue. Field interviews with journalists based in New Delhi, Mumbai, Islamabad, Karachi, and Lahore have helped generate the bulk of the findings we report here, including our analysis of their implications and our proposals for a path forward for news media in the region.

THE SOUTH ASIA CENTER is the Atlantic Council's focal point for work on greater South Asia and the relations between its countries, neighboring regions, the United States, and Europe. It seeks to foster partnerships with key institutions in the region to serve as a forum for dialogues between decision makers in South Asia and the United States. Areas of focus include governance, trade and development, international migratory flows, traditional and non-traditional security, climate sustainability, energy, and other issues. The Center is committed to partnering with experts and stakeholders from both the region and the United States to offer critical analyses and practicable recommendations for policymakers.

<sup>1</sup> "2020 World Press Freedom Index," Reporters Without Borders, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>.

Our conversations centered on the news media's role in diplomacy, examining the opportunities and challenges media narratives offer in shaping the national narratives. Journalists and civil-society actors emphasize the dangers of the current anti-press climate in both India and Pakistan, underscoring that heavy censorship and corporate buyouts have led to flawed media reports and the proliferation of incendiary misinformation. Historically, news media have played a major role in nation-building, foreign policy, and shaping the public narrative, often reflecting a frail freedom antagonized by laws that privilege narrow conceptions of national security and defense above all else. Curbs on these freedoms date back to the time of liberalization, as both India and Pakistan institutionalized a free, pluralistic press only to double down immediately on efforts to stifle its independence and integrity. This widening and tightening of rules and regulations, and the financial strangulation of local news outfits, has reconfigured the news media space, which is now characterized by pervasive distrust and deepening fragmentation in both countries.

This report, made possible by generous support from the Ploughshares Fund, sheds light on the critical implications that reconfiguring the media ecosystem has on India and Pakistan's domestic politics and foreign policy, and the geopolitics of South Asia. A critical way forward is to rethink cross-border reporting with the aim to improve and uphold rigorous regional news coverage. However, a free and diverse news media can only be truly independent if the news media in both countries invest in reinventing their business models. Finally, political elements in both countries have worked to dehumanize the other side through planted narratives and agendas. Networks must invest in reversing this dangerous trend, and in rehumanizing the other side, in order to build more nuance and substance into the social fabric of their coverage of one another.

## INTRODUCTION

The press in both India and Pakistan was pivotal to the movements to achieve independence from the British Empire in 1947. News media in South Asian society have always been a constant battleground, shackled to colonial legacies of being used as a tool for nation-building versus operating as a check on power and government. Most recent setbacks in press freedom and news media have challenged the editorial independence of journalists in both India and Pakistan. Journalists face market and political incentives that often require sacrificing covering realities on the ground and instead touting the government party line. Historically, both countries have used "information campaigns" to win at the local and international levels. Since their liberalization away from state ownership and toward privatization, news media have been used as an offensive weapon to influence people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. A good example is coverage of both countries' nuclear programs, as the media elevated a unified national narrative that uncritically celebrated the leaders and scientists behind the nuclear programs, while simultaneously demonizing the "enemy" that justified disproportionate expenditures on the defense programs of countries where hundreds of millions remain illiterate and impoverished.

Today, with ever-increasing sophistication, social media platforms and digital media have created an environment so complex, fast-paced, and information-laden that the rapid spread of ideas and information is boundless. This greater flow of information and ideas means embracing greater openness at a time when there is an increased pace of globalization. Threats to honest and fact-based journalism are real and concerning, impacting the state of democracy through the gradual mainstreaming of authoritarian practices. With populist leaders on both sides of the border, both India and Pakistan have witnessed worrisome efforts to throttle the independence of the news media sector.

This report explores the role of media as a driver of peace and conflict in both India and Pakistan by first outlining the technological and political advancements that led to media liberalization and the effects it had on recreating a national narrative. The next section explores the impact market and political competition have had on the hyper-adversarial media, driven by ad-revenue models oriented around acquiring independent news groups. The liberalization that swept

across India and Pakistan, and the aggressively monopolistic advertising models that followed, has important implications for the independence of the news media sector today. This report draws attention to this shrinking space and the consequences of concerted attempts to throttle honest and fact-based journalism. Finally, the report presents the implications of this analysis for democracy and peace in South Asia, and suggests possible ways forward for news media, focusing on policies and programs that can contribute to a vibrant, sustainable, and pluralistic press. It aims to help practitioners, experts, and journalists in both India and Pakistan explore ways to draw on best practices and lessons learned when it comes to narratives that drive conflict and can promote prevention.

## MEDIA LIBERALIZATION IN INDIA

Doordarshan, India's first national television network, emerged in 1976, during the Emergency. A powerful tool for then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Doordarshan was institutionalized in a state-led effort at nation-building.<sup>2</sup> Television was a convenient alternative to the free print press, which had served as a dominant institution in India's democratic political culture and was at the core of India's struggle against colonial rule. Removed from a wider political discourse regarding cultural hegemony, independence, and democracy, television was promoted as a centralized effort that exemplified and celebrated India's technological advancements; it was also a powerful tool for central authority to shape public opinion. In the decades that followed, the government of India held a virtual monopoly over electronic media broadcasting in the still-young democracy, creating a state-controlled media culture.

In the early 1990s, when international satellite transmissions entered Indian airwaves, the commercialization of Doordarshan and All India Radio (AIR) paved the way for the surge in India's broadcast media. This move gave more autonomy to the government-owned broadcasters, institutionalizing a move away from a "national consciousness" and toward a freer media. Thus, the last decade of the twentieth century saw a boom in both broadcast and print media through breakthrough legislation, including the Prasar Bharti (Broadcasting Corporation of India) Act of 1990, which eliminated the government's power to stipulate advertisement airtime. This revolutionary law paved the way for news policy and

constitutes the core of communication policies in the country today. India today boasts the largest-selling English-language newspaper, the Times of India, with a daily circulation of more than three million.<sup>3</sup> This opening of cross-media ownership fostered the development of a diverse mix of public, private, and community media at the national and sub-national levels.

The 1997 liberalization of mass media in India opened the floodgates to new political and cultural players shaping local narratives. With the gradual increase of channel capacity and regional, national, and local programming, political leaders gained larger audiences and new avenues to shape public opinion. With soap operas, mythological dramas, and Hindi-language films and songs, Doordarshan programs were soon reaching millions of television sets in India. This meant that national and local politics became more defined for a larger audience as India's print and broadcast media grew more sophisticated. The burst of broadcast media gave rise to interest groups, opinion leaders, and reinforced attitudes at a far more accelerated rate than print media. The advent of vernacular print and broadcast media extended the reach of media houses to hundreds of millions of Indians from different states and villages. The growth of broadcasting, especially television, affected the operation of India's parliamentary system—personifying political parties and their leaders. The 1989 Lok Sabha election is a prime example, as the Congress Party attempted to use digital media to garner votes as a "legitimate use of official media."<sup>4</sup> This was an early indication of the salience of television to Indian politicians, heavily politicizing television policy for decades to follow.

At the close of the twentieth century, the impact of the new world order was evident in the political, economic, and social life of many Indians. With challenges at home and abroad being televised and broadcast throughout Indian homes, it was no wonder that in 1999, the government utilized the new digital and print media landscape to unite and mobilize Indians against a common enemy—Pakistan.

The 1999 Kargil War was India's first televised war, at a time when one in every three households owned a television. Conflict was spread across television screens in every corner of India, with searing images of battle and death and the heroic valor and sacrifice of Indian soldiers. The country's pervasive problems of poverty and illiteracy were replaced with a new fervor, which stirred public passions. The televised

2 Victoria L. Farmer, "Nation, State, and Democracy in India: Media Regulation and Government Monopoly," University of Pennsylvania, 2009.

3 Parul Agrawal et al., *India's Media Boom: The Good News and the Bad* (Oxford, UK: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2013), xi.

4 Farmer, "Nation, State, and Democracy in India: Media Regulation and Government Monopoly."

war shaped the country's public narrative, rallying people from all languages and backgrounds, including the multitudes of Indians who could not read newspaper coverage, behind the war effort.<sup>5</sup> Indians rallied behind their flag with a surge in blood donations to the Indian Red Cross Society in New Delhi, school children collecting money for soldiers' welfare funds, and movie stars using their platforms to support the Indian military. The 1999 Kargil War would also have consequences for the state of nationalism built on the mistrust of Pakistan. The televised battle scenes not only reverberated domestically, but globally as well. New Delhi in 1999 was able to shape the international news coverage of the war as an offensive tactic, projecting its news agenda on a global sphere against its adversary. India's internationalized public relations strategy would be the impetus for Pakistan's move to modernize its own media industry.

## MEDIA LIBERALIZATION IN PAKISTAN

Pakistan's media revolution came five years after India's, in a direct response to the 1999 televised war in Kashmir. In stark contrast to the successful public-opinion mobilization wrought by India's domestic and international information campaign, Pakistan failed to energize even its own public around a unified battle cry. Critics faulted the country's unwillingness to see media as a tool to influence and manage a culturally diverse and uninformed citizenry. Against this backdrop, Pakistan's media privatization was encouraged under the guise of adopting liberal and deregulated policies to appease the popular economic models of the time, based on a neoliberal agenda.<sup>6</sup> The Regulatory Authority for Media Broadcast Organizations (RAMBO) was established in 2000 to "facilitate the devolution of responsibility and power to grassroots by improving the access to mass media at the local and community level."<sup>7</sup> Pakistan entered a new century with democratic slogans of "freedom of the press" and hopes for civilian rule with the coup d'état that brought four-star General

President Pervez Musharraf into power. In reality, Musharraf's eight-year dictatorial rule granted unprecedented freedom to the media—unlike the preceding decade-long democratic rule, which had retained most of the strict media regulatory controls of the past. In the span of a few years, Musharraf became the staunchest advocate for media freedom, lauded by his democratic counterparts in the United States and the rest of the West for embracing and encouraging the private sector to invest in the media industry. Ironically, this same free news media culture that would play a critical role in Musharraf's ousting in 2007.

Accruing substantial political capital inside and outside his country, Musharraf institutionalized active policing of cable networks by staffing media regulatory bodies with military and government loyalists. Media liberalization in Pakistan became a mechanism of controlling fact-based journalism domestically; the façade of leading a democratic government led to indirect control of most news outlets controlled or influenced by the military and government.<sup>8</sup> This newfound appreciation for freedom of expression had certain limitations; criticism of the governance system in Baluchistan and Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), for instance, remained off limits.

From 2007 to 2008, two major incidents in Pakistan shook the media landscape. The 2007 raid on the Red Mosque in Islamabad revealed the power of the news media to whip up national foment as major television anchors received recognition from Pakistani society for their coverage of the raid. Giving Abdul Rashid, the leader of the extremists killed during the day-long battle, an uninterrupted platform to speak directly to Pakistanis with a message to topple the Musharraf regime was an eye opener for the potential scale of disruptions to existing modes of public influence and control in Pakistan.<sup>9</sup> The news media were directly acting as a tool to oust the dictator. Musharraf's 2007 state of emergency and subsequent crackdown on the broadcast media resulted in an increase in digital news, due mainly to online and offline citizen

5 Celia W. Duggar, "Kashmir War, Shown on TV, Rallies India's Unity," *New York Times*, July 18, 1999, <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/07/18/world/kashmir-war-shown-on-tv-rallies-india-s-unity.html>.

6 Shahid Ali, Mehnaz Gul, and Zia Obaid, "Liberalization of Media in Pakistan: A Challenge to Democracy," *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 25 (2017), 39, <https://go.gale.com/ps/anonymous?id=GALE%7CA519364379&sid=googleScholar&v=2.1&it=r&linkaccess=abs&issn=10240829&p=AONE&sw=w>.

7 "Between Radicalization and Democratization in an Unfolding Conflict: Media in Pakistan," International Media Support, 2009, 18, <https://www.mediasupport.org/publication/pakistan-between-radicalisation-and-democratisation-in-an-unfolding-conflict>.

8 Marco Mezzera and Safdar Sial, "Media and Governance in Pakistan: A Controversial Yet Essential Relationship," Initiative for Peacebuilding, 2010, 39, <https://gsdrc.org/document-library/media-and-governance-in-pakistan-a-controversial-yet-essential-relationship/>.

9 "Showdown at the Mosque," *Economist*, July 12, 2007, <https://www.economist.com/asia/2007/07/12/showdown-at-the-mosque>.

activism.<sup>10</sup> It was against this backdrop that Pakistani lawyers initiated a movement for an independent judiciary in Pakistan, which was another strong message calling for Musharraf to step down being broadcast on national television. In a matter of months, disgruntled groups throughout Pakistan found a platform in the country's news media outlets, resulting in an outpouring of revolutionary energy to overthrow the current regime. The English-language news media, targeting the elite and middle-class Pakistani viewership, eventually played a critical role in accelerating the unpopularity of Musharraf and shaking his political base. It was in this context, and the lessons learned under the Musharraf regime, that the military and conservative movements in Pakistan worked to flood media outlets in a covert "war on media."

## MANIPULATING NEWS MEDIA BUSINESS MODELS

Business-model disrupters, changing consumer habits, and audience fragmentation have all led to a gradual destruction of the traditional model of the news media industry. What began as a state-funded television industry in both India and Pakistan has lent itself to structural changes in the media business. In both countries, there have been real increases in monopolistic tendencies and aggressive market practices aimed at increasing market share and killing competition in the press sector.<sup>11</sup> Among the English-language newspaper markets, duopolies or monopolies have developed following decades of fragmented, incoherent, and largely ineffective media laws relating to concentration of ownership. News media in both India and Pakistan today function on broken business models based on advertising revenue, in which the debt-ridden industry is in constant need of bailouts. As a direct result, an "invasion of powerful conglomerates" has led to the mushrooming of the news media industry, with media mergers and franchises creating disruption and complacency.<sup>12</sup>

In India, a small number of companies and conglomerates dominate the country's media landscape. Thus, since their liberalization in 1997, news media have served less as a watchdog against government excess and more as a profit-driven industry. Economic liberalization accelerated the direct corporatization of television media in the 1990s. Through foreign direct investment alone, \$6.1 billion (INR 406 billion) was pumped into the Indian media industry by March 2018.<sup>13</sup> Today, some of India's biggest newspapers are owned by industrial barons with multiple interests—the Birlas with the *Hindustan Times*, the Jains with the *Times of India*, and the Goenkas with the *Indian Express* to name a few.<sup>14</sup> The upward trend of real-estate moguls and large corporate houses investing in news media platforms has stifled any semblance of media pluralism. These businesses require a great deal of political patronage, including Reliance Industry's Independent Media Trust (IMT). This influence combined with money brings access to millions of television sets with news stories creeping into dinner-table conversations, shaping an intentional political and social narrative.

The rapid reconfiguration of Pakistan's media space is directly tied to the country's domestic politics, its foreign policy, and the military establishment's political future. Today, Pakistan's news media are mostly bankrolled by the private sector, due to a lack of state subsidies to support loss-making outlets. Print and broadcast media specifically have been forced to associate with various political and business elites in order to function. The media platforms that have managed to continue publishing and broadcasting face crippling economic conditions: shrinking revenues, unprofitable digital presence, and outstanding fines slapped on news outlets critical of the Pakistani government or military.<sup>15</sup> As a consequence, this increasingly privatized industry has developed a certain coziness with corporate and political bigwigs.

This concentration of ownership has led to devastating ramifications for democracy, diversity of content, and the

10 Ronald Deibert et al., *Access Controlled: the Shaping of Power, Rights, and Rule in Cyberspace* (Boston: MIT Press, 2010), 418.

11 Narasimhan Ram, "The Changing Role of the News Media in Contemporary India," *India History Congress*, 2011, 6, [https://www.thehindu.com/multimedia/archive/00863/Contemporary\\_India\\_\\_863821a.pdf](https://www.thehindu.com/multimedia/archive/00863/Contemporary_India__863821a.pdf).

12 Ali, Gul, and Obaid, "Liberalization of Media in Pakistan: A Challenge to Democracy."

13 Dr. Ahsanul Haq Chisti, "Big, Ever Bigger Business," *Media Ownership Monitor India*, <http://india.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/corporateownership/>.

14 Douglas Bullis, *Selling to India's Consumer Market* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997), 42–43.

15 Anonymous interview.

stifling of the free flow of ideas. With misinformation and disinformation on the rise, speculation and conjecture are what drive today's headlines in both India and Pakistan to meet the specific national discourse.

## SHRINKING SPACE FOR MEDIA

The impact of the privatization developments on mass media in both India and Pakistan has, ironically, led to media ecosystems characterized by rampant self-censorship, and an ineffectual voice for protesting government repression. The governments of both countries have muzzled the press by detaining journalists, strangulating news outlets, and overseeing the privatization of news media to pro-government conglomerates. Today, populist leadership in both countries and their political regimes have manipulated the economic realities of the news media business, creating alternate media realities using disinformation and misinformation campaigns. This pervasive distrust and deepening fragmentation of India and Pakistan's media sectors has been exacerbated by social media and other online outlets, creating growing and novel political vulnerabilities.

India's media landscape today mimics the state-controlled media culture of the 1975 State of Emergency; a period marked by massive media censorship and suspended civil liberties. The current government's clampdown on journalists, opposition leaders, and activists resembles the authoritarian tendencies of the Indira Gandhi emergency government, with the media as a first casualty in the government's quest for unchallenged control. However, the press has also struggled historically to fulfill its role as a watchdog on government, dating as far back as India's pre-independence period. Even then, the press was divided along "nationalist" and "loyalist" lines, and this pathology has bled into today's differentiated news coverage toward political parties at the national and regional levels.<sup>16</sup>

India is slipping back to an older tradition of state-controlled radio and television introduced in 1975 by then-Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Gandhi's state of emergency from 1975 to 1977 was a period marked by massive media censorship, followed by decades of a controlled media culture led by stricter constitutional amendments protecting freedom of the press.<sup>17</sup> Then, the government expelled foreign correspondents and withdrew accreditations of fifty-four Indian journalists, including six photographers and two cartoonists—all critical of government policies.<sup>18</sup> Today, India is a leader in heightened regulation of intermediaries and digital media portals. Under the guise of cracking down on "fake news," New Delhi has consolidated its power and increased surveillance and access to citizens' data, with 2019 setting a record for the most frequent and prolonged Internet shutdowns in the world.<sup>19</sup> This systematic encroachment on digital rights has damaged hopes for a free and open media landscape in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's second term. Journalists risk harassment, death threats, and physical violence in their work—part of a broader government effort to stifle dissemination of information.

In 2016, Pakistan was ranked by international media monitors as the fourth-most-dangerous country in the world for journalists, with a total of one hundred and fifteen killings since 1990.<sup>20</sup> Media workers have been kidnapped, tortured, and beaten to death for delving into the nation's potent military apparatus and spy agencies.<sup>21</sup> While India's first televised war in 1999 liberalized Pakistan's media at the start of the twenty-first century, it was the integrity of the traditional media that led to an unrelenting clampdown by the military and civilian establishments. Musharraf's 2007 presidential decree gave the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulation Authority (PEMRA) unfettered power to halt broadcast transmissions, close offices, seize media equipment, revoke licenses, and increase fines for violations. This heavy-handed attempt to silence anti-government protests and curtail freedom of expression in Pakistan ultimately led to Musharraf's resignation in 2008.

16 Ram, "The Changing Role of the News Media in Contemporary India."

17 "India Media: Papers Remember 1975 Emergency," BBC News, June 25, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-33269607>.

18 Prabash K. Dutta, "When Media was Muzzled: History Retold," India Today, August 3, 2018, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/when-media-was-muzzled-history-retold-1304069-2018-08-03>.

19 "States of Control: COVID, Cuts, and Impunity," International Federation of Journalists, 2020, 6, [https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/States\\_of\\_Control\\_IFJ\\_SAPFR\\_2019-20\\_01.pdf](https://www.ifj.org/fileadmin/user_upload/States_of_Control_IFJ_SAPFR_2019-20_01.pdf).

20 AFP, "115 Killings Make Pakistan Fourth Deadliest Country for Journalists," Dawn News, February 4, 2016, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1237386>.

21 Sherry Ricchiardi, "Challenges for Independent News Media in Pakistan," Center for International Media Assistance, July 30, 2012, 4, [https://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Challenges-for-Independent-News-Media-in-Pakistan\\_Ricchiardi-updated.pdf](https://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Challenges-for-Independent-News-Media-in-Pakistan_Ricchiardi-updated.pdf).

In many ways, the Musharraf era enjoyed a brief period of relative press freedom, which was chipped away, bit by bit. The ramifications of the era of liberalization are felt today in Pakistan. Journalists continue to struggle with pressures—both internal and external—to use their power in support of someone else’s agenda, whether that of the judiciary, the opposition, or the state.<sup>22</sup> One interviewee put it as follows.

The military dictates Pakistan’s talking points. The government oscillates between celebrating the news media to vilifying it. The military and PTI [Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf] government in most recent years have widened the lines of what is acceptable. During the Balakot air strike in February 2019, coverage of Indian-administered Kashmir was lauded as excellent news media coverage illustrating the grave injustices and human rights violations in the territory done by Indian military forces. A few months after, the news media was accused of pushing a “foreign agenda” in its coverage of the Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM). Later that year, with the inauguration of the Kartarpur Corridor, news media was temporarily back on the military’s good side. It’s all a part of a media strategy—we’re pro-India one day and patriots the next.<sup>23</sup>

To complicate matters further, social media and internet outlets have offered an alternative platform to harmonize pro-government voices otherwise dominated television and print media. The central government, marching in lockstep with the military regime, has become more brazen in its censorship efforts, given there is no law effectively governing the security and safety of journalists in Pakistan.<sup>24</sup> Social media has instead become an arm of propaganda using “troll armies” to stifle ethical journalism. This practice has, in turn, led to more hostility between India and Pakistan in recent years.<sup>25</sup> In India, the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has captured social media through the industry’s flawed and vulnerable advertising models on platforms like Facebook and

Twitter, while its messengers promote disinformation against minorities on instant-messaging applications like WhatsApp. More and more, India and Pakistan have moved toward a culture heavily reliant on personal networks for information. Similar to the monopolization of broadcast and print media ownership, the concentration of disinformation campaigns can be traced back to pro-military and government voices.<sup>26</sup>

Over time, both Indian and Pakistani media have wielded more influence over the status of national and local politics and public discourse than ever before. Mainstream news media have oscillated between narratives of nationalism and “strong man” brinkmanship. The most notable recent example was the nature of the media coverage following the 2019 Pulwama attack in Indian-administered Kashmir. Driven by ratings and political agendas, the Pulwama headlines were emblematic of a broader trend—how Indian and Pakistani news media appropriated headlines to meet specific national narratives, pushing majoritarian discourse. In the years leading up to February 2019, editors of channels and publications in both India and Pakistan were sacked and replaced, primarily because of their criticism of the ruling parties—the BJP in India and PTI in Pakistan.<sup>27</sup> As such, few media houses in either India or Pakistan have survived the test of suppression and stood up against the influence of political leaders and their cronies. The very institute of ethical journalism is at risk.

## IMPLICATIONS

With the introduction of advanced communication technologies, new regulatory challenges have emerged. Similar to those of the 1990s, they require decision-making and regulatory policies that can best serve the interests of a pluralistic, functioning free press. Field interviews in both India and Pakistan made clear that journalists overwhelmingly share no interest in serving as diplomats for their country. One journalist from a prominent Pakistani news outlet put it as follows.

22 Shahan Mufti, “Musharraf’s Monster,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, November/December 2007, [https://archives.cjr.org/feature/musharrafs\\_monster.php](https://archives.cjr.org/feature/musharrafs_monster.php).

23 Anonymous interview.

24 “States of Control: COVID, Cuts, and Impunity,” 60.

25 “National Narratives: The Role of Digital Media,” Atlantic Council London workshop session two.

26 Ibid.

27 Annie Gowen, “In Modi’s India, Journalists Face Bullying, Criminal Cases, and Worse,” *Washington Post*, February 15, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/in-modis-india-journalists-face-bullying-criminal-cases-and-worse/2018/02/13/e8176b72-8695-42ab-abd5-d26aab830d3e\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/in-modis-india-journalists-face-bullying-criminal-cases-and-worse/2018/02/13/e8176b72-8695-42ab-abd5-d26aab830d3e_story.html); Ayaz Gul, “Pakistan Moves to Restrict Social Media,” *Voice of America*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/press-freedom/pakistan-moves-restrict-social-media>.

The role of journalism in India and Pakistan is to take a catalytic approach and, for this reason, journalism and media do not fare well together. However, increasingly in both countries, diplomacy is being prioritized over authentic journalism. We do not cover things as they are; we cover them with the news channel angle we have been provided. Lines are being fed to journalists. The government—through predatory advertisement models—is stifling reality to fit a favored context.<sup>28</sup>

The implications are clear: the clamping down on news media freedoms has dire effects on local society, politics, and development. More and more people being able to produce their own media, and the explosion of access to information that social media has provided, led to a fractured news media landscape. Press in India and Pakistan today has been co-opted by political, corporate, and commercial media, appropriating headlines to shape political and social debates. Press freedom is not only under attack from governments, but also from a set of societal actors gradually chipping away at independent journalism.

## DOMESTIC POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The systematic censorship of news media has polarized the industry and created anti-media sentiment throughout the region. Pakistan's inherited blasphemy laws have subjected journalists to high levels of violence when dissenting against state policies. Similarly, India's defamation laws have been used to limit free speech among the news media. This growing pattern of criminal laws used to intimidate journalists has put the security and defense of the country above constitutionally established press-freedom rights. These laws are relics of the colonial era, and completely contradict the idea of a free and impartial media, the bulwark of a democracy. The implications are dire for the future of democracy in the region's two nuclear powers.

For Pakistan, a country punctuated by military coups and political turbulence, free and independent news media are vital for informing citizens and monitoring government actions at all levels. It was, after all, the neoliberal policies of Musharraf in the early 2000s that opened Pakistan's market and industry to the West. In their ongoing offensive to intimidate and harass critical voices in the news media, the military and civilian government continue on a downward spiral, testing their already-fraught relations with Western democracies such as

the United States. With an eye toward its northern partner and an affinity toward its long-standing donor nation, Pakistan seems to be straying away from the modern democratic order and moving more toward the authoritarian and draconian policies of China and Saudi Arabia when it comes to controlling media outlets and journalists.

India's creep toward authoritarianism poses a real challenge for both Indian society and Western interests. Notwithstanding some tremendous gains it has made at the turn of the twenty-first century, India continues to backpedal on policies that have historically strengthened its democratic institutions, including a free and independent press. The overwhelming BJP victory in 2014 created an opening for the party to drastically alter democratic foundations, as it benefitted from the fragmentation of Indian politics and a weakening opposition. It responded by dominating the news media and demanding a pro-government narrative.<sup>29</sup>

Both India and Pakistan's broad and deep linkages to Western democracies, including the United States, have serious implications for local journalists and their civil liberties. The United States and European Union's continued financial interests in the region may refocus both the BJP and PTI governments' energies at preserving basic neoliberal freedoms like a free and independent press.

## A PATH FORWARD

The current trends are worrisome, but not without a path forward. The news media landscape of both India and Pakistan reveals windows of opportunity for cross-border exchange and increased dialogue. These exchanges can, in turn, lead to great collaboration between media networks and journalists on either side of the border to build a regional narrative around climate change, COVID-19 and the decaying health infrastructures, and poverty reduction on a localized level. Investments of this nature would not only bring integrity and plurality back to the news media industry, but also strengthen regional democratic institutions—all badly needed in a region that relies on continued good relations with democracies of the world.

- Journalists in both India and Pakistan emphasize the importance of reporting from across the border. In the past, journalists have been stationed across the border

28 Anonymous interview.

29 "National Narratives: The Role of Digital Media."



to cover foreign policy beats. With heightened tensions in 2008 and the years that followed, journalist visas were suspended due to espionage threats and allegations of serving a “foreign agenda.” Both India and Pakistan should rethink future cross-border exchanges between journalists, to continue building bridges for a more sustainable model, which can remain when tensions escalate and deescalate.

- Pakistani and Indian journalists should be encouraged to join the community of international correspondents, to begin to rehumanize the other side and add nuance to their reporting—not only reshaping local perceptions of life across the border, but also reinvigorating the presence and status of international reporters in both India and Pakistan.
- In order for real progress to be made, the industry must take a hard look at reinventing the business models of news media, incorporating a strategy for digital news media.
- As part of their corporate social responsibility, social media companies like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp should employ local journalists from both India and Pakistan to train local populations on authentic, fact-based reporting.

## CONCLUSION

At the turn of the twenty-first century, both India and Pakistan made conciliatory inroads toward unprecedented freedoms for their press, introducing greater protections against state interference and institutionalizing media reforms. Emboldened by these reforms, broadcast news media have served as a watchdog on government, but not without their own agendas. Since the liberalization of news media, collusion between the press and government has played a distinct role in shaping and promoting national narratives driven by ratings and meeting the “bottom line.”

Reflecting insights gleaned from two years’ worth of field interviews with journalists covering domestic and foreign policy in both India and Pakistan, this report seeks to support a robust conversation about the media landscapes of both countries and how, over time, news media have contributed to building a national narrative. This report explores the burst of broadcast news media following the geopolitical advancements in the region, contextualizes the hard reality of the media business and its influence on authentic journalism, and outlines the increasing fragmentation of news media

in both India and Pakistan. Dozens of field interviews with journalists, international convenings of local and national leaders, and two significant elections have contributed to one conclusion: cross-border collaboration and exchange are necessary for the survival of a free, pluralistic, and thriving news media in both India and Pakistan.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Fatima Salman** is the associate director of the Atlantic Council’s South Asia Center, where she contributes to the center’s policy research initiatives to implement and execute the center’s work on security, trade, energy, and migration issues. Fatima oversees the center’s Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India portfolios. She is a foreign policy expert with a deep understanding of the region’s multi-stakeholder environment. Fatima holds a master’s of science in foreign service from Georgetown University and a bachelor’s of arts in political science and history from the University of California, Davis.

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