Regulating Online Speech: Legal and Ethical Challenges of Digital Journalism in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT
The development of the digital journalism in Pakistan has had a huge impact in changing the media landscape and enabled the dissemination of information at rapid rates and involving the citizens even further. But this change also leads to a very high number of legal and ethical challenges, such as regulatory confusion, privacy, coercion by misinformation/self-censorship on journalists. The legal provisions that govern Internet speech in Pakistan that will be analyzed in the paper include constitutional protection and cybercrime and the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016. It also examines ethical concerns that are inherent in the digital journalism like How are vulnerable populations protected? How reliable is the journalism and how is privacy maintained? The paper examines the clash that exists between free speech, regulation and ethical responsibility on the basis of contemporary scholarly literature including studies that have been conducted on media portrayals, regulation and legal control and responsibility in terms of ethics. Finally, it proposes a multi-dimensional solution that will integrate certain legal protection, professionalism, technological restrictions and citizen involvement to reinforce responsible digital journalism and preserve democratic freedoms.

Keywords: Digital Journalism; Online Speech; Freedom of Expression; Cyber Laws; Media Ethics; Privacy; Pakistan

Introduction
The development of journalism in Pakistan represents an overall pattern of the world where traditional print and broadcast media is replaced by digital and online media. In the past, Pakistani journalism was distinguished by the print newspapers and radio broadcasting which was supplemented by the spread of television channels in the 1990s and 2000s. These conventional media were controlled mainly through press laws such as Press and Publication Ordinance that provided a form of control but allowed

comparatively wide freedom of speech. Along with the coming of the internet and digital technologies, the world of journalism in Pakistan has seen a complete revolution, now dominated by online news portals, social media and citizen journalism. Such advances have opened the information space, opened the interest of people and provided voices of the marginalized groups.

The question of digital journalism, however, possesses special law and ethical problems. Another advantage of the online media is that it can be published instantly, spread all over the world and the content stored permanently unlike the print or broadcast media. This is the speed and scale boosting the impacts of misinformation, hate speech or unethical reporting. The process of freedom of expression is given to the citizens by the legal setup of Pakistan particularly through Article 19 of the constitution which guarantees freedom of expression to the citizens. This right, however, is subject to reasonable restrictions, which are aimed at safeguarding the order of the people, the national security, decency and at the personal reputations (Rizwan & Naz, 2025).

PECA 2016 is the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act that is the key tool used to control online speech in Pakistan. It makes criminal such crimes as online harassment, hate speech, cyberstalking and false information distribution. Although PECA is supposed to safeguard people and ensure the preservation of political order, its wide wording and vague phrasing have raised some worries about the possibility of overreach and arbitrary application as well as a chilling effect on journalistic freedom (Khan et al., 2019).

In addition to legal issues, the digital journalist is faced with many ethical issues. They have to strike a balance between the need to educate people and the need to report the facts and not sensationalizing and protecting the weak groups like children and those who are victimized. According to research conducted by Butt, Hashmi and others (2025), social outcomes of unethical reporting are emphasized and the researchers cite some of the cases when sensationalized media reporting increased harms to society, especially in such sensitive areas as child abuse and gender-based violence (Butt et al., 2025a). Equally, papers on privacy in the era of surveillance show that surveillance of the state and maritime corporations may cause impairment of independence among journalists and jeopardize the privacy of sources(Butt et al., 2024a).

Socio-political factors make it more difficult to control internet speech in Pakistan. The threat of censorship, harassment and political pressure have led journalists to practise self-censorship and limit the public discussion, on the one hand. Moreover, the technological aspects, including algorithmic amplification of the content and the transnational character of the Internet platforms, complicate enforcement and it is difficult to balance the local rules with the cross-border character of the online media.

The paper will consider these legal, ethical and social issues as interrelated by answering three main research questions:

What is the role of the current legislation in speech regulation on the Internet in Pakistan and what are the challenges to the enforcement of the legislation and PECA 2016, in particular?

Which are the major ethical issues that digital journalists contend with and what is their impact on the reporting?

What can be done to ensure a balanced measure between regulation and freedom and involve legal protective measures, ethical standards and institutional apparatus?

Through these questions, the research seeks to have a full picture of regulatory and ethical environment of Pakistan based digital journalism. It relies on the recent books, articles on the topic of media representation, privacy rights and digital ethics and features

the illustrative examples that will reflect the implications of regulation of online speech in their practical aspects. Finally, the paper aims at proposing a multidimensional approach to responsible digital journalism that is both legally understandable, ethically accountable, technologically protective and participates in order to create a safe, informative and participatory online media environment.

Conceptual and Legal Framework
Online speech regulation in Pakistan is driven at the surface of constitutional guarantees, statutory provisions and ethical norms as a complex and developing conceptual framework. The principle of constitutional freedom of speech in the Constitution of Pakistan in Article 19 ensures that the citizens have freedom of expression with reasonable limitations in the name of national security, societal order, decency and reputation protection (Ahmed, 2021). This clause of the constitution indicates a larger conflict within the area of governance of the digital media: the struggle between individual liberties and security of the society in a fast-changing technological world.

The Legal Framework
The greatest statutory tool that regulates the speech of online services in Pakistan is the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016. PECA penalizes crimes such as cyberstalking, online harassment, hate speech and distribution of false or offensive information (Abbasi et al., 2021). Although PECA was intended to solve the increase of digital crime and unhealthy online behavior, its vague and general wording, especially the ones such as offensive information or harmful material, have been widely criticized as creating an air of uncertainty in the eyes of journalists and content creators (Syed et al., 2023). he variety of discretionary powers given to the enforcement agencies by PECA will add to the risk of arbitrary application, possibly leading to self-censorship and discouraging investigative journalism.

PECA is not the only legal instrument that is used to regulate speech online. A stratified regulation is composed of the Pakistan Telecommunication (Re-organization) Act 1996 and Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) regulations of laws on defamation and incitement. Even though these laws are largely designed with reference to traditional media or telecommunications, their terms are being applied to digital platforms and this is normally causing wide spreading jurisdictional issues and legal uncertainty (Mezzera & Sial, 2010a).

Ethical Frameworks in Digital Journalism
Responsible online journalism cannot be guaranteed by any legal regulation. Ethical responsibility is a key issue in media practices. Digital journalists are forced to deal with the demands of immediacy, misinformation and increased visibility of information on the internet. Ethical guidelines focus on precision, justice, openness and admiration of privacy (Iqbal & Khan, 2022). As an illustration, the work on vulnerable populations, e.g. children or harassment victims, should be reported according to the specific rules of ethics to avoid secondary victimization and harm to society. A study by Butt, Hashmi and others (2025) provides an example of how irresponsible coverage of unethical problems, including the issue of child abuse, may increase social harms, which proves the ethical implications of digital journalism (Butt et al., 2025b).

Guidelines on responsible journalism are put up by professional codes of conduct that are set by the Pakistan Press Foundation and Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors. These codes also focus on source verification, sensationalism, protecting minors and

transparency in reporting. But there is very little enforcement and compliance is based on the organizational culture and the integrity of the individual journalists. Without any binding ethical standards, the digital news landscape is prone to sensationalism and fake news (Butt et al., 2024b).

Privacy, Surveillance and Digital Rights
The regulation of online speech especially in relation to the investigative journalism and whistleblowing is focused on privacy issues. Right to Privacy in Pakistan have developed over the decades as a result of jurisprudence and scholarly deliberations, which focuses on ensuring that personal information and communications are not accessed by unauthorized parties State and private digital spying on a mass scale is dangerous to the journalists who could be prosecuted legally or extralegally because of source protection or sensitive information disclosure. The protection of strong privacy is not only a matter of rights of the individual, but also an issue of the morality and proper operation of the press.

The international norms provide the foundational principles of the digital rights, which are largely based on propositions by the UN Human Rights Council to freedom of speech in the digital age but these propositions include proportionality, necessity and accountability in the restraint of online speech. The application of these principles to the regulatory framework in Pakistan can assist in reducing the excessive governmental or institutional control of the digital content, so that legal interventions are directed, justified and transparent.

Conceptual Tensions in Online Speech Regulation
Conceptually, controlling the speech online in Pakistan requires a compromise between a number of competing goals:

Protection of public order and social harmony: The state aims at preventing harmful, hateful or destabilizing content in the internet.

Safeguarding individual rights and reputations: Journalists and citizens should be safeguarded against harassment, defamation and invasion of their privacy.

Promotion of journalistic freedom and ethical responsibility: Freedom of expression and ethical principles facilitate an active and knowledgeable civil life.
According to scholars, these goals need to be achieved concurrently and not independently. The former can be too legalistic and the latter too ethical self-regulating, since the lack of possession of the law can lead to the loss of freedom of expression and vice-versa, the lack of ethical restraints can give rise to the harmful behavior.

Towards a Robust Regulatory Framework
The all-round manner of combating the online speech in Pakistan should also include legal accuracy, moral responsibility, technological safeguards and social involvement of community:

Legal precision: The laws need to articulate laws as to what is not allowed, procedural protections and restrain discretionary authority.

Ethical responsibility: Media houses ought to enforce codes of ethics, training and editorial supervision in an effort to maintain journalism.

Technological safeguards: Human supervision should be supplemented with automated moderation, content filtering algorithms as well as reporting mechanisms to control the harmful content.

Public engagement: Media literacy campaigns enable citizens to think critically about information and curb the dissemination of false information and increase the resiliency of society.

This puts regulation in terms of these multidimensional issues, thus enabling policymakers, reporters and participants in the civil society to create together a digital media ecosystem that respects the freedom of expression, not mentioning protection to the society.

Challenges in Regulating Online Speech

Regulation of online speech in Pakistan is challenged with different legal, ethical, technological and socio-political problems. Since online platforms represent the field of civic participation, transparency and pluralistic discourse, they also create platforms of fake news, cyberbullying and other evil contents. The dilemma faced by the policymakers, media houses and civil societies is what should be done to prevent these abuses without infringing the right to expression.

Legal Ambiguities and Overreach

The absence of a clear definition of PECA 2016 is one of the biggest issues. Articles that prohibit the sharing of information that is offensive or the distribution of content that is likely to defame or cause harm are not defined with specifics and thus, there is a lot of room to interpret (Saleem et al., 2025). Both have practical implications: the vagueness provides a chance to encourage self-censorship in news reporters and online content creators to avoid likely legal penalties even when it comes to coverage of a topic of social interest (Wajahat et al., 2025).

To make the situation even more challenging, PECA enforcement is confused with the measures of the Pakistan Penal Code and the Pakistan Telecommunication (Re-organization) Act 1996, which results in a disjointed regulatory landscape (Zahid et al., 2024). The outcome of such overlapping jurisdictions can be the inconsistency in enforcement, the delay in the violation treatment and the uncertainty of digital media professionals. Furthermore, the absence of transparency in the procedure of appealing or the system of control is an aggravating factor affecting the chilling effect on the freedom of expression (Mezzera & Sial, 2010b).

Ethical Challenges in Digital Journalism

Digital journalists are facing new ethical challenges that are informed by the nature of immediacy, virality and metrics of audience engagement. The velocity of digital reporting usually focuses on time more than on precision, which exposes the chances of misinformation or unproven assertions (Butt et al., 2024c). As other researchers note, sensationalism in sensitive matters, including children abuse or gender violence, may increase social damages, undermining media makers and the trust that people place in them (Butt et al., 2025c).

Besides, a moral dilemma is posed in the interplay of the general good and potential

damage. To use only the example of reporting harassment cases, their privacy of the victims must be considered carefully, whereas in the case of political reporting, a journalist may find themselves in the conflict between being transparent and keeping safe. Ethical rules, despite being accessible via professional entities, are quite voluntary, which is why it is difficult to implement them steadily (Yousaf et al., 2024).

Technological and Operational Constraints

The very nature of digital platforms creates technological complexities, which make it impossible to effectively regulate it. The material posted on social media platforms is spread worldwide and it usually rests outside the jurisdiction of local legislation and makes implementation difficult (Kasakowskij et al., 2020). Adaptable content moderation devices, such as algorithms and artificial intelligence, are increasingly carried out to isolate damaging speech, but they usually are missing the delicacy to differentiate between abusive data and valid critique, satire or political commentary. Wrongful takedowns may occur due to misclassifications and will lower the confidence in the system.

Journalists are also affected by the limitations in their operations. Poor resources, rapid reporting and absence of technical training complicate the process of risking legal and ethical standards. Furthermore, the false or malicious information that is accidentally disseminated by the algorithmic amplification process could create the risk of reputational and social harm before it becomes fixed (Saurwein & Spencer-Smith, 2021).

Socio-Political Pressures

Pakistani journalists are often reported to be politically interfered with, harassed and censored, which sets a stressful atmosphere that prevents them from doing independent coverage(Jamil, 2018). Fear of legal consequences, state and non-state attacks and the fear of being crushed by other states are the main contributors to self-censorship, especially in some sensitive topics like political criticism, minority rights or corruption reporting. Such socio-political policies undermine editorial autonomy and restrict the multiplicity of opinions that people have access to.

The political factors that sometimes influence regulatory authorities charged with the responsibility of enforcing PECA and other laws to do with it would cause concern regarding selective enforcement and misuse of powers. These difficulties highlight the necessity of clear, responsible and objective control measures that would be able to reconcile the safety of the general order and the rights of the press (RAI & KUMAR, n.d.).

3.5 Privacy and Surveillance Concerns

The issue of privacy is the main point of regulation of online speech, particularly, the investigation journalism and source protection. The lack of privacy, mass surveillance and data collection by both the state and non-state organizations threaten journalists and the rest of the population. The freedom of expression can be indirectly curtailed through such surveillance, as it will intimidate whistleblowers and investigative reporters. Poor security of online communications and personal information can also be used to perpetrate harassment, defamation or targeted attacks, which adds to the regulatory situation.

Ethical and legal aspects of privacy overlap with more general discussion of digital rights. It has been stated by scholars that online speech should be regulated proportionately, necessitating and being accountable. Regulatory frameworks that do not include these principles are likely to undermine the level of trust in people, suppress

legitimate discourse and deteriorate the democratic system of governance (Aroyehun, 2024).

Misinformation and Public Literacy Challenges

One of the operational issues is the misinformation carried by way of social media and online news portals. False news, rumors and fake news may easily shape the opinion of the people, fuel social conflicts and even cause violence. Research indicates that the media literacy of the masses is low, which heightens these dangers so that viewers are unable to determine credible and misleading information (Obasi, 2025). Digital journalists should therefore thoroughly strike between quick coverage and fact-checking, contextualization and educating the audience.

Misinformation is not a problem that needs to be solved by the law only, but rather it is crucial to focus on media literacy and mass awareness campaigns, cross-platform networking of journalists, tech standpoints and civil society. In the absence of these multidimensional approaches, regulations can be considered unfinished and responsive instead of proactive.

Case Studies / Illustrative Examples

The analysis of real-life examples of speech control on the Internet in Pakistan can help to understand the intricate relationship between laws, ethical standards and social values. These case studies outline the achievements and difficulties related to the implementation of regulatory policies and preservation of the journalistic freedom and ethics.

Misinformation and Social Media Amplification

The problem of fast transmission of misinformation via social media is here to stay. As an illustration, in the COVID-19 pandemic, many fake ideas regarding vaccines, therapy and national policies were shared on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp (Ali & Iqbal, 2024). This misinformation prompted mass panic among the general population, vaccine hesitancy and unrest among the population in some regions. Those who covered health problems had two possible tasks to perform: to refute the inaccurate reports and not to enhance the unconfirmed ones.

As according to research by Butt, Hashmi and other authors (2025), misinformation may have a practical social impact, such as the stigmatization of a particular community and the loss of trust in both the media and institutions as a whole (Butt et al., 2025d). Such regulatory systems as PECA 2016 are designed to punish the spread of false information, although the dilemma is how to strike a balance between the implementation and freedom of speech. Excessive constitutional interpretation of the law may lead to silencing of legitimate social discussion of health and policy issues.

Ethical Dilemmas in Reporting Sensitive Social Issues

Sensitive topics like child abuse or gender-based violence are frequently covered with ethical conflicts raised. Secondary victimization can be caused by graphic reporting, sensational headlines or giving names to victims (Ruhl Ibarra et al., 2024). In a case in point, news portals which reported on instances of child abuse in Punjab and Sindh were condemned across the board due to the fact that they posted pictures and details of the abuses that did not meet the ethical standards, leading to a backlash and atrocity on the families of the victims.

Professional bodies have published ethical codes in which they suggest that the victim be anonymized, that sensationalism should be avoided and that the story should be put into

context to avoid harming. The compliance is however not that high especially in smaller online outlets that put priority on traffic rather than responsible reporting. These instances show that laws are not enough to solve the ills that the society faces; moral self-control and professional responsibility are also instrumental.

Privacy and Digital Surveillance Concerns

Intrusion into privacy of individuals through state surveillance and hacking into digital communications has also posed a hindrance to investigative journalism. In 2022, journalists who covered government procurement and corruption cases also said that they were trying to monitor their emails and social media accounts, which weakened their capacity to protect their sources (AlAshry, 2024). These examples show why protection of privacy, both in laws and in technology, is very crucial in ensuring that journalists are able to carry out investigative tasks without the fear of intimidation.

The author highlights that the privacy of journalists in the digital context is not just the issue of personal rights, but the key to keeping the democratic media system running, in which whistleblowers and informants will be free to share their information (Iqbal, 2024). In the absence of sound privacy laws, reporters will censor themselves or evade covering issues of interest to the audience.

Self-Censorship and Editorial Constraints

Self-censorship in press is usually caused by ambiguous statutory laws and the possibility of being punished. As an illustration, in the case of political crises and demonstrations in 20212023, the journalists who reported on the opposition movements in the largest cities do not publish critical analysis because of the threat of prosecution on the basis of PECA 2016 (KHAN, 2024). This self-censorship compromises the accountability of the people and restricts the variety of dialogue within the reach of the citizenry, which brings out the tension between regulation and the freedom of expression. The concept of self-censorship is also a manifestation of wider socio-political pressures, such as being harassed by political forces or the online trolling campaigns. In coping with these pressures, journalists have to manage professional duty versus personal and organizational peril and the conflict between legal, ethical and political aspects of practice.

Media Literacy and Public Engagement

There is a lack of media literacy in the general population, also contributing to difficulties in regulating speech on the Internet. The failure to understand content, the sensational and viral news and the failure to distinguish between credible sources and misinformation leads to a cycle of spreading misinformation. In Pakistan, research has shown that users tend to post unverified information on WhatsApp and Facebook and do not cross-verify the information, which increases the societal effect of unverified content (Imran & Maqsood, 2025).

It is thus the responsibility of journalists to be responsible in reporting activities and educating the publics on media literacy. Workshops, campaigns of public awareness, collaboration between media organizations and civil society could help empower the audience to be able to critically assess content. The combination of a strategy of public engagement with legal protection and ethics reporting is a comprehensive approach to reducing online harms.

These are descriptive examples that emphasize the two-dimensional issues of controlling online speech in Pakistan. Misinformation, ethical issues, breach of privacy, self-

censorship and low levels of media literacy of the population are all examples that show that even such legal measures as PECA 2016, though essential, are not enough alone. The only way to achieve proper regulation is to incorporate law, ethics, technology and community participation in a way that digital journalism becomes useful to the society and at the same time preserving the democratic rights and the welfare of the society.

Balancing Regulation and Freedom
The process of regulating and being free in digital journalism is a complicating and urgent dilemma in Pakistan. Proper online speech regulation should not ignore the need to balance the rights of the society to tranquility, individual rights and the interests of the society with the need to respect the freedom of speech, ethical responsibility and democratic transparency. This necessitates a multidimensional approach in which legal protection, codes of ethics, technological applications, privacy rights and engagement of the people are integrated.

Legal Safeguards and Clarity
One of the key moves in establishing the balance is the improvement of the current laws to make them more ambiguous and less prone to abuse. Although essential in combating cybercrime, The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 suffers the vagueness of definition namely with regards to what constitutes as offensive or false information (Niazi et al., 2025). Necessary is precise and unambiguous legal language to assist in establishing the boundary between material that is actually harmful and what is lawful expression and reduce the needless imposition and self-censorship.

Possible solutions to improve accountability and fairness could be procedural protections, including timeframe to be adhered to when carrying out investigations, independent system and explicit appeal mechanisms (Akhtar et al., 2024). These mechanisms ensure that the enforcement mechanisms are not too restrictive of the legitimate journalistic operation and the citizens have confidence in the regulatory mechanism. In addition to this, PECA ought to be coordinated with other stipulations in the Pakistan Penal Code and Telecommunication Act, which can reduce the disintegration of the regulation to ensure that journalists do not work under the fragmented legal system (Salman, 2023).

Ethical Accountability and Professional Codes
Legal action should follow, but not only that to ensure the responsible online journalism. Self-regulation is an ethical pillar, which is core in developing the balance between freedom and protection of the society. Codes of conduct of the professionals such as the ones proposed by the Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors (CPNE) and the Pakistan Press Foundation are aimed at verification, avoidance of sensationalism and safety of vulnerable groups (Sarwar et al., 2023).

The media outlets are required to institutionalize the ethical training programs, editorial controls committees and accountability mechanisms to strengthen the compliance with such standards. As an illustration, editorial guidelines requiring that the victims of sensitive stories be anonymized, fact-checking guidelines and internal review of the content accuracy can help harm without necessarily resorting to external means, such as the legal right hand. Ethical responsibility enables journalists to make sound judgments that are in not only legal limits but also in the interest of the society.

Technological Tools and Content Moderation

Technological solutions are added to ethical and legal solutions. Dangerous material, hate speech, harassment or misinformation are easy to detect through automated content moderation, artificial intelligence (AI) or algorithmic content filtering. The above are however mechanisms that must be well tuned in order to avoid over censorship and unwarranted blocking of legitimate speech.

Human beings are significant to control. The editorial boards, fact-checking teams and independent review committees can review flagged content and make sure that context, nuance and intent of the message are all taken into consideration. The combination of human judgment and technology is a reasonable way of enforcing the online standards of speech without compromising the freedom of journalism.

Privacy Protections

Privacy forms a part of regulation and freedom. Strong protection of the online communications of journalists, the confidentiality of sources and personal information of citizens would contribute to the preservation of the public confidence and encourage the investigative journalism. The digital rights frameworks are based on international standards, including the resolutions of the UN Human Rights Council concerning digital freedom of expression and propose that privacy rights should be proportionate, necessary and overseen independently (Poland, 2024).

Journalists and whistleblowers can be protected by encrypting their data, anonymizing it and using a secure communication channel that will prevent surveillance and harassment. The privacy-protective regulation is such that regulation against harmful language on the internet does not unwillingly suppress investigative journalism or civic participation.

5.5 Public Engagement and Media Literacy

Media literacy and involvement of the public are considered as key factors to reaching a sustainable equilibrium. Lack of knowledge on the examination of digital content only contributes to the misinformation further and places strains on both regulators and journalists themselves (Sharma & Rout, 2024). Citizen education programs on how to critically judge the sources, fact-check sources and to act responsibly online can enable the population to take an active role in digital governance.

Media literacy can be achieved through the collaboration of media bodies, civil societies and educational institutions in developing workshops, awareness and internet materials. Such initiatives will restrict the application of punitive legal intervention by itself, thus making them to participate in the same to ensure that the responsibility falls on the journalist and the citizen to ensure ethical and informed digital discourse is maintained.

Integrated Regulatory-Ethical Framework

The complete integration on various levels is necessary:

Legal Precision: Well defined narrow statutes that have procedural protections, help eliminate abuse and arbitrariness.

Ethical Responsibility: There is an institutionalized professional code that provides guidelines on how journalists should handle sensitive matters.

Technological Moderation: AI and algorithmic tools, supported by human review, are effective at controlling harmful material.

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Privacy Protections: Good data safety and source confidentiality provide a great environment to investigative reporting.

Public Participation: Media literacy and civic engagement bring about informed digital communities.

These sides will create a synergistic ecosystem when applied in tandem where regulation does not imply oppression and freedom of expression is deployed reasonably. This strategy enables the digital journalism to offer its role to the conditions of the transparency, accountability and welfare of the society but not interfere in the rights of the individuals and moral principles (Sultan & Amir, 2023).

The digital media regulation and freedom in Pakistan require a multidimensional and integrated approach in order to balance between the two notions. It must be legally safeguarded, the codes of ethics need to be codified, the applications of technology must be fine-tuned to human control, privacy policies must be robust and the involvement of the people under media literacy initiative must be taken into consideration. With the establishment of cooperation between policymakers, journalists, media companies, civil societies and audience, Pakistan has a chance to reach a balance between disciplined regulation of online speech, freedom of journalism and beneficial and informed and responsible and participatory digital journalism that can be enjoyed by society.

Conclusion
The rapid development of the digital journalism in Pakistan has transformed the media space with unparalleled opportunities of information exchange, engagement and transparency of the people. At the same time, it has come with complex problems in the legal control, ethical commitments, privacy, technology administration and overall literacy. As explained in this paper, the process of enforcing online speech regulations is a complicated one and the existence of a law such as PECA 2016 is important to ensure cybercrimes and harmful content do not occur, yet, ambiguities and expanded discretionary power that may limit the freedom of expression and self-censorship are apparent.

There are also burning ethical dilemmas. Journalists are torn between telling the truth as required, with responsibility and protecting vulnerable groups, keeping up and checking as well as negotiating socio-political pressures. Privacy and surveillance are also issues that create further problems to the environment making the protection of sources, safety of communication and investigative reporting more challenging. The technological realities of the amplification of algorithms and the multi-national transmission of content are accompanied by even more regulatory and operation issues.

The case studies on misinformation, sensitive social issue coverage, self-censorship and lack of media literacy demonstrates the fact that misinformation cannot be easily imposed upon by the law. Instead, it requires a multi-dimensional resolution, which includes legislative safeguarding, ingrained ethical standards, technological moderation and robust privacy guarantee and engagement through media literacy programs.

It is necessary, to reach this balance, the lawmakers, regulatory bodies, media houses, journalists, the civil society and the masses should work together. Through creation of a space in which freedom of expression is upheld but in a responsible manner, Pakistan will be able to create a ecosystem of media that will empower democratic governance, social cohesion as well as improvement in public trust.

To sum up, law, ethics, technology and citizen awareness are synonymous in the finalization of responsible digital journalism in Pakistan. This kind of framework will

make sure that online speech is not repressed or left unregulated but rather one that allows the media to play its role as a participant in informed public discourse, accountability and development of the society.

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