



RESEARCH PAPER

The Role of Digital Media in Promoting Political Transparency and Accountability in Pakistan

¹Jalil Ahmed*, ²Asad Raza Talpur and ³Dr. Siraj Ahmed Soomro

1. Assistant Professor, BSRS Department, Mehran University, Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto Campus, Khairpur, Sindh, Pakistan
2. Lecturer, Department of Mathematics & Related Studies, Sukkur Institute of Business Administration, University, Sukkur, Sindh, , Pakistan
3. Associate Professor, Department of Pakistan Studies, Shah Abdul Latif University, Khairpur, Sindh, Pakistan

*Corresponding Author: Jalilahmed@muethkp.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

This study finds out impact of digital media in the process of transparency and accountability and to access the potential of digital media as a tool for the common citizens having no any access of electronic media or print media in empowerment and political participation in Pakistan. The use of digital media can help highlight this concern by providing a platform for the masses that can ensure their access to information, retain them with one another, and make their elected officials accountable. For the conduct of this research, in-depth interviews have been conducted with social media experts' activists, journalists, and government officials. The focus of the interviews was based on campaigns and movements. This research venture concludes that political transparency and accountability in Pakistan are subject to digital media as it has the potential to play a crucial role in advancing their effectiveness. Hence, this study attempts to address challenges associated with digital media and its potential for the betterment of good governance in Pakistan. The study recommends several recommendations for the maximization of the potential of digital media to enlarge the system of governance in Pakistan.

KEYWORDS Accountability, Digital Media, Pakistan Transparency

Introduction

In the age of modern technology, the role of digital media has become significant in terms of enhancing accountability and political transparency in countries like Pakistan (Muzaffar, Chohdhry, & Afzal, 2019; Hussain, 2014). The citizens are empowered through digital media by holding the representatives responsible for the sharing of information and creating access to fundamental rights in the country. Prior, the citizens had less likely opportunities to acquire information about governmental actions about their lives and rights. In other words, earlier, the information was controlled by governmental agencies including the media, and thus, policies were made in favor of the government and a group of elite families. This resulted in the dearth of power of the common masses to elect or make their leaders accountable for their actions. However, with the advancement in technology and the emergence of digital media, the situation has changed in Pakistan (Riaz, 2010).

This paradigm shift in technology and media has made the common masses able to get information about governmental policies and activities and make them accountable. The spread of digital media in the form of online news, websites, blogs, and research-based reports has made social media an important online platform for the common masses to acquire information about governmental policies (Calderaro, 2018). The communication gap between government and common masses has been reduced

resulting improvement in governmental policies. Further, with the help of digital media, individual interactions and vibrant communication make individuals able to coordinate with elected officials that resultantly fosters accountability and transparency in the country. This has also resulted in the establishment of a civic coordination and actions such as social media campaigns and virtual protests.

The fear of being caught and criticized in corrupt activities is also reducing due to increased space and scope of social media. For instance, in 2017, the selling of bogus degrees involving a government official was revealed on social media by a social media user. The issue was highly highlighted and publicized resulting the resignation of government official. Moreover, the increasing influence of social media has established a populous and an informed platform where populous have become more aware of their obligations and rights. This makes an easy way to seek and spread the information related to the government officials. This shift in society has made political agents and officials more conscious in terms of corruption and maladministration. Today, they avoid to corrupt activities in large as getting away from the mismanagement and corruption has become a difficult task.

Though the increase of social media has been ensuring accountability and openness in political arena yet there are several issues associated with this phenomenon. For instance, not all individuals have access to the modern technology, internet, and social media portals. Further, the division on the social media between neutral dissent and political agents' hindrances the process of effectiveness of social media in countering corruption and ensuring accountability in the country. Moreover, the spread of disinformation and misinformation through social media is another significant challenge in countering corruption and ensuring accountability. This process impacts the public trust on government officials. For instance, in 2018, the tool of misinformation was spread on social media highlighting bogus information about elections in Pakistan. the aim of that campaign was to reduce the voting turnout to make one political party win elections (Muzaffar, Yaseen & Safdar, 2018).

To conclude, despite a host of challenges, social media still is a blessing in disguise for the people of Pakistan as it helps create a more democratic and responsible political systems with potential in fostering accountability and transparency in the country. The social media as a platform provides masses with an easy access to information, engaging them in a coordinating platform, and a virtual space to mitigate corrupt activities and ensure accountability by taking their elected representatives accountable for their actions.

Literature Review

In the recent decade, digital media has been assumed as a significant tool for the promotion of transparency and political accountability in Pakistan. The use of social media provides common masses an easy access to the information they needed for their elected representatives and fosters an effective communication between individuals and government officials resulting empowerment of common masses in the country. Following are the main areas on which the role of social media is being discussed with particular reference to improvement in accountability and transparency in Pakistan:

Impact of Social Media on Political Transparency

The rise of social media due to the advancement in the tools of modern technology has made political and governmental information easily accessible to citizens. The asymmetric system of information has been replaced with a symmetric flow of information to everyone due to the growth in social media outlets in the country. This way, governmental policies are subject to public scrutiny making it hard for officials to

conceal wrongdoing or commit crime-related activities like corruption. For instance, according to the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT)(PILDAT,2022), in 2013, during the event of natural hazards like floods in Pakistan, the government's incompetency and corrupt attitude were reported through social media. Moreover, several social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter (now X) are being used to highlight the response of governments in their efforts for relief and coordination during any hazards like floods. These applications of social media, therefore, play an important role in addressing such social phenomena resulting in the facilitation of common masses in the country (Kane, Alavi, Labianca & Borgatti, 2014).

Accountability of Officials

The rise and advancement of social media also help the modern world to make officials and elected leaders accountable for their actions. Social media tools such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube are the most prominent tools among many used to spread information from top to bottom and from rich to poor specially in arab spring movement.(Arafa & Armstrong, 2016). Among other tasks, the use of social media is also experienced in making leaders and officials of governments accountable for their actions. This has emerged as a global phenomenon. The common masses are highly empowered with the easy flow of information to hold their elected officials responsible for their incompetency and maladministration. In the race of social media, Pakistan is no exception. The emergence of day-to-day effective coordination between individuals in Pakistan has made social media a vibrant platform to check and criticize the affairs and policies of world leaders. For instance, the social campaign of #MeToo in Pakistan has made the masses aware of their duties in society and respect and rights for women. The movement was highlighted on every social media outlet to rid of the occurrence of rapes, women harassment, domestic violence, and other related issues. Besides, some high-profile government officials and politicians were also subject to criticism over their misconduct and corrupt actions. Therefore, social media has enabled the masses in Pakistan to hold their elected representatives responsible for their actions.

Challenges in Promoting Accountability and Political Transparency through Digital Media

Despite the numerous advantages of digital media for political transparency and accountability, there are several drawbacks. One issue is the digital divide. In Pakistan, not all citizens have equal access to digital technology. This means that certain citizens will benefit more than others from digital media's capacity to increase political transparency and accountability. Another issue to contend with is the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation via digital media. This can erode public trust in the government and make holding politicians accountable more difficult. In 2018, for example, a social media effort was conducted to spread misinformation regarding Pakistan's elections. The campaign's goal was to reduce voter turnout and aid a specific candidate.

Theoretical Structure

The following theories serve as the theoretical foundation for this research article on the function of digital media in promoting political openness and accountability in Pakistan:

Theory of the Public Sphere

According to this view, digital media has created a new public sphere in which citizens can freely access information and connect. As a result, citizens are better

educated and involved, which is critical for political transparency and accountability. (Habermas, 1989).

The concept of Social Media Activism

According to this idea, social media has enabled new types of civic engagement and activism. Citizens may now rally and organize political concerns more easily because of social media sites like Twitter and Facebook. This has raised political pressure to be more transparent and accountable (Castells, 2012).

Watchdog Journalism Theory

According to this hypothesis, digital media has empowered journalists to act as government watchdogs. The wrongdoings of politicians and government officials are now easily captured and shared through social media on behalf of findings collected by social media journalists and activists. Therefore, this has culminated in the formation of an accountable and transparent environment in the world. (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm, 1956).

To conclude, the applications of these theoretical approaches provide a foundation to address the scope of social media in disseminating the environment of accountability and political transparency.

Material and Methods

Collection of Data

Interviews with journalists, activists, and government officials to gain insight into how digital media was used during the elections. Focus groups were held with citizens to learn about their impressions of how digital media was used during the elections. Case studies of unique campaigns or movements using digital media to enhance political openness and accountability during elections. Analysis of social media and online news websites for the types of political content shared and consumed during the elections.

Researchers can acquire a thorough understanding of the role of digital media in fostering political openness and accountability in Pakistan by combining primary and secondary data collection approaches.

Primary Data

The main data collection method used in this research study was primary and secondary. The use of primary data collection method, which involved conducting interviews with participants. The interviewees were professional journalists, activists, social media users and professionals. The open-ended questions helped organize the round-table discussions (Rauch, 2015).

Case Studies

Whether using digital media to achieve political openness and accountability, the above information can clearly be seen from case studies of individual campaigns or movements that have used digital media.

Secondary Data

Content Analysis

Analyzing the content of digital media platforms such as social media and online news websites can help identify the types of political content that are being shared and consumed.

Document Analysis

One way to gain a deeper understanding of the government's stance on digital media as it relates to political transparency and accountability is to analyze government documents such as policy papers and reports.

Statistical Analysis

Data from surveys and other sources can be statistically analyzed to evaluate the relationship between digital media use and political engagement, awareness, and accountability.

Results and Discussion

According to the conclusions of this study, digital media has played an important role in fostering political transparency and accountability in Pakistan.

Political Transparency

Citizens now have easier access to information about government actions and policies because of digital media. This has been accomplished through several avenues, including social media, online news websites, and blogs. For example, research conducted by the Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT) discovered that digital media played an important role in exposing corruption and inefficiency during Pakistan's floods, (Gilani, 2019).

Accountability in Politics

Digital media has enabled citizens to question their elected leaders. This has been achieved through the creation of a platform for voters that could enable them debate thereby hold their elected officials accountable for their actions. (Khan, 2022). For instance, #MeTooPakistan utilized social media networks to sensitize the public on sexual harassment and assault within Pakistan, thus demanding actions from politicians and state officers.

Challenges

However, the study discovered several barriers to improving political transparency and accountability in Pakistan using digital media. The first challenge is the division of social media because not all people have access to social media to effectively understand and use it (Bhatti & Khan, 2021). This finding provides evidence that only a small number of people are contributing to the better of society by fostering political accountability and transparency in the country.

Additionally, the other challenge associated with social media is the spread of disinformation and misinformation by social media outlets. This process has damaged the public trust in government officials and politicians and made the process of accountability and transparency more difficult (Khan & Bhatti, 2020). For instance, with the help of social media, misinformation related to general elections in Pakistan was circulated to rig the elections in 2018. (Hameed, 2020). Therefore, this has emerged as a big challenge for the common masses to build trust in government officials and media outlets for the promotion of accountability and transparency in the country.

This research has several repercussions for policymakers and practitioners in Pakistan. The study revolves around the role of digital media in the promotion of transparency and political accountability in Pakistan. The study found that digital media can be utilized as the best tool for the promotion of transparency and political accountability in Pakistan. (Khan, 2021). This way, policymakers, and politicians can be punished for their wrongdoings, and the process will encourage civic activism for the promotion of transparency and accountability in the country.

Further, the findings also found challenges associated with the use of digital media and its repercussions for the promotion of political accountability and transparency. For instance, disinformation and misinformation through digital media fosters mistrust between individuals and government officials (PTA, 2021). Therefore, this has been increasing a gap between government and common masses in developing and implementing policies. Last but not the least, government should encourage proper and legal use of digital media to ensure accountability and transparency in the country.

Conclusion

To conclude, in countries like Pakistan where corruption, malpractices, and misinformation are rampant, the use and advancement of digital media can promote democratic norms such as transparency and accountability. The digital media has the potential to divert the corrupt actions for creating a smooth democratic and political environment in the country that could work for the betterment of society. This can be achieved if citizens are granted easy access to information, internet, and digital world. The process will engage people with each other to contribute to virtual sphere and mitigate the malpractices in political and democratic systems. The promotion of digital tools and literacy can harness better results. The awareness and trainings for people at grassroot levels can also ensure access of the masses to become experts of digital world. This way, a democratic political order can be ensured and corruption, and spread of misinformation can be eradicated from society.

Recommendations

Following recommendations are based on the findings of this paper:

Improvement in Digital Literacy

In Pakistan, still a large number of populations does not have access to internet or digital gadgets and have dearth of technical knowledge and skills that can be used to promote digital world in the country. In the meantime, it has become necessary to educate masses and provide them access to internet and digital gadgets so that virtual sphere in the country can be improved and enhanced. Doing so will help ensure the democratic process, accountability, and transparency in the country.

Promotion of Independent Media

The independence of media is a necessary part of democratic societies which helps ensure the voices of dissent for the good of society. To expose the corrupt political leadership, their wrongdoings, and meek policies, an investigative media is necessary in countries like Pakistan where corruption is rampant and deep rooted in the political and democratic institutions. Further, the journalists should have adequate security and independence to raise the malpractices of the officials because they are routinely threatened and intimidated in Pakistan. Therefore, to ensure an independent media, fundings and security for journalists must be promoted so that accountability and transparency can be enhanced in the country.

Advancement of Technological Tools

The advancement of technological tools and openness of the use of data are fundamental sources that help common masses to seek easy access to information on policymaking, financial expenditures, and financial matters performed by the governmental officials. The advancement of technological tools for digital media will enable users to develop platforms for the check and balance of government's actions. The process can hold politicians and leaders accountable for their misconduct. Therefore, open-source and advancement of digital technological tools can promote political accountability and transparency in Pakistan.

Tackling Distortion and Propaganda

The process of spreading misinformation and propaganda through digital media outlets has been common since the inception of digital media in Pakistan. Certain political parties, politicians, and government officials have been caught using digital media to spread falsehood aiming to divert the voting turnout and secure seats in elections through deception and malpractices. This process, therefore, has been undermining the very spirit of accountability and transparency in the country. In the meantime, special trainings, literacy, and tool be initiated to address the flow of distortion of information and spread of misinformation in the country so that transparency and accountability can be ensured.

References

- Arafa, M., & Armstrong, C. (2016). " Facebook to Mobilize, Twitter to Coordinate Protests, and YouTube to Tell the World": New Media, Cyberactivism, and the Arab Spring. *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective*, 10(1), 6.
- Calderaro, A. (2018). *Social media and politics*, Sage
- Castells, M. (2012). *Networks of outrage and hope: Social movements in the Internet age*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Hameed, S. (2020). *Digital media and political change in Pakistan: The case of the 2018 elections*. Routledge.
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. MIT Press.
- Hussain, Y. (2014). *Social media as a tool for transparency and good governance in the government of Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan*. niversitäts- und Landesbibliothek Bonn
- Khan, A. R. (2021). Digital media and the challenges of democracy in Pakistan. In A. R. Khan & S. Hameed (Eds.), *Digital media and democracy in Pakistan* Routledge.
- Khan, A. R., & Bhatti, A. (2020). The role of social media in the 2018 Pakistani general elections: A content analysis of Twitter. *Journal of Information Technology & Politics*, 17(2), 140-157.
- Kane, G. C., Alavi, M., Labianca, G., & Borgatti, S. P. (2014). What's different about social media networks? A framework and research agenda. *MIS quarterly*, 38(1), 275-304.
- Muzaffar, M., Chohdhry, S., & Afzal, N. (2019). Social Media and Political Awareness in Pakistan: A Case Study of Youth, *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 3 (II), 1-13
- Muzaffar, M., Yaseen, Z., & Safdar, S. (2020). Role of Social Media in Political Campaigns in Pakistan: A Case Study of 2018 Elections. *Journal of Political Studies*, 27(2), 141-151.
- Pakistan Telecommunications Authority (PTA). (2021). *Digital media and Pakistan: A policy perspective*. Islamabad: PTA.
- PILDAT. (2022). *The state of democracy in Pakistan 2022*. Islamabad: PILDAT.
- Riaz, S. (2010). Effects of new media technologies on political communication. *Journal of Political Studies*, 17(2), 161.
- Rauch, J. (2015). Exploring the alternative-mainstream dialectic: What "alternative media" means to a hybrid audience. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 8(1), 124-143.
- Siebert, F. S., Peterson, T., & Schramm, W. (1956). *Four theories of the press: The authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and Soviet communist concepts of what the press should be and do*. University of Illinois Press.