

“PECA, THE PUBLIC SPHERE, AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DIGITAL MEDIA IN PAKISTAN: AN EXPLORATION OF JOURNALISTS’ PERSPECTIVES”

Zarkash Khan^{*1}, Noman Yaser², Ayesha Kiran³

^{*1}MPhil Scholar at Communication & Media Studies, UoS

²Assistant Professor at Communication & Media Studies, UoS

³PhD Scholar at Center for Media & Communication Studies, UoG

¹zarkashkhan7170@gmail.com, ²noman.yaser@uos.edu.pk, ³kiranayesha456@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: *

Zarkash Khan

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ABSTRACT

This study looks at the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) as a means of regulating digital activity in Pakistan. This research draws on an updated Political Economy of Communication framework and the Public Sphere Theory as expanded to networked and affective publics to examine how legal intimidation and ideological framing interact to constrain independent journalism in contemporary communication systems. The research examines how legal threats and ideological framing come together to limit independent journalism. The study employs qualitative methodology, conducting in-depth interviews with six senior journalists and analyzing the data through thematic coding in NVivo 15. The findings show that PECA has created legal uncertainty and intimidation through arbitrary notices and prosecutions. It has institutionalized self-censorship in newsrooms and has led to the misuse of FIRs against journalists. Informants revealed that the politically charged term "fake news" serves as a justification for repression. Multi-agency mechanisms, including PEMRA, PTA, FIA and security agencies, actively coordinate censorship and remove content. Overall, these factors show that PECA, despite its portrayal as a necessary law for oversight and regulation, goes beyond cybercrime. It instills fear, stifles dissent, bolsters prevailing narratives, and diminishes the media's function in a democracy. The study demands immediate reforms to PECA, encompassing procedural safeguards, autonomous oversight, and the safeguarding of journalistic freedoms.

Keywords: PECA, Political Economy, censorship, press freedom, journalism, surveillance, Fake News, Public Sphere.

INTRODUCTION

The enactment of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) in 2016 became a crucial milestone in the policy of the digital governance approach in Pakistan. The response to the rapidly increasing cybercrimes, including financial fraud, impersonation, harassment, and information breaches, led to the adoption of PECA, which makes it a proactive tool against

cybercrimes against personnel working in cyber environments (Ali, 2021). Advocates argued that the Act provided law enforcement agencies with long-awaited legal support to combat the cyber threats, digitalized Pakistan in line with the international digital standards, and created safe online environments, especially for women and vulnerable populations (Shah, 2023). The 2025

amendment, the Revised Prevention of Electronic Crimes (Amendment) Act, is a major reorganization of the framework of cyber-governance in Pakistan, enlarging the frontiers of the original 2016 Act. The amendment also proposes new agencies such as the Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority (SMPRA) and the Social Media Protection Tribunal, which will oversee the activities of online platforms, control the content, and ensure that users adhere to their directives. Other definitions in the law, including, but not limited to, aspersion and unlawful or offensive content, are included, and the state is given more power to block, limit, or censor digital content considered harmful. Though the amendment is presented by the government as a much needed attempt to modernize the country and combat misinformation and improve online safety, researchers and digital rights activists warn that the broad terms of the law can lead to increased government regulation of digital communications at the expense of freedom of expression and editorial independence in the Pakistani media industry (Prevention of Electronic Crimes [Amendment] Act, 2025). PECA was initially envisioned as a protective mechanism meant for enhancing credibility, trust and security with regards to digital sphere. However, PECA implementation has continued to be a controversial issue with regard to its implications. Critics state that it has too wide-ranging provisions, is vaguely defined, and can be used as a political tool, thus turning a cybercrime framework into the tool of state repression (Raza, 2022; Freedom House, 2023). Journalists, activists, and human rights organizations have highlighted the effects of PECA on censorship, surveillance, and arbitrary legal intimidation (Khan, 2019; Shah, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2018; Mirza et al., 2025). The weaponization of the Act against opposition and its impact on the freedom of the press are demonstrated through the high-profile cases of media professionals and thus lead to a kind of digital authoritarianism that scholars have since described (Bajwa, Hussain & Arif, 2022). Simultaneously, PECA has reshaped the digital public space in Pakistan, providing a platform for citizens to discuss, question, and demand political power. Based on the conception of the public sphere as put forward by Habermas

(1989) and the subsequent critical analyses highlighting the power relations, linguistic inclusivity, and conditions under which democratic interaction can take place (Fraser, 1990; Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2010), this paper provides a conflicting conceptualization of PECA as a regulatory system as it defines who can speak, what can be said, and under what circumstances democratic interaction is possible. According to current research, digital publics are becoming more discontinuous and mediated by algorithmic and regulatory logics that define participation and discussion (Klinger and Russmann, 2022; Schafer, 2022; Fenton and Freedman, 2020). In line with this, PECA could be viewed as an instrument of the state power that is entangled with these processes, and may have negative impact on Pakistani digital public space in the context of larger discourses of democracy, surveillance, and control.

The two-sided nature of PECA, which is protective in theory and repressive in practice, is an issue that has been widely studied in the scholarly literature (Bajwa et al., 2022; Mirza et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2023; Aslam et al., 2025). Therefore, PECA offers an interesting argument to examine how cybercrime laws, freedom of the press, and democracy intersect in Pakistan. The current research has used the political economy of communication theory (Mosco, 1996; Murdock and Golding, 1991) and public sphere (1989) to question the operation of PECA as a cybercrime law and as a structural mechanism of state control. Research into the interaction between PECA, economic risks, and the hegemonic filters that mediate the transformation of media space in Pakistan is based on interviews with senior journalists and the literature that persists, thus situating the legislation in the wider debate about press freedom, digital rights, and governance practices in the Global South.

Research Questions

RQ1. How do Pakistani journalists describe PECA's practical impact on their reporting and editorial decisions?

RQ2. How do journalists perceive PECA's effects on freedom of expression in Pakistan?

Literature Review

In 2016, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) was promulgated, and it became a turning point in the regulation of digital media in Pakistan. Originally positioned as such a wholesome reaction to cyber threats, such as internet fraud, harassment, and data breaches, PECA has been recognized by researchers as a long-awaited lawful framework aimed at combating the new menace in the digital realm (Ali, 2021). In this regard, the legislation was proposed to bolster cybersecurity, defend the citizens against cybercrime, and ensure that Pakistan is on par with the global standards of cyber governance (Shah, 2023). On the policy level, the advocates argue that PECA has created a larger range of possible operations of law-enforcement agencies to deal with cybercrime in a more organized fashion and has served as a normative point of sovereign control of the digital space (Faisal et al., 2024; Wajahat et al., 2025; Khan, 2025; Mangi et al., 2025). However, critical scholarship is a radically different evaluation, highlighting the negative consequences of PECA on journalism and freedom of expression. The literature shows that the provisions of the Act are quite extensive and vague that may be actively used to promote selective enforcement and misuse (Freedom House, 2023; Raza, 2022). Human-rights organisations (such as CJP, 2022) have documented examples of PECA being used against journalists, activists, and voices of dissent, and have bypassed due-process in many cases. As an example, a senior journalist Asad Ali Toor, who had published critical content about the military, was charged under PECA, and a news editor of Daily The Express Tribune, Bilal Farooqi, was detained in 2020 on PECA charges of posting critical content on social media (Human Rights Watch, 2020; CPJ, 2021; Amnesty International, 2021). Similarly, PECA was used against journalist Absar Alam, who had published a series of police complaints over his coverage of state institutions, which is supported by press-freedom organisations and civil-rights groups (CPJ, 2021; HRCP, 2021; Amnesty International, 2021). These high profile cases are examples on how the Act is used to surround and put the press under economic strain effectively limiting the field on which they can report independently. Therefore, the Act has

been criticized as draconian by journalists and press unions, claiming that it makes statutory regulation a censorship tool, and encourages self-censorship on a mass scale to avoid legal liability (Raza, 2022).

There has been individual response to PECA by individual journalists, but also collective response have been noted. The Act has been challenged over and over again by the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) and digital-rights organisations, such as 'Bolo Bhi' and the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF), protesting against it, initiating public campaigns, and filing legal petitions (HRCP, 2021; DRF, 2022; Bolo Bhi, n.d.; RSF, 2020). In 2022, PFUJ organized protests across the country against changes to PECA that increased criminal liability on speech on the internet, claiming it was an unconstitutional assault on press freedom. The petitions submitted by civil-society organizations in Islamabad High Court were later invalidated by the court, which ruled against some of the controversial amendments, which is an indication of how legal challenges now become a battleground concerning digital rights.

The PECA of Pakistan demonstrates how digital authoritarianism is implemented with the help of the legal system, undermining the principles of democracy and creating the long-term opposition of journalists and civil society. According to Jamil (2021), Pakistan is described as a competitive authoritarian country where internet liberties are undergoing systematic repression, but opposition continues. Equally, Ahmed et al. (2023) stress that even with limiting actions, there is still a robust web of civil-society actors mobilizing around the issue of digital rights. Recent scholarship highlights the fact that the 2025 amendments of PECA support this authoritarian trend, with the bodies of journalists and human rights organizations characterizing the act as not compatible with the international human rights and democratic practices (Younas and Tariq, 2025). The PEC framework shows the institutionalization of legal and algorithmic control by PECA, which entails state and elite domination of the media systems in Pakistan, which is not isolated but instead aligned with the broader description of digital authoritarianism in the Global South (Fuchs, 2022; Murdock, 2021; Couldry and Mejias,

2019; Mansell, 2021). The international comparisons provide additional nuance. Although other nations, including India and Turkey, employ digital legislation to censor dissent, the hybrid form of governance, which Pakistan has developed following the military-civilian power-sharing, offers PECA a unique authoritarian essence (Yesil, 2014; Thussu, 2019). Pakistan does not have any institutional protection over journalists against arbitrary prosecution as in other countries where the independent courts or strong digital-rights advocacy can offer some redress.

Meanwhile, the implementation of the Act has been characterized by an overreach, as PECA has been collaborating with PEMRA, FIA, and PTA to practice coordinated censorship, thus institutionalizing the restrictions of free expression (Ahmed, Yilmaz, & Akbarzadeh, 2024; Jamil, 2021; Adil, Sheraz, & Hassan, 2025; Asad & Ahmad, 2022). Raza (2022) shows how takedown orders, surveillance technology, and shadow-banning strategies all suppress dissent in the digital realm, and Fuchs (2021) highlights that platform capitalism is closely connected with state regulation to enable surveillance. This dynamic increases the repressive potential of PECA by enabling state institutions like PEMRA and PTA to take advantage of corporate infrastructures and algorithmic government in the implementation of censorship and the increase of digital authoritarian control. The discussions of the public sphere in a broader context also reveal the consequences of PECA. The conceptualization of the public sphere by Habermas (1989) as a space where citizens share ideas without coercion, where the democratic will-formation is possible, remains influential in the discussion of communication and democracy, as does the model (Wheeler & Iosifidis, 2016). Subsequent scholarship has come to problematize this ideal, with gender, class, and power asymmetries being excluded (Fraser, 1990; Fenton and Freedman, 2020; Schafer, 2022). The researchers like Dahlgren (2005), Fuchs (2014), and Papacharissi (2010; 2021) believe that in spite of the new possibilities of participation, online platforms extend state and corporate control via surveillance, commodification, and algorithmic regulation (Klinger and Rusmann, 2022; Castells, 2020). In Pakistan, PECA has

reorganized this digital public space by reducing the space of dissent, institutionalizing surveillance, and normalizing censorship (Butt, Makk & Yamin, 2022; Khan & Shah, 2021; Yusuf, 2018), which undermines the deliberative and pluralistic roles of a democratic system. This renders PECA not only a legal or journalistic concern but also a key factor of how the public sphere works in the current digital current digital era (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal, 2018; Schafer, 2022).

Methodology

The research design is cross-sectional and the qualitative methodology has been adopted to examine the role played by the PECA in transforming the media landscape in Pakistan, compromising editorial autonomy, and facilitating digital control in Pakistan. The conceptual framework applied in the research is the PEC framework (Mosco, 1996; Murdock and Golding, 1991) that gives the conceptual structure of analyzing state control schemes, ownership relations, and ideological restraints to independent journalism. In addition, the Public Sphere Theory (Habermas, 1989; Papacharissi, 2021; Nielsen & Fletcher, 2023) is incorporated to understand how the digital communication environment shapes journalistic engagement and public discourse under regulatory influence. The study used purposive, non-probability sampling for the selection of informants based on the fact that they could provide detailed information about the impact of PECA on the journalistic practice. The senior journalists with ten or more years of professional experience were sampled in Lahore and Islamabad; the purposive sampling allowed the informants to not only have direct experience of the implications of PECA but also be in a better position to understand the structural constraints of the media industry.

Data Collection and Analysis

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used as a method of data collection. The flexibility of the interview format also gave the opportunity to the informants to express personal experiences, professional challenges, and the perception of the role that PECA played in influencing the newsroom practices. Each interviews took a duration of 45 to 60 minutes each and was

audio-taped with the consent of the informants. Verbatim transcripts were obtained and analyzed using NVivo 15 software. A thematic analysis approach was applied, where recurring patterns, concepts, and narratives were identified across the dataset. Codes were generated inductively and then organized into broader themes reflecting legal repression and ideological framing, consistent with the public sphere. The software facilitated systematic coding, visualization of relationships between themes, and the refinement of analytical categories.

Ethical Considerations

Anonymity and confidentiality were observed strictly, thus protecting the informants. Pseudonyms were used in place of real names and sensitive information was treated with the highest level of care in order to reduce any chances of retaliation. The involvement was purely voluntary and all informants were informed of their consent before taking part in the study.

Findings and Discussion

The interviews highlighted four interrelated themes in which PECA has impacted the restructuring of journalism in Pakistan: legal insecurity and intimidation, criminalisation using FIRs, the politicisation of fake news, and multi-institutional censorship by the PEMRA. The testimonies of informants reveal the fact that these laws which were initially created to regulate the digital sphere are now used as the tools of authoritarian control.

1. Legal Insecurity and Intimidation

While some journalists acknowledged the original rationale behind PECA, they emphasized that its application has created pervasive insecurity. As Informant 1 explained, "Any law, including the PECA Act, is beneficial if applied correctly to serve the public. The fundamental purpose of PECA was to curb the spread of false information, which is a sound principle." Yet he stressed its misuse, noting that "a significant flaw in the application of PECA is that it often targets individuals who share information rather than the person who generated the false post. The real culprit who starts the misinformation is often not caught."

Other informants highlighted how PECA, in particular, has been weaponized to curtail reporting on sensitive political figures. Informant 2 remarked: "The PECA Act has also come, affecting your reporting and media operations. Sir, at this time, it's affecting 110%... informant 2 asserted that he had been specifically instructed not to mention Imran Khan's name, warning that otherwise actions would be taken against him under PECA. He explained: "Nowadays there's a ban on Imran Khan; we cannot mention his name on networks. We cannot even tweet about him or post him on social media. This restriction has come upon us through PECA." Such experiences illustrate how political red lines are codified into law, transforming journalistic caution into structural self-censorship.

Similarly, Informant 3 characterized the amendments as part of a broader authoritarian strategy: "I personally feel it's a very negative move by the government to amend PECA ordinance in that way that it has curtailed the independence of journalism, PECA is used as a tool, as a practice, as a weapon against the independent voices in Pakistan." These perspectives underscore how PECA generates legal intimidation that fosters a climate of fear rather than accountability, echoing Herman and Chomsky's (1988) concept of "flak" as a disciplinary mechanism.

2. Criminalization through FIRs

A recurring concern was the use of First Information Reports (FIRs) to criminalize dissent. Informant 1 provided a striking example: "An example a police officer in Mianwali filing an FIR under PECA against a doctor for allegedly spreading propaganda against Maryam Nawaz. He elaborated on the systemic flaws, observing that "in Pakistan's legal system, once an FIR is registered, the accused is immediately treated as a culprit, not just an accused person... an FIR is supposed to be just a First Information Report, followed by an investigation."

He further described a case in which a woman accused of running several fake accounts was publicly vilified before any evidence was presented: "Her pictures were circulated online, making her a culprit before any investigation; the allegation was later found to have no

connection to reality. Courts are quashing such FIRs because they are often filed improperly.” Such accounts demonstrate how FIRs, intended as neutral reporting tools, are routinely deployed as punitive measures that entrench insecurity and silence.

3. Politicization of Fake News

The rhetoric of “fake news” emerged as another critical theme. Informant 3 argued that punitive laws are the wrong approach: “Measures to stop fake news should not rely on misusing this law; instead, digital media literacy offers a vital alternative to restrictive legal measures.”. Informant 1 described his own efforts to counter misinformation: “My efforts are to educate people about false news on social media... these are social media people; they don’t have any authentic reporter or source.” Meanwhile, Informant 4 highlighted how disinformation thrives under weak regulatory structures: “Since there’s no formal and clear policy for digital media yet, all kinds of fabricated or exaggerated information can be presented with ‘spice’ and sold on digital platforms.”

Together, these reflections reveal how the label of “fake news” is mobilized ideologically both to justify censorship and to obscure the lack of investment in media literacy and professional safeguards.

4. Multi-Institutional Censorship and PEMRA Notices

Finally, informants stressed that PECA operates within a wider ecosystem of repression involving multiple regulatory bodies. Informant 5 Responded: “Security forces weaponize laws like PECA to prosecute critical voices, while local police (SHOs/DPOs) directly censor content by forcing cable operators to block channels or relegate them to obscure channel numbers.” Informant 1 confirmed how PEMRA actively intervenes in newsroom content: “PEMRA sends notifications to channels if their coverage is deemed improper... PEMRA has issued notices to channels specifically for using misleading thumbnails on their social media videos.”

Informant 4 recalled a case that illustrated PEMRA’s reach into everyday reporting: “An incident in Sargodha involving fake medicine news illustrates PEMRA’s direct involvement:

‘PEMRA letters arrived for the individuals involved. PEMRA’s investigation team called the person who was the subject of the story.’ Such testimonies show how censorship is systematically coordinated across agencies, embedding PECA within a broader infrastructure of control that merges legal, administrative, and algorithmic mechanisms.

Synthesis

Combined, the findings indicate that PECA did not just serve to fight real cybercrime but served as repressive structures to remake the media world in Pakistan. These laws strengthen elite domination by creating legal insecurity, criminalizing dissent by use of FIRs, justification of suppression in the name of fake news, institutionalisation of censorship by multiple institutions, and undermine the democratic role of journalism. Through the Political Economy of Communication, PECA can be understood as an intersection between state power and regulatory capture to subdue dissent and punish independent voices on the digital realm.

Conclusion

The results of the research show that PECA is not only a piece of legislation of cybercrime but a complex tool of state power planting digital authoritarianism into the media system of Pakistan. The experiences of informants described by them indicate that PECA breeds insecurity of the law and intimidation whereby notices and FIRs are not used to ensure convictions but rather to bring about a culture of fear. Such climate, in its turn, legalizes self-censorship, as journalists and editors anticipate covering sensitive issues like civil-military relations or political opposition. The law is also brought into the digital realm where it justifies surveillance, allows shadow bans, and allows content to be removed in collaboration with social media platforms, effectively reducing the size and freedom of the digital public sphere.

The analysis also illustrates the disproportionate effect PECA has on independent and freelance journalists, who do not have the support of an organization or the law protection and, therefore, are more vulnerable to harassment and prosecution. Meanwhile, the legislation is closely connected to multi-institutional censorship, which functions alongside PEMRA

and PTA to create a concerted crackdown. According to the Political Economy of Communication framework, PECA is an exemplification of how the power of the state, economic dependence and institutions intersect to corrupt the democratic role of media. PECA solidifies the hegemonic discourses and excludes the dissenting voices.

To guarantee that Pakistan upholds its constitutional obligation to freedom of expression, the much needed laws and ordinances such as PECA need to be reformed urgently. These can be external monitoring systems, procedural measures to stop arbitrary dispensation and specificity of offences to avert misuse. This study can be supplemented in future work by investigating the overlap between PECA and artificial intelligence and algorithmic moderation and undertaking comparative studies on digital laws in the Global North and in other regions in the Global South. With the digital media taking an increasing role in the landscape of political communication, the significance of comprehending and critically assessing legal structures like PECA is critical to safeguarding democratic communication and avoiding authoritarian consolidation.

The most important is that PECA course indicates how the digital public sphere of Pakistan, the disputed sphere of communication, opposition, and discussion, is being reduced, in a manner systematically structured by the state. PECA subjugates the emancipatory potential of digital media by turning the areas of open discourse into the domains of fear and surveillance. Any significant reform should therefore not only ensure the freedom of the press but also the openness, inclusivity and pluralism of the public sphere which is indispensable to democratic life.

Limitations of the Study

There are a number of limitations in this study. First, it relies on a limited sample of older journalists in Lahore and Islamabad, not regarding the context of the regional or rural media. Second, the use of qualitative interviews, although providing in-depth information, limits the statistical confirmation of the overall effects of PECA. Third, the research is representative of a particular political point in time, and the impact of PECA might change over time.

Fourth, self-censorship might have been caused by the fear of reprisal, thus, barring the informants to exercise their opinions freely. Lastly, there are no views of policymakers, regulators, and civil society, which lowers the thoroughness of the analysis.

Recommendations

The suggested changes to PECA in the future must aim at reducing the ambiguity of the provisions, excluding journalistic activity, and imposing a judicial warrant on surveillance and arrests. There should be the creation of independent oversight bodies and the PTA and FIA should be required to present periodic transparency reports. Better safeguards of journalists such as providing legal assistance to freelancers and the implementation of a set of laws protecting privacy and data security should be enhanced, which facilitates safe communication. The civil society unions, rights groups and academia should be actively engaged in reform processes to enhance the popularity of citizens. Lastly, comparative studies of the digital laws worldwide and the interaction of PECA with artificial intelligence and algorithmic moderation will be critical to ensuring that digital governance in Pakistan is consistent with democratic values and global human rights regulations.

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