Freedom of Expression in the Digital age: Effect of Prevention of Electronic Crime Act (PECA) on Pakistani Media

Hassnain Ali[1], Naimat Ullah Khan[2]

1. Journalism & Media Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, hassnainali8177@gmail.com

2. M.Phil. Sociology, University of the Punjab, naimatullahniazi32@gmail.com

Abstract
This study looks at how the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 affects freedom of expression in Pakistan. A especially as the country's digital media scene changes quickly. Based on the constitutional protection given in Article 19 of Pakistan's Constitution, the research explores how, lists, editors, media groups, and digital rights activists understand and deal with the restrictions from PECA. The study used a qualitative approach, including semi-structured interviews with media professionals and cyber law experts, along with a review of legal texts, court decisions, and other literature on digital governance and media rules in Pakistan. The results show that while PECA was meant to tackle online crimes and improve cybersquatting, its application has led to unexpected issues for press freedom and democratic discussion. Journalists say they are more likely to self-censor, face pressure from editors, and find it harder to do investigative reporting because they fear being prosecuted under unclear legal terms. Regulatory bodies have also interpreted the law broadly, allowing them to block certain content and intimidate media workers who publish different views or politically sensitive material. The study also points out that PECA has a bigger effect on underrepresented voices in the media, especially female journalists and digital content creators, who experience more online harassment and trolling. These gender-based challenges have limited their involvement in digital journalism, creating new kinds of inequality in access to free speech. When compared to international human rights standards, like Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the research finds that PECA doesn't meet the principles of legality, necessity, and proportionality needed to justify limits on speech. In general, the study argues that while some regulation is needed to deal with online harm and false information, PECA needs major changes to make sure cyber security goals don't go against constitutional freedoms. It suggests more judicial supervision, clear policy processes, and training programs for journalists and media organizations to protect digital rights. Building these systems can help Pakistan find a fairer balance between national security and the basic right to free expression in the digital age.

Background and Historical Context

Over the past two decades, communication technologies have made huge changes in how people share ideas, spread information, and deal with power in today's societies. In Pakistan, this change has been very strong, changing how citizens interact with the media, get involved in politics, and express themselves in public. Before, newspapers, radio, and TV were the main sources of information. Now, digital platforms have become a big part of daily life. This shift isn't just about technology, it shows a big change in society and politics in how different voices are shared, heard, and challenged. In the early 2000s, Pakistan went through a big change when the complete sector was opened up, making mobile internet accessible to more people. The spread of mobile networks and affordable internet access created new ways for people to connect and get involved online (Khan, 2020). The number of internet users grew rapidly less than 10% of the population in 2010 to over 50% in 2020 showing a huge increase in digital inclusion that brought millions into the online world (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority [PTA], 2021). This change made communication faster and spread information more widely. People who once relied on TV or newspapers could now share their ideas directly, bypassing traditional information gatekeepers. This new communication environment helped drive more political participation and activism. The lawyers' movement between 2007 and 2009 is a clear example of how digital tools changed social activities. Activists and legal experts used online forums, text messages, and early social networks to bring thousands of people together against authoritarian rule (Rahman, 2017). What started as a legal protest turned into a national democratic movement that showed how digital tools could influence public opinion. Over time, platforms like Facebook, Twitter (now X), and YouTube became places for political discussion, citizen reporting, and alternative storytelling (Baloch, 2019). These platforms gave more people a voice, especially those who had been left out before, and challenged the state's control over information. So, digital media in Pakistan evolved into more than just communication tools; they became important spaces for political debate, social resistance, and defending democratic rights. The rise of social media not only changed how people communicate but also transformed journalism and the entire media industry. Traditional newsrooms, which followed the daily schedules of print and broadcast news, had to adjust to the fast pace of online reporting. Independent digital outlets and citizen journalists challenged the dominance of older media, often offering a wider and more local range of views (Siraj & Hussain, 2021). Audiences started taking part in news production, sharing real-time information from conflict zones or during human rights crises. However, the online world also brought new problems like fake news, hate speech, political trolling, and coordinated propaganda campaigns, which made it harder to tell the truth from manipulation (Mahmood, 2020). For journalists, this meant dealing with both new opportunities for visibility and dangerous risks like harassment, surveillance, and even violence. These changes have renewed discussions about the right to freedom of expression in Pakistan's constitution. Article 19 of the 1973 Constitution guarantees freedom of speech and the press as essential democratic rights. But it also has wide exceptions concerning national security, public order, decency, and morality (Constitution of Pakistan, 1973, Article 19). These clauses have been used to justify censorship and suppress dissent, allowing different governments military and civilian to control media narratives. While the constitution acknowledges freedom of expression as a basic right, its conditional language gives a lot of room for regulatory control and possible misuse by those in power (Zahid & Javed, 2021).

With the rise of digital media, this conflict between free expression and state control has become more visible. As online platforms expanded, the government's desire to monitor and control

cyberspace also grew. The 2016 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) is a key moment in Pakistan's efforts to regulate the digital environment. Though intended to address cybercrime, online harassment, hate speech, and extremist content, PECA has faced a lot of criticism for its vague terms and heavy punishments (Yousaf, 2019). Human rights groups like Amnesty International (2020) argue that the law gives the state too much power to monitor digital communications, silence critics, and stop investigative journalism. This struggle between digital freedom and control is central to ongoing debates about democracy and civil liberties in Pakistan's information society. Understanding this complex relationship between technology, media freedom, and state control needs a historical view. For many years, Pakistan's print and broadcast media operated under various levels of censorship, whether during direct military rule or under civilian governments using indirect pressure. Journalists and activists often saw digital communication as a chance for freedom a new space where people could speak without fear of censorship. However, as digital tech became a big part of political and social life, the state developed new ways to monitor, control, and shape online narratives. The use of laws like PECA shows that government control mechanisms have just changed not disappeared. So, the rise of digital communication in Pakistan shows a paradox: it has given more power to people to express themselves and challenge authority, but it has also made it easier for the state to monitor, censor, and manipulate. The same platforms that opened up information have become contested areas where freedom and control coexist. Looking at this paradox is important for understanding the changing world of free expression, media ethics, and political life in Pakistan. Also, analyzing these shifts gives valuable insight into how digital technologies are transforming democratic culture not only in Pakistan but across the wider Global South, where the battle between state power and digital freedom continues.

Governance Regulation and Censor

In 2025, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) in Pakistan has become a major topic of discussion after the introduction of controversial amendments, known as the PECA Amendment Bill, 2025. These changes make it a criminal offense to spread "false information" that could cause fear, panic, or unrest, with potential penalties of up to three years in prison and fines of up to Rs. 2 million. The amendments also suggest the formation of new government agencies, such as the Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority (SMPRA), the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA), and a Social Media Protection Tribunal, all aimed at regulating and controlling online content. The law has already been contested in the Supreme Court, where it is argued that it breaches Articles 19 and 19A of the Constitution, which protect freedom of speech and access to information. Critics also worry that the law might be used to enable government censorship and stifle opposition. In response, media organizations, journalists, and civil society groups have expressed strong opposition. On 31 January 2025, a "Black Day" was observed in several cities, including Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, and Quetta. Journalists wore black armbands and raised black flags to show their protest against the amendments and to demand their withdrawal. Several specific cases have also drawn attention and criticism. In August 2025, four women journalists from the Islamabad National Press Club were investigated under PECA for discussing personal topics in a Whatsapp group. In another case, veteran journalist Farhan Malik was arrested by the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) in Karachi under PECA provisions related to fake news and offenses against state institutions. His digital platform was subsequently taken offline. Reporters have reported an increase in self-censorship and legal threats, particularly in smaller towns where PECA FIRs are filed even for local news coverage or

for reporting on grievances against government officials. The debates around the amendments highlight concerns that the law's vague language and broad powers could give state agencies wide authority to control online content, punish critics, and shape public narratives, rather than simply ensuring online safety. This development marks a major change in Pakistan's media environment: digital platforms are no longer seen as "loopholes" beyond government control, but are now facing serious legal oversight that threatens freedom of expression and the independence of the press.

Social Change and Journalistic Landscape in Pakistan
The introduction of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 has changed the way media and communication work in Pakistan, especially with the fast growth of digital technology. By 2025, Pakistan had more than 130 million people using the internet and almost 50 million social media accounts, showing how much online platforms have become a part of everyday life. The rise of digital journalism, including independent YouTube channels, online news websites, and citizen journalism, has made it easier for people to get information from different sources. But it has also caused more conflicts between the government and journalists. In 2025, the government passed an updated PECA law that adds stricter rules against spreading "false or harmful information. This has led to protests from journalists and human rights groups. Journalists say these laws are making it hard to tell the difference between stopping cybercafé and controlling the media, which is making them more cautious and afraid to report freely. A 2025 report by Freedom Network Pakistan says that over 120 journalists have been harassed, sent legal warnings, or threatened online under PECA since 2020. High-profile arrests and the shutting down of digital news channels show how government control is expanding from traditional broadcast media (which used to be regulated by PEMRA) to online spaces. Civil society groups are warning that these regulations are limiting public discussion and making it harder for journalists to investigate issues like government corruption, human rights abuses, and political misconduct. At the same time, people are turning more to digital media, forcing traditional news organizations to change how they operate or risk losing relevance. The combination of social media activism, government oversight, and legal action under PECA is shaping a new phase of social change in Pakistan. This period is marked by ongoing debates about digital freedom and the freedom of the press in a media environment that is constantly evolving.

Problems statement
The growth of digital communication in Pakistan has changed how people engage with each other, share information, and interacts with the media. In the past twenty years, websites and apps like Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube, and Instagram have become key platforms for political discussion, getting news, and getting involved in community activities. These tools have let regular people share their ideas, question official stories, and report on issues that mainstream media may not cover. In many ways, digital communication gives Pakistanis new ways to use their constitutional right to speak freely and take part in public life without relying only on government-controlled or commercial media. However, this increased digital freedom has also led to more conflict between government control and personal rights. The government has become more involved in managing online spaces, often using reasons like "national security," "public morality," and "social harmony" to justify these actions. This has caused worries about censorship, watching people, and restricting digital freedom (Javaid, 2020). While

these actions are usually presented as necessary for public safety, they often act as ways to limit different opinions and control political messages. *This conflict* is at the center of Pakistan's efforts to find a balance between managing the digital world and keeping democratic accountability. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), passed in 2016, is the most important and controversial law affecting the digital environment in Pakistan. It represents the government's attempt to create a legal system for managing online behavior, dealing with cybercrimes, and handling harmful content online. At first, PECA was seen as a positive step to protect people from online abuse, financial fraud, identity theft, and cyber-terrorism. But critics say the Act's unclear and broad language has turned it into a tool for control rather than protection (International Commission of Jurists [ICJ], 2017). Most of the sections in PECA dealing with online speech, defamation, "religious sensitivities," and criticism of the government are not clearly written, allowing for many different interpretations (Rehman, 2019).This vagueness gives authorities the power to target journalists, activists, and regular users who post criticisms or expose government issues. The Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), which enforces PECA, has been accused of using these provisions to silence dissent instead of ensuring justice (Digital Rights Foundation, 2021). The FIA's tendency to use these laws selectively where critics are quickly arrested while politically supportive voices are ignored creates a sense of fear and uncertainty. This blurs the line between legal enforcement and political suppression, raising major concerns about the misuse of government power. One of the most serious problems is what researchers and media freedom advocates call a "**chilling effect**. "This refers to an environment where journalists and online users self-censor because they are afraid of legal consequences or online harassment for expressing certain opinions. Many Pakistani journalists admit to avoiding sensitive topics like civil-military relations, religious extremism, and corruption due to the risk of being targeted under PECA (Freedom Network Pakistan, 2020). As a result, critical journalism is declining, investigative reporting is discouraged, and the role of the press as a democracy watchdog is being seriously weakened. The lack of clear definitions about what is "objectionable" adds to this uncertain environment, pushing media professionals to be more cautious (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

While traditional media organizations may have legal support and institutional backing, digital journalists, bloggers, and freelance writers face a much more dangerous situation. These individuals and small groups, often with limited resources, are easy targets for intimidation and legal threats (Ashraf, 2021). Surprisingly, the very platforms that once offered freedom from censorship are now among the most heavily monitored in Pakistan's media environment. For women journalists, the problem is even more complicated. Although PECA includes clauses meant to fight cyberbullying and online harassment, these provisions are applied inconsistently. Many cases of online abuse against women go unchecked, while the same laws are used to file cases against women journalists who criticize government policies (Shah, 2020). This selective application of justice undermines the credibility of the law and discourages women's participation in the digital public space. Another major issue is the vague and undefined terms used in PECA. Words like "obscenity," "immorality," and "national security" are not clearly defined in the Act (Yousaf, 2019). This lack of clarity allows enforcement agencies to interpret the law in ways that give them unchecked power. The issue goes beyond poor law writing; it raises questions about the nature of the rule of law and constitutional protections. Pakistan is a member of several international agreements that protect freedom of expression, including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Under Article 19 of the ICCPR,

restrictions on free expression must be clear, necessary, and proportional to a legitimate purpose (United Nations, 2011). However, PECA does not meet these standards, as its unclear provisions can be misused, eroding public trust in the justice system. The enforcement mechanisms of PECA have also faced heavy criticism for being opaque and politically influenced. Both the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) the main groups responsible for carrying out PECA operate with limited public oversight (Baloch, 2019). Their processes for blocking content, removing social media posts, or arresting online activists are rarely transparent. In many cases, actions against journalists or online users have been taken without clear legal reasons or the right to appeal. This selective enforcement reinforces the idea that cyber laws in Pakistan are tools of political influence rather than instruments of justice. The overall effect of these developments is a shrinking democratic space within Pakistan's digital environment. Freedom of expression is not just a personal right; it is the foundation for accountability, transparency, and informed public discussion. When journalists and citizens fear punishment for expressing critical views online, it harms the very principles that support a healthy democracy. Society loses access to different viewpoints and open conversations. In Pakistan, traditional media already struggles with economic and political pressure like ownership issues, government ads, and rules set by authorities and now digital platforms are becoming more controlled, which weakens the freedom of the press (Mahmood, 2020). The online world, once thought to be a place where people could speak freely without being censored, is now facing similar limits that have long been used to control print and broadcast news.

Research Amis and Objectives

Every academic inquiry begins with clearly defined objectives that guide the direction, scope, and methodological approach of the study. For a subject as sensitive and evolving as freedom of expression in Pakistan's digital sphere, articulating precise objectives is particularly significant. This study is designed to address the multi-layered effects of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) on the media landscape in Pakistan.

The first objective of this thesis is to analyze the impact of PECA on freedom of expression in Pakistan. Although the law was formally introduced as a safeguard against cybercrime, including harassment, hate speech, and terrorism-related activities, its practical application has been far more controversial (International Commission of Jurists [ICJ], 2017). By focusing on the experiences of journalists, bloggers, and digital activists, this research seeks to understand whether PECA protects freedom of expression or restricts it. This objective encompasses both legal analysis and empirical evidence gathered from media practitioners.

The second objective is to examine how Pakistani media professionals perceive digital restrictions. Journalists and editors are not merely passive subjects of the law; they are active interpreters who constantly navigate the boundaries of permissible expression (Mahmood, 2020). By documenting their perceptions and experiences, the research will highlight the "chilling effects" of state regulation and the strategies media practitioners use to maintain professional integrity while avoiding legal repercussions. This objective acknowledges that freedom of expression is not solely a legal matter but also a lived reality shaped by institutional pressures, editorial policies, and personal risk assessments.

The third objective is to assess whether PECA aligns with international human rights frameworks, particularly Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Pakistan ratified in 2010. International law recognizes that freedom of

expression may be restricted under certain circumstances, but such restrictions must be narrowly tailored, necessary, and proportionate (United Nations, 2011). By comparing PECA's provisions with these global standards, the research will evaluate whether Pakistan's cybercrime legislation strengthens or undermines its international obligations.

Together, these objectives aim to situate PECA within the broader conversation on law, media, and democracy in Pakistan. They provide a clear pathway for the study, ensuring that the analysis is not only descriptive but also evaluative, critical, and relevant to both national and international contexts.

Research Questions

Every academic investigation starts with clearly set goals that shape the study's direction, range, and methods. In a topic as delicate and changing as freedom of expression in Pakistan's digital world, having clear goals is especially important. This study is meant to look at the many effects of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) on the media in Pakistan.

The first goal of this research is to look at; how **PECA(** Prevention of Electronic Crime Act) affects freedom of expression in Pakistan.?

Although the law was created to protect against cybercrime, like online harassment, hate speech, and terrorism, its real use has been much more controversial (International Commission of Jurists [ICJ], 2017). By looking at the experiences of journalists, bloggers, and digital activists, this study aims to find out if PECA helps protect free speech or limits it. This goal includes both looking at the law and collecting real-world evidence from media workers.

The second goal is to understand; how Pakistani media professionals see digital restrictions?

Journalists and editors aren't just people affected by the law; they are also people who interpret it and move around its limits (Mahmood, 2020). By recording their views and experiences The study will show how strict government rules can make people self-censor and what strategies media workers use to keep their jobs while staying out of trouble. This goal shows that free speech isn't just about laws but also about how people live and work in a system where there are pressures, rules, and personal risks.

The third goal is to check if PECA matches international human rights rules, especially Article (19)of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which Pakistan joined in 2010.?

International law allows some limits on free speech, but those limits must be very specific, necessary, and reasonable (United Nations, 2011)By comparing PECA with these global standards, the research will see if Pakistan's cybercrime law supports or goes against its international promises.

Together, these goals aim to place PECA in the bigger picture of law, media, and democracy in Pakistan. They give a clear plan for the study, making sure the analysis is not just about describing things but also about judging, thinking critically, and being relevant to both local and global views.

Significance of the Study

The research of freedom of expression in the digital age goes beyond just ideas it's about understanding how democracy operates. In Pakistan, where the media has faced pressure, censorship, and control for a long time, the introduction of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) in 2016 sparked new conversations about digital freedoms. It's important to study how this law affects the media because it shows the increasing struggle between technology and

government control. This thesis has value in three areas: education, policy, and professional practice. From an academic point of view, this research adds to the understanding of media freedom, digital laws, and democratic systems. Most existing studies on freedom of expression have focused on traditional media like newspapers and television (Norris, 2009). However, the digital world is different because it mixes personal and public communication, which changes how we think about the media. In Pakistan, there is not much research that specifically looks at how PECA affects journalists, with most studies being general in nature (Yousaf, 2019). By looking at what media professionals think and using theories like Habermas's public sphere and the chilling effect, this study brings a deeper understanding to the field. This research also helps in comparing media systems across different regions. Scholars in South Asia argue that digital laws are often used to protect national security, but they can also be used against critics (Thapliyal, 2020).

*By comparin*g PECA with international standards like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the study connects local and global issues. This perspective helps scholars understand how new democracies are dealing with the balance between freedom and control in the digital world. Moreover, the study looks at how digital control affects women journalists, who face specific challenges like online abuse and character attacks (Shah, 2020).Including these views makes the study more complete, showing that "journalists" are not all the same but a diverse group. This helps give a broader picture of the media landscape in Pakistan. The research is also important for policy making. PECA is often criticized for its unclear language and how it's applied (International Commission of Jurists [ICJ], 2017). By showing the law's impact on journalists, the study provides evidence that can help change policies. Lawmakers and rights groups need to understand how laws work in practice, and this research gives that insight by highlighting which parts of PECA harm freedom of expression and how they compare with international standards. The research also helps improve accountability within institutions. Agencies that enforce PECA, like the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), are often criticized for not being transparent (Javaid, 2020).

On a global level, the thesis contributes to discussions on digital regulation in new democracies. Organizations like the United Nations, Freedom House, and Reporters Without Borders have noted how governments often use security as a reason to limit online speech (Freedom House, 2022). By placing PECA in this global context, the study not only criticizes local practices but also helps the international conversation on balancing security and freedom. For journalists, editors, and media organizations, this research has real-life applications. By showing how self-censorship, pressure, and fear affect digital journalism, it helps media organizations take care of their staff and maintain independence. It can also guide policies on digital security and legal preparedness. This study is also useful for digital rights groups and civil society. Organizations like the Digital Rights Foundation and Freedom Network Pakistan monitor how PECA is misused, but they often rely on personal stories. By combining theory with real data, this study gives activists stronger evidence to push for reforms and design more targeted campaigns (DRF, 2021). Finally, the research benefits everyday people who use digital platforms for news, opinions, and community involvement. Understanding how PECA is used and its potential impact on their rights helps them ask for accountability from the government. This study educates the public about digital freedoms, making sure there's a connection between legal frameworks and everyday awareness. Overall, the academic, policy, and practical value of this

study show its importance. It's not just about describing how PECA affects media but actively contributing to discussions about rights, governance, and democracy in Pakistan. By connecting theory with practice and law with real-life experience, the thesis aims to help scholars, policymakers, journalists, and citizens. In doing so, it seeks to support freedom of expression as a key part of democratic life in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Theories and Legal Foundations of Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression is a key part of a democratic society, allowing people to share ideas, question authority, and take part in public discussions. In political thought, John Stuart Mill proposed the harm principle, which says that speech should only be limited if it causes actual harm to others. Another idea, the marketplace of ideas, suggests that allowing different viewpoints to compete helps societies find the truth and make progress. Communication theories like Agenda-Setting and Framing also show that limiting certain views can lead to a narrow understanding of issues and weaken public awareness. In Pakistan, this right is protected under Article 19 of the Constitution, which ensures freedom of speech and the press, but also allows for "reasonable restrictions" in cases related to national security, public order, decency, and morality. However, these restrictions are often poorly defined, giving the government a wide range of discretion on what is acceptable speech. This legal uncertainty has enabled the state to control public debate more than is typically allowed in a democracy, and many experts argue that this harms accountability and transparency.

Overview of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA)

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) was passed in 2016 to tackle cybercrimes like hacking, identity theft, harassment, and online fraud. It introduced ways to preserve digital evidence, allow searches of electronic devices, and remove harmful online content. Despite its goal of improving cybersecurity, some parts of the law, especially Sections 34 and 37, were criticized for being too vague and lacking proper procedural safeguards. These sections allowed the government to censor material without a clear review process. In 2025, major changes were made to the law, expanding its scope by making the spread of "false" or "fake" information a criminal offense and creating a new regulatory body that can block content without court approval. Human rights and media groups, such as the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists and the Digital Rights Foundation, warned that these changes made it hard to tell the difference between cybersecurity and censorship, giving the government the power to silence political opposition under the pretense of suppressing misinformation.

PECA in Practice: Threats to Journalistic Freedom

Use of PECA against Journalists

Studies show that PECA has increasingly been used to target journalists who criticize government institutions. A 2021 report from the Freedom Network found that over half of the journalists charged under PECA between 2019 and 2021 were detained, often with additional charges such as criminal defamation, making it harder for them to defend themselves in court. Many were arrested for social media posts considered "**anti-state**," while others had their YouTube channels or websites shut down without any judicial review. These actions suggest that

PECA, rather than just dealing with cybercrime, has become a tool for silencing independent reporting and discouraging criticism of those in power.

The Chilling Effect and Self-Censorship

One of the most harmful indirect effects of PECA is the chilling effect, where the fear of consequences leads journalists to self-censor. Research from the Digital Rights Foundation (2025) and the Pakistan Journal of Media Sciences (Iqbal & Jan, 2021) shows that many journalists avoid sensitive topics or use careful language to prevent government retaliation. Interviews by Ashraf, Durrani, and Hussain reveal that reporters often skip controversial stories or adjust their tone to avoid job loss or danger to their families. This atmosphere of fear weakens investigative journalism, resulting in less diverse news content and limiting public debate, which weakens democracy.

Institutional Dynamics Enforcing PECA

National Cyber Crimes Investigation Agency (NCCIA)

In 2024, the government replaced the Federal Investigation Agency's Cybercrime Wing with the National Cyber Crimes Investigation Agency (NCCIA), giving it nationwide authority and broader surveillance powers. While the reform was presented as a step toward better cybercrime management, critics argue that the NCCIA's unchecked authority and lack of judicial oversight have led to increased state surveillance and deepened concerns about targeting political critics, journalists, and activists.

Legal and Historical Context

Pakistan's struggle between controlling online spaces and protecting free speech has existed long before the introduction of PECA. The landmark case Bytes for All v. Federation of Pakistan (2013) criticized the long-term blocking of YouTube and ruled that internet access restrictions must be proportionate and necessary. However, the implementation of PECA largely ignored this legal precedent and reintroduced broad, executive-driven powers of censorship. This contradiction highlights a deeper institutional problem where the protection of digital rights is often outweighed by political convenience.

International Comparisons and Normative Perspectives

From an international law perspective, Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) to which Pakistan is a signatory requires any restriction on free expression to be lawful, necessary, and proportionate. Comparisons with other countries show that while most have cybercrime laws, democratic systems typically include strong protections such as judicial review, independent oversight bodies, and clear definitions of prohibited actions. In contrast, PECA lacks these safeguards. International organizations like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and Reporters without Borders have criticized Pakistan's approach as leaning toward digital authoritarianism, where national-security rhetoric is used to justify broad suppression of dissent. This makes Pakistan's regulatory environment more similar to restrictive regimes than to open democracies.

Declining Press Freedom and the Media Environment

Over the last decade, Pakistan's ranking in global press freedom indices has dropped significantly, and legal pressure under PECA has played a central role in this decline. Reports

from the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics (2025) indicate that investigative journalists face job insecurity, public defamation, and personal threats after exposing corruption or misconduct. The case of journalist Shahid Aslam, who lost his job after reporting on a military officer's financial activities, shows how professional punishment and social isolation can discourage independent inquiry. The misuse of PECA has thus created a climate of fear and compliance, damaging not only press freedom but also public trust in information systems.

Synthesis and Research Gaps

The literature reviewed shows a clear trend: although PECA was meant to be a cybersecurity tool, it is often used to stop legitimate journalism. The increasing power of the NCCIA and unclear legal definitions has made it hard for journalists to know what is allowed, leading them to practice self-censorship. Even though there has been a lot of discussion about the problems with PECA, there are still several areas that need more research. One gap is the lack of in-depth studies that look at how journalists personally deal with PECA and the ways they find to keep reporting. Another gap is the limited number of comparisons between Pakistan's rules on online speech and international or regional standards. Lastly, there isn't enough research on how investigative journalism changes when facing legal risks in the digital age. Filling these gaps could help us better understand how modern legal systems affect free speech in Pakistan's environment.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This research uses a qualitative research approach because the issue being looked at the effect of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) on freedom of expression in Pakistan's media can't be fully understood through numbers or statistics alone. Freedom of expression, censorship, and how people feel about legal limits are deeply connected to human experiences, the way institutions work, and the bigger political and social environment. These things are best understood by looking closely at them, understanding the context, and interpreting what people say and do, rather than just measuring them (Creswell & Poth, 2018).Quantitative research can show trends and connections, but it can't explain why journalists, editors, and digital creators see the law the way they do, or how they deal with the pressures of being watched and regulated. Qualitative research, on the other hand, helps explore the meaning people attach to their work. It shows how they see risk, where they draw the line on ethics, and how they understand government actions under PECA. These insights can't be reduced to numbers they need to be understood through people personal stories, emotions, and reasoning in their own settings. Qualitative research is a good fit because it helps understand how people express themselves in their daily work. Journalists and media professionals often deal with a mix of law, ethics, and power. Their ideas about "freedom" or "restriction" aren't fixed they change based on how they interact with editors, government officials, their audience, and tech platforms. To learn about these complex relationships, methods like interviews, thematic analysis, and case studies are needed. These approaches let the researcher look beyond what's on the surface and explore the real experiences of people involved. This study uses a qualitative framework that is both exploratory and descriptive. It's exploratory because not much is known about how PECA affects media freedom, and the study aims to find new patterns of self-censorship, surveillance, and fear in Pakistan's media. It's descriptive because it wants to show how these patterns show up in real

life like in newsrooms, online spaces, and individual practices. By combining both aspects, the research gives both ideas and real examples, making it useful for communication and media studies. Creswell and Poth (2018) say qualitative research works best when the goal is to understand what people or groups mean by a social or human problem. This study follows that by looking at how journalists, editors, and digital media workers understand PECA not just as a law, but as something that influences their decisions, what they say, and how freely they can report. Understanding these views is key to understanding the bigger picture of law, media, and democracy in Pakistan. The method also follows a growing trend in media research that focuses on understanding things in context rather than just measuring them. Tracy (2020) explains that qualitative methods are great for studying communication that involves negotiation, power, and moral choices things that are central to how journalists deal with regulatory authorities. Media laws like PECA aren't static; their meaning changes as they are used, challenged, and interpreted by those who follow them. So, using a qualitative approach helps track these changing meanings and see the real impact of state control on what journalists do and what people talk about. Another benefit of qualitative research is its ability to adapt to the realities of participants. Since the study deals with sensitive topics like fear of being arrested, censorship, and political pressure, it's important to use methods that build trust and let participants speak openly. Semi-structured interviews offer this flexibility, allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions, explore new ideas, and clarify things as the conversation goes on. This open and caring way of asking questions makes sure participants' voices are truly heard and not limited to fixed question. The study also uses thematic analysis as the main way to understand the data.

*This techniq*ue helps find patterns, repeated ideas, and deeper meanings in people's stories. Thematic analysis is especially good for understanding complicated social issues like freedom of the press because it connects personal experiences with larger social and institutional forces. It helps link individual stories to bigger structures like laws, organizations, and politics. In addition to interviews, the study will look at other types of data, like policy documents, reports on freedom of the press, and materials about digital rights. This helps put participants' answers into a bigger picture by including official and institutional information. Combining personal stories with official reports gives a fuller understanding of how PECA affects both attitudes and actions in Pakistan's media. Finally, using a qualitative method supports the study's view that knowledge is created through social processes, not fixed facts. Freedom of expression isn't the same for everyone it means different things depending on factors like social class, gender, media ownership, and political context. A qualitative approach is best for capturing these many different viewpoints. It respects participants as people who help create knowledge and values their experiences as important data for understanding the complex digital media world in Pakistan.

Population and Sampling

Target Population
The study centers on people who are either directly involved in or greatly impacted by how the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) is implemented and understood. These individuals were carefully selected to cover a wide yet connected range of views about digital communication, media freedom, and legal rules in Pakistan. The participants include:

- Media professionals like journalists, editors, and content creators working in print, broadcast, and online media. These people often face the real effects of PECA in their daily work, especially in how it affects their editorial choices, what they can report, and how much they might self-censor.
- Cyber law experts, such as legal scholars, practicing lawyers, and human rights advocates who specialize in digital rights and media law. Their input is important to understand how the law is interpreted, challenged, and discussed in Pakistan's legal and policy environment.
- Activists and policymakers, representing civil society groups, advocacy organizations, and regulatory bodies that work on digital governance, freedom of expression, and online safety. This group helps show how policy decisions are made, supported, and applied when it comes to digital regulation.

By including these different groups, the research covers various aspects of the issue those who live with the law's effects (media professionals), those who interpret and question it (lawyers and activists), and those who create or carry out the rules (government or regulatory officials).Gathering these viewpoints allows for a more full and balanced look at how PECA affects digital expression and media practices in Pakistan. To choose participants, the study uses purposive sampling, a type of non-probability sampling commonly used in qualitative research. This method focuses on knowledge, experience, and relevance rather than on getting a representative number of people (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purposive approach ensures that each participant brings in valuable, context-specific information directly related to the research. By intentionally selecting individuals with experience in digital journalism, cyber law, or policy advocacy, the study maintains a focused and informed group of participants.

- The plan is to include around 20 to 25 participants, spread across different categories:
- 10 to 12 journalists and editors from both traditional and digital media.
- 5 to 7 legal experts and activists working on digital rights, legal reform, or online advocacy; and
- 3 to 5 policymakers or regulatory officials with experience in implementing or managing cyber laws.

This distribution ensures a variety of backgrounds and perspectives while keeping the scope manageable for in-depth qualitative analysis. The exact number may change based on when data saturation is reached the point where more interviews don't bring new themes or insights. Reaching saturation will help decide when to stop collecting data, ensuring both depth and complete analysis. Overall, this approach shows the study's focus on depth, diversity, and expertise rather than on generalizing through numbers. By working with people from media, legal, and policy areas, the research aims to give a detailed understanding of how PECA influences freedom of expression, professional conduct, and democratic discussions in Pakistan's digital world.

Data Collection Methods

Semi-Structured Interviews
The main way I collected data is through semi-structured interviews with journalists, digital rights activists, and experts in cyber law. This method is useful for discussing sensitive issues like censorship and government control because it allows for both structure and flexibility (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). We use a set of prepared questions to make sure all interviews are

consistent, but we also leave room for participants to share their own thoughts, experiences, and how they deal with PECA.

Some exemplary questions I ask are:

- How has PECA changed the way you do your job or make editorial decisions?
- What problems do you face when sharing your opinions online under PECA?
- In your view, does PECA help protect freedom of expression or limit it?
- How do you see the role of agencies like the FIA and PTA?

Interviews are done either in person or through secure online channels, based on what the participants prefer and what's safe for them. Each interview usually takes between 45 and 60 minutes. With permission, we record the interviews and then write them down for further study. In addition to interviews, we also look at content analysis of causes related to PECA that are reported in the media. This includes stories about journalists being investigated, arrested, or censored because of PECA. Content analysis helps us understand the bigger picture by connecting personal stories with real-world examples and showing how laws are enforced (Krippendorff, 2018).

The content analysis covers:

- Reports of major PECA related cases in the media.
- Responses from editors and official statements from institutions.
- Public discussions about digital rights, censorship, and cybersecurity.

I also use secondary sources such as:

* Legal documents, including the PECA 2016 text and any changes made to it.
* Reports from NGOs and monitoring groups like Freedom House, Digital Rights Foundation, and Amnesty International.
*Research papers and academic articles that explore cyber laws in Pakistan.

These sources give us a more complete picture, making sure our study isn't just based on interviews but is also supported by real documents and expert research.

Data Analysis Technique

Thematic analysis is used to examine interview transcripts and other content data. This method involves carefully going through the data to find patterns and common themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The process includes six steps:

Familiarization – Reading through the transcripts several times to get a full sense of the overall content.

Coding – Giving labels to parts of the text that show important ideas or concepts.

Generating themes – Combining these labels into larger groups, like "self-censorship," "legal uncertainty," or "pressure from institutions."

Reviewing themes – Looking at these groups again to make sure they fit the data consistently.

Defining and naming themes – Explaining what each theme means in relation to the research questions.

Producing the report – Bringing all the themes together into a clear and organized summary.

A comparative coding approach is also used to look at the differences between freedom of expression and legal limits. This helps compare what people say with the rules in PECA, showing where they agree or disagree.

Ethical Considerations

Research into freedom of expression in Pakistan faces major ethical issues because people may encounter dangers when talking about delicate subjects. For this reason, it's very important to follow research ethics carefully.

By keeping identities private and names unknown is important. Participants will be given fake names, and any personal details will be taken out of the recorded interviews. All the information will be kept in a safe place and only the researcher will have access to it. Before interviews begin, I will get a document that explains what the study is about, what possible risks might be, and that can leave at any time without facing any problems. I was given their consent either in writing or verbally before taking part. To avoid the own opinions affecting the study, the process will include checking and thinking carefully about the data. I know they might have personal opinions when looking at the information, so they'll use discussions with other experts and check information from different sources like interviews, content analysis, and other materials to make sure the results are trustworthy. Since the topic is politically sensitive, interviews will be arranged in secure places, and online communication will use protected platforms to keep participants safe. These steps make sure the research follows international standards like the Belmont Report, which focuses on respecting people, doing good, and being fair. This report was created by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research in 1979.

Summary

In short, this chapter explains the approach used to examine how PECA affects freedom of expression in Pakistan. The study uses a qualitative method, selects participants carefully, and gathers information through multiple methods to ensure a thorough and reliable look at the topic. The analysis focuses on themes to better understand what people say about the legal rules involved, and it includes steps to keep both the participants and the research itself safe and honest.

Data Analysis and Findings

Introduction

This chapter shares the information gathered from interviews with journalists, activists, legal professionals, and government officials, as well as an analysis of reported cases related to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA). The findings are grouped into themes to show how PECA has influenced freedom of expression in Pakistan in a complicated way. While the interviews give detailed views from those working in the media, the case studies and analysis put these views into a wider context of political and institutional developments. The chapter starts by giving an overview of the data and then looks for common themes. These themes show repeated patterns in what people said, in documented PECA cases, and in media coverage. This helps provide both factual evidence and deeper understanding, which prepares the way for Chapter 5, where the results are explored using different theories.

Presentation of Data

Summary of Interviews with Journalists and Experts
Interviews were carried out with 12 journalists, 6 legal professionals and activists, and 4 people from government or regulatory bodies. The journalists worked for different types of media, such as newspapers, TV channels, and online platforms. Most of them worried that PECA's unclear language could be used to stop legal reporting.

Journalists at big print and broadcast companies said their editors added new rules for checking content on topics like security, politics, and religion.

One TV journalist said:

"*Even before I write my story, my editors tell me to check if anything might break PECA. It's always on my mind sometimes we just skip stories altogether.*" (Interviewee 7, personal communication, 2024)

Bloggers and freelance journalists felt more at risk because they didn't have official legal support if the government took action. Independent writers said they were often targeted for commenting on politics, especially when they criticized government institutions. Legal experts pointed out that the law's unclear terms like "obscenity," "immorality," and "national security" made it hard to apply.

A human rights lawyer said, "*This vagueness makes the law a tool for politics instead of protecting people's rights." (Interviewee 14, personal communication, 2024).Government officials and regulators, however, saw PECA as needed to handle online crime.*

A representative from the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) said, "Without laws like PECA, we would have mess online like terrorist messages, fake money schemes, and online abuse with no one to hold accountable." (Interviewee 19, personal communication, 2024)

This difference in views shows the main conflict between freedom of speech and online safety, which is a key theme in this study.

Case Studies of PECA-Related Incidents in Pakistani Media
Case studies offer real-life examples of how PECA has been used and challenged in actual situations. Three key cases were examined in detail: The Case of Journalist Shahzeb Jillani (2019) – A well-known journalist was accused under PECA for sharing what was claimed to be "false information" about government bodies on social media. Though the case was later dropped, it showed how PECA could be used to silence journalists (International Commission of Jurists [ICJ], 2019).

The Ban on TikTok (2020–2022), the PTA kept blocking TikTok, saying it promoted "immorality" and "indecency." Although presented as a moral measure, these bans mostly hurt content creators who used the app for their work and to express themselves (Khan, 2022).The Arrest of Women Journalists (2021) A number of female journalists faced online harassment, and when they tried to get help through PECA, the authorities either ignored them or used the law against them. In one instance, journalist Asma Shirazi received threats, but there was no real support or protection given (Shah, 2021). These examples show how PECA is used in a selective way and how its fairness is questioned. While government officials say it's a fair law, the way it's applied often shows favoritism and sensitivity to political and institutional concerns.

Content Analysis of Reported Cases under PECA

The analysis of 30 media stories from 2016 to 2023 about PECA-related events showed three main patterns.

Firstly, most of the cases involved people accused of speaking out against government bodies, while issues like online scams and harassment were less commonly reported (Digital Rights Foundation, 2021).

Secondly, many times charges were brought but then dropped, which suggests that the law is more often used to pressure people than to enforce justice consistently (Rehman, 2019). Third, there were a lot of discussions in newspapers and opinion pieces questioning whether PECA is fair, with many seeing it as going against democratic values and global human rights rules (Amnesty International, 2020). Overall, these findings match what was heard in interviews, showing that PECA is used in a way that limits freedom of speech.

Thematic Findings

The information gathered from interviews, case studies, and analysis of media content shows several repeated themes that highlight the complicated connection between PECA and free speech in Pakistan. Even though each person's experience was different, there were some common ideas that came up in the stories people shared. These include how media workers see the effects of PECA, how much self-censorship happens and the pressures editors face, and the part government agencies especially the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) play in influencing the online media landscape.

Perceptions of Media Professionals on PECA's Impact

One of the clearest ideas that came up in interviews was the common belief among journalists and digital activists that PECA is more of a tool for control than a way to protect people. Although the law was meant to deal with online bullying, financial crimes, and content related to terrorism, people who talked about it said it was mostly used to silence political opinions and criticism of the government.

Journalists talked about feeling uncertain and scared, even when doing normal reporting.

A senior print journalist said:

"*Whenever I write about government or military issues, my editors tell me to be careful with my words."*

They always mention PECA as the reason, saying, 'We don't want trouble with FIA.' It feels like there's a policeman in the newsroom" (Interviewee 3, personal communication, 2024).For many people, the biggest problem with PECA was how unclear its language was. Words like "integrity of Pakistan," "decency," and "obscenity" were seen as flexible terms that could be used in different ways. This uncertainty created what interviewees called a "culture of silence," where critical reporting became less common (Yousaf, 2019). Interestingly, policymakers and regulators had a different view compared to journalists.

A PTA official said the law was ***"not meant to silence journalists"* but to "protect ordinary citizens from online fraud, harassment, and exploitation"** (Interviewee 19, personal communication, 2024). However, activists challenged this by pointing out that the law was used selectively. As one digital rights campaigner said, "The state is quick to use PECA when a blogger criticizes institutions, but slow to act when women journalists report harassment" (Interviewee 15, personal communication, 2024).This difference shows a bigger gap in how the

law is seen: while regulators say PECA is a way to protect, those affected especially journalists see it as a way to intimidate.

Patterns of Self-Censorship and Editorial Pressures

A second big theme that came up was the growing habit of self-censorship in Pakistani newsrooms. Journalists from print, TV, and online platforms talked about being more cautious about publishing stories that could lead to problems under PECA.

For TV journalists, meetings often included direct advice to avoid certain subjects. A producer at a major news channel said:

"It's not just about avoiding direct criticism. "Even talking about cyber governance or digital surveillance is seen as risky. Editors tell us, 'Why invite PECA cases? Let's just skip this story.'" (Interviewee 8, personal communication, 2024).

Self-censorship was especially strong among digital journalists and freelancers who didn't have strong support from their organizations. Independent bloggers shared that they got warnings from FIA officers about their online posts, making them more careful about covering politics or security topics. One blogger explained:" I got a call from FIA after I tweeted about a corruption scandal. "They didn't arrest me, but the message was clear: we're watching you. Since then, I avoid political issues." (Interviewee 11, personal communication, 2024).

These experiences match up with the idea of the "chilling effect" where unclear or strict laws make people hesitant to speak out, even when they aren't actually being punished (Schauer, 1978).In Pakistan, this effect works through both official and unofficial pressures laws are supported by hidden threats of government monitoring.

Editorial rules also show this trend.

Many journalists said their workplaces now have legal review processes where content is checked by in-house lawyers before it's published. While this is meant to be a safety measure, it often stops or delays stories. A digital editor said, "We now spend more time talking about what not to publish than what to publish." (Interviewee 6, personal communication, 2024).This acceptance of censorship is one of the most important findings: PECA has not only created external limits but has also changed how journalism works inside newsrooms in Pakistan.

Role of Government Sectors in Regulation

The focal point revolves around how governmental bodies such as the FIA and PTA fulfill their responsibilities under PECA regulations. The participants characterized these organizations as politically influenced entities lacking in openness and responsibility. FIA, (responsible for investigating and prosecuting PECA matters), frequently appeared menacing and lacking professionalism when interacting with reporters. Multiple respondents detailed occasions when FIA officials unilaterally contacted them regarding alleged infractions but did not initiate legal proceedings nor compelled them to erase digital communications publicly. An on-air reporter conveyed. The International Automobile Federation does not invariably require your apprehension. It's sufficient to make contact through a telephone message. It's evident that their surveillance of your reports continues. The mere presence of this strain alters your writing style entirely (interviewer's note: conversation with Interviewee 4 in 2024). Consequently, the PTA faced criticism over its arbitrary censorship of internet resources. Repeated restrictions on TikTok, grounded in PECAs' moral have been used as instances of excessive authority and discriminatory application (Khan, 2022). The activists contended that these restrictions impeded

free speech and entrepreneurial prospects among internet content producers by offering minimal relief against actual forms of cyberbullying (Digital Rights Foundation, 2021). Despite being viewed by policy-makers as crucial for safeguarding national security and preserving cultural identity, these measures have been justified in their defense. The official presented his viewpoint: There is must not tolerate uncensored dissemination of indecent content by international sites. The entity PECAS grants me the power to uphold neighborhood interviewer 20, confidential conversation in 2024).Institutional validation stems from an overarching conversation within Pakistan concerning safety and ethics as tools for legitimizing limitations. However, numerous individuals highlighted that these measures frequently fail in terms of openness and legal procedures, thereby deepening suspicions about their arbitrary nature and potential biases.

Synthesis of Thematic Findings

When examined collectively, these results depict an information environment marked by anxiety, internal restraint among journalists, and governmental encroachment on free speech rights. The journalists view PECA more as an infringement on their autonomy rather than a safeguard for it. The practice of self-restraint in expression is now widespread, as publishers implement aimed at avoiding future legal issues. The government bodies like FIA and PTA significantly influence this setting by frequently employing secretive and politically motivated strategies.The overarching concepts jointly highlight the inherent conflict within the framework of PECA; although legislation aims to protect against online threats, its implementation often unfairly targets political discourse and media freedom. The discrepancy lies at the heart of Pakistan's ongoing discussion about free speech during its technological era.

Emerging Trends

To the Exceeding what I observe directly, my findings uncovered various new directions shaping the overall Pakistani media landscape through PECA's influence. These developments highlight how various forms of communication have varying effects according to legal regulations; they also underscore differences in their treatment based on gender roles within society; finally, it demonstrates how media companies adjust their practices accordingly.

Digital Media vs. Traditional Media Experiences

One of the most noticeable things found is how PECA affects digital and traditional media differently. Journalists at well-known print and broadcast companies often said they had some kind of support from their organizations, like access to legal help or backing if they faced a PECA issue. On the other hand, independent digital journalists and bloggers felt more at risk.
An online news editor shared:
"Mainstream journalists have a newsroom and a lawyer to support them. For us, if the FIA sends a notice, it's just us facing the state. That fear makes many delete their posts or stop writing completely." (Interviewee 12, personal communication, 2024)
This difference shows a bigger issue in Pakistan's media industry. Even though PECA is meant to apply to everyone, it's used more against people who don't have institutional support. Independent media, which started as a way to share different opinions, are now being shut down more. Looking at reported PECA cases also backs this up. Over 60% of the cases mentioned in the news between 2016 and 2023 involved independent bloggers or small digital platforms, not journalists from big media companies (Digital Rights Foundation, 2021).

This shows that PECA is being used to protect big organizations while controlling new ones, which reduces the variety of voices in Pakistan's digital world.

Gendered Implications: Women Journalists and Online Harassment

Another important trend is how the effects of PECA affect men and women differently. Women journalists often face more than just government monitoring they also deal with online bullying from trolls and organized attacks. Surprisingly, even though PECA has laws against online harassment, women who needed help found that these rules were not usually followed.

One female reporter shared her experience:

"*After I told the FIA about online threats, they told me to 'be careful about what you post.'*

Instead of helping me, they suggested my reporting was the issue" (Interviewee 9, personal communication, 2024).This situation matches what research shows about how online spaces often make gender-based discrimination worse (Shah, 2020).Women journalists are caught in a tough spot: they face more online abuse, and at the same time, they're more likely to be targeted under unclear parts of PECA. In one known case, a journalist who criticized government policies was given a legal notice, but her reports about ongoing online harassment were completely ignored (Amnesty International, 2020).

This unequal way of enforcing the law shows that institutions often shut down women's voices and let people who abuse online spaces get away with it.It also shows how laws like PECA, instead of helping those in need, can sometimes deepen the gap in who gets to speak freely.

Media House Policies on Digital Compliance

Finally, there's a clear trend emerging where media organizations are setting up formal systems to follow rules and reduce risks under PECA. Many big media companies have started using internal rules to check digital content. These rules include:

- Checking legal issues before stories are published.
- Limiting how journalists use their personal social media.
- Giving staff warnings about types of content that might draw attention from the government.

Even though these policies are meant to protect journalists, many feel they are too strict.

A TV producer shared this view:

"*Management gave us a list of topics we shouldn't cover, like religion, military, and security.*

They also watch our personal Twitter accounts. It feels like we're already censoring ourselves before the government even asks us to" (Interviewee 2, personal communication, 2024).

These changes in how media organizations operate show that PECA's influence goes beyond individual reporters and affects the whole culture of newsrooms. While these rules might help media companies avoid conflict with the government, they also limit what journalists can report. This raises concerns about the future of free press, especially as new journalists start working in environments where self-censorship is seen as normal.

Summary of Findings

The data analysis presented in this chapter reveals a media environment profoundly shaped by PECA. The findings can be summarized under four key insights: PECA as a tool of control rather than protection. While officially justified as a safeguard against cybercrime, PECA has been applied disproportionately to restrict political speech and journalistic critique. Journalists view the law primarily as a mechanism of intimidation. Normalization of self-censorship.

Journalists and editors increasingly pre-emptively censor content to avoid potential legal repercussions. This chilling effect has reshaped editorial practices, reduced investigative reporting, and narrowed the diversity of perspectives in public debate. Institutional overreach by FIA and PTA. Government institutions responsible for enforcing PECA operate with limited transparency and accountability. Their interventions are often politically motivated, reinforcing the perception that PECA is a tool for silencing dissent rather than protecting citizens. Emerging inequalities and gendered impacts. The law disproportionately affects independent digital journalists, who lack institutional protection, and women journalists, who face compounded challenges of harassment and legal targeting. Media organizations are responding with restrictive compliance policies that further institutionalize censorship. These findings illustrate the central contradiction of PECA: although presented as a framework for security and digital governance, it has in practice curtailed freedom of expression in ways that undermine democratic discourse in Pakistan. The chapter thus provides the empirical foundation for Chapter 5, where the findings will be situated within theoretical frameworks such as Habermas' public sphere, the chilling effect theory, and human rights law.

Discussion

Linking Findings with Theoretical Framework
The study's results can be understood using the theories discussed earlier: Habermas' idea of the public sphere, the chilling effect theory, and the international human rights framework, especially Article 19 of the ICCPR. Habermas (1989) described the public sphere as a place where people can have open and rational discussions without being controlled. In Pakistan, digital platforms were once seen as expanding this space, allowing more people to share their views and avoid state-controlled media. But the use of PECA shows how the government is once again using its power in the digital world. Interviews with journalists and activists showed that they now view the internet not as a free space for discussion, but as a monitored area where people are careful not to speak out for fear of getting in trouble. This shows that the public sphere is changing instead of being a place of empowerment, the internet is becoming part of state control.

The chilling effect theory (Schauer, 1978) also explains the self-censorship that participants described. Even if no one is actually punished, the presence of unclear and harsh laws makes journalists hesitant to speak out. The usual practice of checking content and following strict rules is a clear example of this chilling effect people are not being censored directly, but they are scared into silence because of the risk of legal consequences. From a human rights point of view, *Article 19 of the ICCPR* allows restrictions on freedom of expression only if they are legal, necessary, and fair. The findings of this study show that the enforcement of PECA often doesn't meet these standards. The vague meanings of terms like "obscenity" and "integrity" don't satisfy the requirement for clear laws, and the selective targeting of political speech breaks the principle of fairness. International human rights groups, like the UN Human Rights Committee (2011), have stated that restrictions can't be used to prevent criticism of government institutions. However, in practice, PECA has been used against exactly such criticisms, showing a clear difference between what Pakistan is supposed to do according to international law and what it actually does.

Comparative Analysis with International Practices

Comparative views show that Pakistan is not the only country struggling with controlling digital areas. In South Asia, India's Information Technology Act has also been used to detain journalists and activists for sharing content seen as offensive (Thapliyal, 2020). Similarly, Bangladesh's Digital Security Act has faced criticism for punishing dissent and punishing journalists harshly (Rahman, 2021). These examples point to a pattern in the region where laws meant to protect are actually used to control people.

On the other hand, democratic countries in Europe focus more on protecting users. For example, the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) aims to protect individuals without punishing speech in a way that stops free expression (European Commission, 2018). While European countries also deal with hate speech and false information, any restrictions are usually decided by courts and are based on clear legal rules. This shows how Pakistan's approach differs from international standards. The comparison shows that Pakistan's way of managing digital spaces through PECA is more like authoritarian methods than democratic ones. The result is less freedom for journalists and a weaker digital public space.

Contradictions between Cyber Security and Press Freedom

This study shows a big problem: even though PECA is supposed to be important for cyber security, in reality it harms freedom of the press. Goals like stopping terrorism, harassment, and fraud are fair and important. But when the law is used mostly against journalists and political opinions, these goals get pushed aside for political control. This issue is called "**securitization of expression,**" a term scholars use to describe how free speech is seen as a danger to national security, which then makes it easier to limit that speech (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

In Pakistan, this process has made it common to think that criticizing the government through journalism is the same as causing instability, which weakens the role of the media as a check on power. This contradiction has wider effects on building a strong democracy. A free press is not just about giving people information it's also about making sure leaders are held responsible. When laws mix security with control, they hurt both democracy and real cyber security. As people involved in the study pointed out, by focusing on silencing critics instead of tackling actual digital crimes like fraud and harassment, PECA ends up going against its own main goals.

Summary of Key Findings

This study found several connected trends and issues related to freedom of expression in Pakistan under the PECA law;

- PECA is used as a tool for control.

Even though it's meant to protect people;

- it's actually used in a way that unfairly targets political and media voices.

Self-censorship has become common.

Reporters from different media outlets said they often follow strict rules to avoid possible legal problems. Institutions involved in enforcing PECA, like the FIA and PTA, are seen as being influenced by politics.

Their selective use of the law makes the public lose trust. There are unequal impacts in how the law is applied. Independent digital journalists and female reporters face more risks, showing how PECA worsens existing social and gender inequalities. Media organizations are changing how they operate by setting up compliance measures. These steps help protect the organizations but limit the freedom of journalists to report freely. These results show that a law meant for cyber

security has, in reality, limited freedom of expression and reduced the space for open discussion online.

Conclusion

The main finding of this thesis is that the Pakistan Electronic Communications Authority (PECA) has greatly limited freedom of expression in Pakistan, especially affecting journalists and digital activists. Instead of making people safer, the law has created a climate of fear and self-censorship. The gap between what the law aims to do and how it actually works shows how cyber laws in countries transitioning to democracy can be used for authoritarian control. This study adds to academic discussions by connecting real-world examples from Pakistan with broader ideas about the public sphere and the chilling effect on free speech. It also helps shape policy discussions by showing specific parts of the law and how they go against international human rights standards. On a practical level, the study highlights the need for journalists, activists, and policymakers to understand how cyber laws affect media environments and democratic conversations. In the end, the effects of PECA go beyond the media; they show and support larger issues related to democracy, rights, and how power is managed in Pakistan. If these issues aren't dealt with, they could damage trust in both media and government institutions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, this study recommends the following:

- Policy Reforms for PECA and Cyber Legislation
- Clarify unclear terms.
- Words like "obscenity," "morality," and "integrity" need clear definitions to prevent unfair use (ICJ, 2017).
- Introduce judicial oversight.
- Content removal and prosecution should require court approval, ensuring that the FIA and PTA are held accountable.
- Focus on real cybercrimes.
- Enforcement should target crimes like fraud, harassment, and terrorism, not silence political speech.
- Role of Judiciary in Protecting Fundamental Rights.

The courts should play a more active role in reviewing PECA cases and ensuring that any restrictions are necessary and not excessive, as required by Article 19 of the ICCPR (UN, 2011).Courts should also set a good example by protecting the freedom of the press, supporting the constitutional right to free speech.

Guidelines for Media Houses and Journalists

1. Media companies should create internal rules that protect journalists without limiting their ability to report.
2. Raining should help journalists understand PECA laws so they can work safely without facing unnecessary restrictions.
3. Media groups working together can better protect each other from unfair government actions.

Capacity Building and Awareness for Digital Rights

- Civil society groups should run more campaigns to educate people about their digital rights and how to get legal help.

- Training should especially support women journalists and independent digital workers, who face more risks.
- Working with international groups can help local efforts and provide better models for change.

Closing Reflection

This study highlights the challenges of digital expression in Pakistan. Although new technology was meant to make communication more open, the PECA laws have limited these freedoms. Using real data and theoretical ideas, the research shows that cyber laws are not neutral. They reflect deeper power struggles. The main challenge is to rethink regulation not as a way to control, but as a way to protect rights and allow free, democratic expression.

References

Amnesty International. (2020). Pakistan: PECA and the crackdown on digital rights. Amnesty International Report.

Baloch, H. (2019). Social media and political mobilization in Pakistan. Asian Journal Communication Studies, 12(2), 88–103.

Khan, S. (2020). Digital transformation and media freedom in Pakistan. Journal of Media Studies, 35(1), 1–15.

Mahmood, S. (2020). Digital journalism and online harassment: A case study of Pakistan. Global Media Journal, 18(34), 77–95.

Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA). (2021). Annual Report 2020–21. Islamabad: PTA. Rahman, T. (2017).

Technology and protest: The lawyers' movement in Pakistan. South Asian Studies, 32(2), 45–63.

Siraj, S., & Hussain, A. (2021). Journalism in the digital era: Challenges and transformations in Pakistan. Journal of Communication Research, 23(1), 102–121.

Yousaf, F. (2019). Cyber laws and freedom of expression in Pakistan: A critical appraisal of PECA. Pakistan Journal of Law and Society, 10(1), 55–72.

Zahid, G., & Javed, R. (2021). Freedom of expression and constitutional limitations in Pakistan. Asian Journal of Law and Policy, 5(3), 66–82.

Ashraf, S. (2021). Digital media under siege: The impact of PECA on online journalism in Pakistan. Journal of Media and Democracy, 14(2), 33–50.

Bennett, W. L., & Livingston, S. (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. European Journal of Communication, 33(2), 122–139.

Digital Rights Foundation. (2021). Cyber harassment and PECA: Trends and case studies. Lahore: DRF.

Freedom Network Pakistan. (2020). Annual state of press freedom in Pakistan. Islamabad: Freedom Network.

Javaid, U. (2020). State control and digital rights in Pakistan. Journal of Political Studies, 27(1), 55–73.

Rehman, H. (2019). Cyber regulation and the crisis of free speech in Pakistan. Asian Journal of Law and Society, 6(3), 441–460.

Reporters Without Borders. (2021). World Press Freedom Index 2021: Pakistan. RSF Report.

Shah, N. (2020). Women journalists and digital harassment in Pakistan. Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies, 18(1), 67–83.

United Nations. (2011). General comment No. 34: Article 19 freedoms of opinion and expression. Human Rights Committee.

International Commission of Jurists (ICJ). (2017). Pakistan: Cybercrime law must be amended to protect freedom of expression. ICJ Report.

Norris, P. (2009). Comparative media systems: Liberal and regulated models of press freedom. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Thapliyal, S. (2020). Cyber laws and democratic freedoms in South Asia: A comparative analysis. Asian Journal of Comparative Politics, 5(2), 141–159.

Iqbal, N., & Jan, F. (2021). Job insecurity and self-censorship in Pakistani media. Pakistan Journal of Media Sciences, 2(2), 212–245.

Pakistan Institute of Development Economics. (2025). The precarious path of Pakistan's media landscape: Navigating freedom, regulation, and sustainability.

Shah, S. A. A., & Butt, M. N. (2025). Pakistan's PECA 2025 and global digital regulations: Balancing security and freedom. Social Prism, 2(1), 64–91.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3(2), 77–101.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches (4th ed.). Sage.

Schauer, F. (1978). Fear, risk, and the First Amendment: Unraveling the chilling effect. Boston University Law Review, 58(5), 685–732.

Habermas, J. (1989). The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society. MIT Press.

European Commission. (2018). General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR): Regulation (EU) 2016/679. Official Journal of the European Union.