

# Essay

Biased Media is a  
Real threat to Democracy.

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## Essay

Walter Lippmann, an American journalist, stated that "Where all think alike, no one thinks very much." It highlights the dangers of a biased media environment that suppresses diverse perspectives leading to a lack of critical thinking. Media plays a crucial role in any democratic society by providing information, shaping public opinion, and holding those in power accountable. However, the rise of biased media poses a significant threat to the democratic fabric of Pakistan and other countries as well. In recent years, Pakistani media has come under scrutiny for its biased reporting, sensationalism, and lack of objectivity. Media serves as the fourth pillar of democracy, alongside the executive, legislative

and judiciary branches. Its primary function is to inform citizens, facilitate debate, and act as a watchdog over the government and other powerful institutions.

In Pakistan, a diverse and vibrant media landscape has emerged since independence, comprising print, broadcast and digital platforms. However, the proliferation of biased media outlets has blurred the lines between news and propaganda, posing a grave danger to democracy. Biased media outlets in Pakistan often prioritize sensationalism over substance, resorting to inflammatory rhetoric and divisive narratives to attract viewership and readership. This sensationalism contributes to the spread of misinformation and the polarization of society along religious, ethnic, and political lines. Moreover, biased reporting can sway public opinion,

influence electoral outcomes, and undermine the credibility of democratic institutions.

During the past two decades, the media sector in Pakistan has grown immensely in terms of scale and influence. With the deregulation policy and emergence of private TV channels in the early 2000's, electronic media became a power broker and a marker of public sentiments. Corporate entities have since engaged in a frantic war over occupying public attention. News cycles, after decades of state control on information, turned into a real-time, 24/7 Process. This sudden explosion has had implications for the quality, impartiality, and accuracy of the media landscape. With the gradual dwindling of print media

and legacy editorial filters, TV channels have had a field day in not just reporting on the power politics of the country but also acting and engaging as power brokers and Kingmakers.

Democracy of Pakistan is currently being threatened by biased Media. It is not a new phenomenon; since the early ages, it has been used by states for multiple purposes in different modes. It is particularly used in the context of war to boost the morale of the armed forces. However, the modern trend of technology, social media, and AI has altered the very way information is created and disseminated. Biased Media rapidly share fake news as anyone can write, post and share any information without any

need for verification. Among the biased media platforms, Facebook, Twitter and Google have turned into powerful enablers of vast disinformation campaigns. A case in point is the Arab Spring in the Middle East and Africa wherein Twitter and Facebook were largely used to spread anti-state narratives. Similarly, during the 2024 Indian elections, biased media reports massively permeated society targeting minorities, particularly Muslims through toxic narratives such as labelling Muslims "infiltrators". The "Love Jihad" narrative was also built to incite the Hindu majority against the Muslims for indirect political support.

Misinformation and Disinformation can influence public behaviour by altering the



organic processes of public opinion. Accurately informed citizens are the essence of democracy. However, fake news or MDM leads to poor decisions, such as not voting for a good leader. To illustrate, during primary elections in the state of New Hampshire, many people received calls in the voice of Joe Biden who said, "We know the value of voting democrats. You must save your vote for the November elections. Voting this Tuesday only enables the Republicans in their quest to elect Donald Trump again." The Biden administration denied the initiation of such a call, proving that it was an AI-generated sound meant to mimic Biden. In this way, people's opinion is changed and shaped by misinformation. Through AI-generated audio-

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visuals, a fake scenario is created to shatter public trust in the way elections are conducted, leading to public delusion about politics. For instance, in the Slovakia elections of 2023, a day before the election, an audio recording spread over social media with the leading candidate, Miklaj Simka, boasting about how he would rig the election in favor of his party. Usually, it propagated to attack the integrity of the election process.

Biased information shakes the very foundation of democracy by eroding trust between the ruler and the ruled. Institutions are the building blocks of a nation, as was described by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson in their book "Why Nations Fail" that

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it is trust in institutions that sets developed countries apart from developing ones. Conversely in various states, it has been observed that the spread of misinformation regarding the government and its policies has eroded public trust in the institutions. For instance, incessant propaganda against the judiciary in Pakistan fostered skepticism towards the impartial role of the court. Recently, a fake video went viral that showed Supreme Court's Justice Athar Minallah visiting former Prime Minister Imran Khan in prison after Khan complained about, allegedly, being denied the entitled facilities. As Ishrat Hussain proclaimed in his book, "Governing the Ungovernable", the trust deficit between the people

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and their institutions is one of the biggest reasons behind the economic crisis in Pakistan. The spread of biased media is threatening democracy by fueling the economic crisis in the country.

Biased media sow the seeds of polarization, eroding democratic values in society.

Democracy requires a society that is based on the principles of "us". However, biased news by using the vehicle of social media, has divided society into two distinct poles where one pole considers the other its enemy. Therefore, whenever they see any content, no matter how distorted or fake it may be, it only reaffirms their established opinion and is accepted as

the truth without any reasoning. This kind of behaviour in turn leads to the polarization of the society and enables manipulation. Democracy will only thrive in a peaceful and pluralistic society. This polarization of society challenges democracy by boosting extremism in society. Notably, the current wave of extremism in Pakistan was observed in the tragic case of Mashal Khan, the lynching of Prakash Kumara, the immolation of a tourist in Swat and Parachinar rivalry. These incidents owe their existence to the devastating consequences of biased information.

According to the Freedom House 2023 report, both the civilian authorities and military in Pakistan have curtailed media freedom in recent years.

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The PTI governance (2018-2022) accelerated this trend, but ~~its~~ it has become worse in recent years. Media outlets are facing interference with distribution and broadcast, the temporary disappearance of journalists, a ban on specific television presenters, physical attacks, and withdrawal of government advertising. In August 2022, media regulators took the ARY News television channel off the air after the PTI officials criticized the role of and involvement of the military in Pakistani politics on a broadcast. The official was arrested and charged with sedition and abetting mutiny. In October 2022, a gunman killed ARY News anchor Arshad Sharif in Kenya in an apparently targeted attack. However, decentralised media

also led to the spread of misinformation, echo chambers, and online harassment. During the recent election period and post-election period, Pakistan has seen a proliferation of misinformation aimed at influencing public opinion and political opponents.

A possible strategy to tackle biased media is media literacy and educating critical thinking from an early age. Students should be encouraged to question the authenticity of information, its aims, and its appeal. According to Nina Jankowicz, a journalist on biased information, if the truth is not repeatedly reinforced, people may eventually accept false information as true. Therefore, a constructive

effort should be made to increasingly share the true nature of any biased news.

International collaboration for the regulation of digital media is the need of the hour. There should be a mechanism for the verification of online platforms, such as the EU's Digital Services Act, which regulates online platforms to prevent the spread of biased news against democratic purposes. EU countries can be consulted in this regard for the collaboration and coordination.

Moreover, consistent fact checks by reputable media organisations are proven strategy in combating biased media. Applying this method helps identify and correct inform-



ation. The government can utilize its tech-savvy citizens for fact checking. In this context, brief inoculation games and videos can improve people's ability to identify information.

In conclusion, democracy relies on authentic deliberation and accurately informed citizens that shape the decision-making process through transparency.

However, the widespread proliferation of biased media poses a significant challenge to the very basis of democracy. Eliminating it is essential. Empowering it is essential. Empowering people to seek truth, sort fact from fiction, and discard falsehood is an essential building block to this pursuit, requiring a wider awareness of biased

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information by both citizens and the government. Additionally, public communication at various levels, government, non-governmental organizations, the media, and the research community, should be encouraged to distribute evidence-based information when it seems likely to be used in a harmful and misguided manner. Else, unregulated social media is bound to promote polarisation in society and produce political intolerance among the masses which is a threat to the democratic norms and stability of the state.

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