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## ESSAY MOCK

### BIASED MEDIA IS A REAL THREAT TO DEMOCRACY

#### 1. Introduction

- a) Significance of free and independent media in sustaining democratic spirit.
- b) Thesis Statement

#### 2. Instances which give credence to the notion proving biased media as a real threat to democracy

a) It sows the seed for political polarization  
Case study: Escalating the political divide between treasury bench and opposition party

b) It suppresses the blatant voices of political opponents and critical thinkers.  
Case study: Analysis on current and previous governments in curbing opponent voices



c) Concentration of media ownership in hands of few has raised concerns about independent democracy.

Case Study: Report by the Center for Media and Democracy in Pakistan

d) It offers no news coverage of extra-constitutional practices and human rights violation in marginalized areas.

Case Study: Recent mass protests in Bannu and extrajudicial killings

e) It curbs the voice of marginalized ethnic groups leading to isolation and sectarianism

Case Study: Recent protests (2 July 2024) in Quadian, Balochistan left unaddressed.

f) Sensationalism of religious and racial issues give birth to new wave of sectarianism which undermine the democratic regime

Case Study: Recent mob lynching incident in Swat and brutal killing of a man

g) Digital propaganda on social media influence election results

Case Study: Facebook's Cambridge Analytical Scandal (2016)

h) Twitter surpasses free speech limits used to influence voter's mind by populist leaders.

Case Study: Trump and Twitter



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i) It propagates false information and spread propaganda affecting democratic spirit

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j) Disinformation campaigns launched by rival countries to tarnish image of Pakistan's democracy.

Case Study: India's Uri False flag operation (2016)

3. Factors responsible for biased role of media which poses threat to democracy

a) Financial challenges led social media owners to succumb to state pressure

Case-in-point: Adnan Rehmat's report

b) Biased role of PTA in blocking online content against national interest

Case Study: Ban on X since February 2024

c) Civilian authorities and democratic forces have curtailed media freedom

Case Study: Freedom House 2023 Report

d) Disappearance of journalists, physical attacks and killings have sparked fear

Case Study: October 2022 killing of Arshad Shareef in Kenya

e) Ban on specific television programs and presenters is against democratic promise

Case-in-point: ARY News Channel off air under PDM (2022-23)



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b) Prohibition on <sup>highlighting</sup> insurgency affected areas  
Case study: Uncoverage of Balochistan and KP's insurgency & militant areas.

4. Recommendations to overcome the biased role of media and revive the democratic spirit

- a) Effective role of PTA and PEMRA be ensured
- b) Uplifting restrictions to promote free and fair role of media in shaping democracy.
- c) Media literacy needs to be given due impetus to critically evaluate and identify biases and propagandas
- d) Journalistic standards needs to maintained.

5. Conclusion

# THE ESSAY

During the past two decades, the media sector in Pakistan has grown immensely in terms of scale and development. Media, deemed as the fourth pillar of democracy, has a crucial role in keeping democratic norms intact. Media, in all its forms as print media, broadcasting media (radio, television) and electronic media (social media) has become a power broker and marker of public sentiments. Its role is to promote accurate information free of biases, and provide upto date and impartial knowledge



objectively. However, in recent years, the growing trend and sudden explosion of media has implications for the quality, impartiality and accuracy of the media landscape. The issue of State control on media remains and when it intersects with corporate imperatives, the results are not so positive for upholding of public interest, or creating a fair environment for access to knowledge and information, which ~~negot~~ lack of effective environment for ~~the~~ fair and free access to information ~~intum~~, undermine the democratic spirit of the country, deteriorating public confidence in government. In the recent years, media is seen to demonstrate a biased role with instances of escalating political polarization, uncovers of unconstitutional <sup>perhaps</sup> and marginalized voices, sensationalism, spreading of false information and strict compliance with State representatives due to multiple factors. However, this biased role has led to posing threat to democracy which needs effective recommendations to change the status-quo.

There are numerous instances which give credence of to the notion of examining media's role as biased which has ultimately posed a threat to democracy. The first instance is shown seen in



media's role in sowing the seeds for political polarization. Political polarization refers to process where individuals or groups become increasingly divided along political lines and develop animosity for other political tendencies. While political polarization is grown due to manifold factors, media has also played a role in exacerbating political polarization. The unnecessary media coverage of opponents criticizing and blaming the other political faction has to further escalation of animosity, discontent and hatred. Currently, examples are seen as how media presents and sensationalize the critical statements of ruling party and opposition leaders against each other. Thus, media has widened the political rifts leading to more polarization.

Secondly, while publicising the negative comments of rivals on one hand, media has also suppressed the blatant voice of political opponents and critical thinkers on matters of growing concerns. With the change in democratic regime and subsequent overthrow of a certain <sup>ruling</sup> party, media is also seen as changing priorities and conforming to ruling democratic forces. A case studies in this regard are provided as how current and previous governments have curbed the opponent voices.

For example: **The PDM meetings in 2018 government were**



Sometimes left uncovered. Similarly, recently, grievances of opposition parties are censored.

Therefore, such instances demonstrate that undue pressure from democratic officials lead media to suppress the voices of political opponents.

Moreover, another threat to democracy is posed by concentration of media ownership in the hands of few which has also raised concerns about pluralism and independence. The larger section of media journalists with less access to media ownership are unable to carry out independent and biasless research and coverage because they have to obey the instructions of the seniors. The act of violation may even lead to a handing over the responsibility to another journalist and even termination of service. According to report of Center for Media and Democracy Pakistan: "The concentration has led to lack of diverse viewpoints and focus on commercial interests over public welfare or journalistic integrity."

Hence, many journalists believe that the tradition of single ownership has considerably failed media's role and curtailed the democratic notions.

Another insightful concern about the



biased media role can be witnessed in extra-constitutional practices and human rights violation which get no <sup>news</sup> coverage. The marginalized areas of Pakistan, since the inception of Pakistan ~~has~~ have demanded equal socio-economic opportunities and just treatment as promised by the democratic slogans. Yet, their grievances are left unaddressed. **Latest case in point is recent mass protests in Bannu, KP.** The people of Bannu ~~are~~ <sup>have</sup> growing concern of "Operation Azm-e-Istihkam" starting from Bannu to control insurgency. Their peaceful protest was answered with excessive use of force, indiscriminate shelling and tear gases leading to ~~an~~ civilian fatalities and injuries. ~~Hence,~~ ~~such~~ But the ~~print~~ news channels simply maintained silence over the matter of extrajudicial killings. Therefore, media has exhibited a biased role in highlighting the human rights violating violation raising concerns over effectiveness of democracy.

Furthermore, media has also curbed the voice of marginalized ethnic groups leading to isolation and sectarianism. The prejudices against marginalized groups or parties has also lead to ~~sep~~ the Separation of East Pakistan in 1971. ~~As~~ The province of Balochistan is also heading in same footprints with demand for



listening their grievances. However, media has not played an effective role in pinpointing their grievances. **The recent protest (July 2024) in Gawadar, Balochistan was left unaddressed.** The media could not bring to the surface the event due to external pressure from state entities. Hence, when it comes to highlight marginalized factions, media remain silent and social media is also subject to disruption of service.

Another glaring instance of media's biased role is exhibited in sensationalism of certain issues related to religion and race which give birth to new wave of sectarianism. ~~On one hand,~~ the prevailing silence of on relevant issues of a provinces presents a sharp contrast to the over sensationalism and ~~use~~ unnecessary spotlight to religious and social issues. Emergence of numerous sectarian groups to influence the democracy which relies on national integration for ~~sm~~ its smooth functioning. **The recent mob lynching incident in Madyan, Swat and brutal killing of a man on Desecration of The Holy Quran was is an example.** Almost every News Channel and social media platforms spread the news like fire with rapid sharing of videos showing the incident of his burning alive and torturing of dead body. Such



footages splits the nation into two conflicting viewpoints and which harms the national integration. <sup>Hence,</sup> loss of national integration and emergence of sectarian and ethnic groups negatively disrupt the democratic functioning.

In addition, digital propaganda spread through social media influence election results. While democracy relies on evidence-based discourse and wellinformed citizens, election related misinformation has boosted polarization and undermined public trust. A case-in point is Spain elections last year, where antidemocratic agents had imitated Regional government's website to claim that terrorists plan to attack Poling Station.

**Another glaring example is Facebook's Cambridge Analytical Scandal (2016).**

Cambridge analytical company collected data from Facebook users and manipulated data to create ads for political campaigns affecting US presidential elections. Hence, to conclude, digital media has adopted a biased role in presenting misleading information thereby affecting smooth democratic process of elections.

Another connected issue on the social media's role is provided by twitter which has surpassed free speech limits. This has paved the way to influence voter's mind by populist leaders. The example in this regard is **Trump and**



### use of Twitter for political campaign.

When Donald Trump's election related news was censored on news channels, he used Twitter as a medium to propagate his mandate and political tendencies. Hence,

Social media platforms like Twitter are increasingly politicized for election procedure and political movements. Which sometimes surpass free speech limits.

To add further instances of social media's role, social media is also used to propagate propagandas against potential rival candidates.

Most of the times, contesting candidate is unaware of the action he never performed but the manipulation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) create fake content and videos against him.

For instance, In US Presidential election, deep fake videos and fabricated online content through AI was used against political candidates to harm their reputation.

Moreover, the use of echo chambers amplified the political ideologies of certain parties and made them reluctant to accept other political ideologies as it shows content related to algorithms. Therefore, social media's false information has hampered the democratic process.

Likewise, this disinformation campaign add fuel to the fire when the rival



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Countries used them to tarnish image of another country. India's Narendra Modi's Hindutava regime has exacerbated anti-Muslim sentiments through spread of such false propagandas. A Case study in this regard is **India's Unlabeled False Flag Operation (2016)** whereby Pakistan was blamed for terrorist activities in Kashmir which were firmly denied by Pakistan. In conclusion, social media and broadcasting media surpass the boundaries of state by not only developing anti-state ~~statements~~ sentiments but also ~~aggravating~~ <sup>harming</sup> hostile neighbouring countries' image. All these factors undermine democratic spirit.

So far the instances proving social media as potential threat to democracy have been discussed. Now, the factors responsible for the biased role of media will be discussed. These factors have undertaken role of media as independent institution and has also posed threat to democracy.

The first factor is financial challenges that have led media owners and managers to succumb to increasing pressure from the state, including the government and security agencies. Such institutions do not accept critical media coverage. As a result, advertisement revenues



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have diminished, and many prominent journalists and talk shows have been silenced. Consequently, people are drifting to online sources to access relevant and unbiased information but this source is also subjected to disinformation campaigns. Therefore,

**Adnan Rehman noted that Express Media Group and Dunya media group reportedly laid off 200 journalists and cut down salaries of the remaining by 15 to 35 percent in recent months. Therefore,**

financial ~~res~~ constraints lead to ~~so~~ media ~~tiltering~~ accepting state pressure which has affected democracy and put it at stake.

The second factor is the biased role of Pakistan Telecommunicating Authorities (PTA) curbing internet services and banning blocking platforms affecting digital media landscape. PTA has the authority to block online content deemed inappropriate or against national interests. The most recent evidence of this practice is a nationwide Twitter (now X) ban since February 2024.

Ban on X was made to quell public discontent over allegations of election fraud. According to Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRC): Shutting down internet networks bleed online business and commerce and adds to misery of an already fragile economy. Hence, PTA's unnecessary blockade infringes on



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on people's right to democratic decision making.

The third factor affecting media's role and undermining democratic norms is the action of civilian authorities and

undemocratic forces. Their roles have curtailed media freedom. According to Freedom House 2023 report, both civilian and undemocratic authorities have curtailed media freedom in recent years. Hence, media outlets are facing interference with distribution and broadcast which is against the democratic tradition of

Another factor of widespread concern is frequent disappearance of journalists, with physical attacks and even killing target killings which have sparked fear among journalists. Uptil now, many journalists have been kidnapped and severely tortured, while some received threats of harm to their family members influencing their independent working for a bigger cause. In October 2022, a gunman killed Arshad Sharif, ARY News anchor in Kenya in an apparently targeted attack. Since then, investigation of the matter saw prolongation and delays till 2024 when Kenyan judiciary declared his assassination as unconstitutional.

To conclude, the Pakistani journalists are



largely insecure both within and outside state boundaries making democratic independence a distant dream.

Furthermore, ban on specific television programs and presentors is against democratic promise of offering free media to everyone. The media sector face multiple dangers when they broadcast and share conflicting perspectives that are against Pakistani politics. Media faced similar dangers under PDM government (April 2022-August 2023). In August 2022, media regulators took ARY News television off air after PTI official criticized the role and involvement of undemocratic forces in Pakistani politics in a broadcast. The officer was charged with sedition and abetting mutiny. In conclusion, banning television programs and levelling false charges on public statements poses potential threat to democracy.

Additionally, there is prohibition on access to militancy and insurgency affected areas. The province of Balochistan, the largest area wise area has been marginalized since Pakistan's inception. Similarly, the tribal Pashtun belts of Bannu, and South Waziristan are largely neglected segments of KP. Yet authorities have refrained ordered local journalists to refrain



from discussing the separatist activity in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunwa. The ignorance of these grievances and have led to demand of separating these areas by the sectarian and separatist sections. While the rebel or militant groups threaten ~~them~~ <sup>media journalists</sup> in return who allegedly side with the government.

However, certain recommended measures can be adopted to overcome the biased role of media and revive the democratic spirits. Firstly, effective role of PTA and PEMRA <sup>must</sup> be ensured. The role of PTA is to monitor and check telecommunication and online content while PEMRA regulates electronic media including television and radio broadcasts. Both the regulatory bodies must ensure safeguard of national interest but must not put unnecessary restrictions on internet networks and social media platforms as X.

Secondly, to shape effective democratic traditions, all restrictions must be uplifted to promote free and fair role of media. The Pakistani public and citizens are educated enough to analyse, and reject misinformation and false propagandas. They must be allowed free access to these platforms and without frequent internet shut downs to



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build their opinion and widen their knowledge base. Hence, undue restrictions on internet services and platforms need to be uplifted.

Thirdly, there is a need to promote media literacy to critically evaluate and identify biases and propagandas. Acceptance or rejection of possible biased information should be left to the netizens to decide themselves. Hence, media literacy is to given to identify false propagandas.

Fourthly, journalistic standards needs to be maintained to revive democracy. Journalism is a much responsible profession which requires a bold, self-confident, fearless and resilient journalist. Journalistic standards marked by presentation of accurate information, dissemination of potential ~~problem~~ knowledge base, education of Pakistani people by upto date awareness and building development of critical thinking skills to help in contribute in decision making should be inculcated. Therefore, there is a need to develop and uplift journalistic standards.

To conclude the discussion, the role of media is nowadays largely observed as subject to potential biases and prejudices which are affecting democratic regimes.



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The undue intervention of State and non-state entities, lack of security to journalists and media-persons, unnecessary check and balance on television programs and internet platforms and ineffective role of PTA

are multiple factors responsible for the biased role of media. As a result, numerous instances reflect to prove the ineffectiveness of media. The biased role of media as seen by growing political polarization, suppressing ~~the~~ and neglecting the marginalized voices, ~~highlighting~~ hiding extraconstitutional practices, and sensationalism of certain contents can only be encountered by adopting effective measures. Both government and media must go hand in hand to ensure free and fair spread of knowledge and information with the motive of educating and shaping the public opinions. Only through adopting effective measures and accountability of all state institutions, media can play a biasless role to revive democratic spirit instead of posing a threat to it.

