



Advance Social Science Archives Journal

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol.2 No.4, Oct-Dec, 2024. Page No. 524-533

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



## COMBATING FAKE NEWS AND PROPAGANDA: POLICY APPROACHES FOR SAFEGUARDING MEDIA INTEGRITY AND PUBLIC TRUST IN PAKISTAN

<b>Muhammad Noaman Yousaf</b>	Lecturer, Department of International Relations, National University of Modern Languages, Rawalpindi
<b>Majid Ali Shah</b>	Assistant Professor, Department of Media Studies, IQRA University Islamabad H9 Campus
<b>Munazza Khalid</b>	Lecturer, Department of Politics and International Relations, International Islamic University Islamabad

### ABSTRACT

This article examines the complex problem of countering propaganda and fake news in Pakistan, highlighting the necessity of sensible legislative measures to protect media integrity and rebuild public confidence. It looks at how common disinformation is becoming, especially on social media, and how it affects democratic processes and public discourse, negatively. The article outlines a number of policy solutions, including as media literacy programs, regulatory frameworks for digital media, and the part played by government organizations, media outlets, and civil society in resolving the problem. The report supports a balanced strategy that encourages free speech while preventing the spread of misleading material, drawing on global best practices. It also emphasizes how crucial it is for stakeholders to work together and implement open, fact-based policies in order to shield the public from the damaging impacts of propaganda and fake news. In order to guarantee a better informed and resilient society, the essay ends with suggestions for bolstering media governance, encouraging responsible journalism, and raising public awareness. Qualitative approach has been utilized in the research process and content analysis along with thematic and discourse analysis of the available data has been undertaken as per the research demands. The article is an attempt, addition and contribution to academia, and guideline for scholars, students and policy makers.

**Keywords:** Disinformation, Misinformation, Polarization, Media Literacy, Deep Fake Detection, Propaganda Crises

### INTRODUCTION

The concept of fake news is not at all new. Although related concepts like "false news" have been used since the 16th century and it has long been known that news may sway public opinion for political or financial purposes, it seems to have originated in the late 19th century. Yellow journalism, a word from the late 19th century, was used to characterize overblown or blatantly manufactured tales, similar to fake news of today, that were linked to financial gain for news organizations. Yellow journalism, which was likely the precursor to tabloid news, has been accused of fueling the fervor that resulted in the Spanish-American War. The progressive era saw a decline in concerns about yellow journalism, but worries about media

manipulation may have peaked in the 1920s after Walter Lippmann's writings were published. Drawing from his experiences as a writer for the War Department and the State Department during World War I, Lippmann was alarmed by how easily the public had been duped into supporting a war that it had initially opposed. Since then, academics and public intellectuals have documented how the media may sway public opinion to further different political objectives (Lance E. Mason, 2018).

The spread of fake news has become a widespread and intricate problem in the modern era of abundant information and digital communication. While fake news specifically refers to information presented as real news with the intention of spreading falsehoods and misleading readers for other gains, disinformation is a broader concept that is defined as purposefully false, inaccurate, or misleading content seeking to cause harm or benefit. Fake news has an impact on politics, society, and public trust in addition to influencing individual opinions since it permeates every aspect of our connected world, from social media to traditional news sources (Duong Hoai Lan, 2024).

People have been influenced by disinformation over Brexit, US riots, and the European refugee issue. Even prior to the pandemic, the administration and media in Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria were viewed as totally untrustworthy. For the majority, however, it was Covid-19 that brought with it an unending torrent of misinformation. The primary cause of this quick spread was social media. Authorities and conventional media also faced a great deal of criticism. Problems included ministries playing politics, news reporters taking short cuts, and the EU continuing to be distant. Speaking with Europeans, we found that their distrust of these organizations has made them more selective about where they get their information. There has been a trend in Southern Europe to trust news sources and regional and local administrations. Participants in Eastern Europe often looked to the European Union or international news agencies for trustworthy information when searching abroad. Had greater faith in traditional media and national governments in the North and West. Greater transparency and education are admirable long-term objectives. However, it must be a false assumption the creation of a world free from false information. Ultimately, any attempt to establish strict control over the information flow brought us back to the age-old query: Who is watching the watchers? (Boyle, 2022).

In many countries, including autocracies and democracies, conspiracy theories and misleading information have infiltrated the mainstream political landscape. Pakistan is no exception. In Pakistan, there are significant obstacles associated with believing conspiracy theories and misleading information, as well as with rejecting it. These beliefs may negatively impact interstate relations, attitudes towards minorities, and political behavior. A nationally representative phone survey uncovered widespread misconceptions and conspiracy theories about Pakistan's standing overseas, its indigenous minority communities, and its state military might (Muhammad Tariq, 2023). The impact of disinformation on Pakistani society is significant. Instead, it has profound effects on how the public is framed, how institutions are trusted, and how

public opinion is undermined. These effects might deepen societal divisions and polarization. In Pakistan, where political conflict, religious tensions, and ethnic fault lines have the capacity to upend state foundations, misinformation has the potential to exacerbate existing divisions and obstruct the development of an informed populace (Haroon Elahi, 2023).

One of the top ten nation's most susceptible to climate change is Pakistan. It becomes the responsibility of that country's institutions, especially the news media, to inform, convey, and educate the public about the possible risks of the crisis in such a perilous position. Many studies have been conducted to far that have demonstrated the significance of mass media, particularly news media, which is the primary source of information regarding climate change. But in the post-truth era and highly selective media landscape of today, the "politicized rhetoric" surrounding climate change and a deluge of false information have made the job of the media, and climate journalists in particular, extremely difficult. As a result, in order to combat this erroneous information, journalists frequently choose to use a variety of strategies, such as hiring fact-checkers, which adds to their reporting schedule and may make covering climate change more difficult (Waqas Ejaz, 2021 ).

Similar to other parts of the world, "disinformation" poses a serious danger to democratic norms and public discourse in Pakistan. Disinformation spread over the internet has increased or created problems with access to reliable information, political polarization, social media discussion manipulation, news media confidence, health-related information, and hate speech. Online disinformation played an unquestionably detrimental role during the Covid-19 pandemic in Pakistan because of the threats to public health and safety that were brought about by rumors, conspiracy theories, and misleading communications about the coronavirus. However, observers have already noticed the rise of misinformation in Pakistan before to the epidemic over a number of topics, including commerce, governance, foreign policy, electoral politics, and health. The risks that misinformation poses to Pakistani people' ability to participate in society politics are highlighted by the nation's recent increase in Internet usage and the significant role that social media has taken on in national politics (Disinformation and the Freedom of Opinion and Expression , 2024 ).

Media Policy in Pakistan has become inevitable and indispensable combating the problems faced due to the challenges posed by fake news and propaganda. The menace has significantly thwarted the democratic process, social cohesion in the state, safety of the individuals, economic stability and press freedom in Pakistan. Media policy is essential for preserving public confidence in media organizations and enabling citizens to make educated decisions. It gives other points of view a forum, holds those in positions of authority accountable, and promotes public dialogue. The creation of public information literacy initiatives is aided by media policy. The protection of press freedom and the necessity for regulation can be balanced with the aid of media policy. A lack of diversity in opinions and material can be caused by concerns with media ownership concentration, which are addressed by effective

media policy. It is imperative that media policies have measures to protect journalists against intimidation, assault, and censorship. This way, reporters may carry out their duties without worrying about facing consequences.

Policies can assist programs aimed at raising public media literacy levels. By enabling people to assess information critically and identify false material, these programs can help people become more educated and build a more informed society. Media policies have the power to establish moral guidelines and conduct standards for reporters and media companies, guaranteeing that their work is impartial, responsible, and fair. Media policies must change to meet the benefits and difficulties posed by new technologies and platforms, such as social media and digital news outlets, as media consumption rapidly moves to digital platforms. The economic difficulties that media companies confront, such as those pertaining to advertising revenue, the shift to digital media, and competition, can also be addressed by media policy.

### **Objectives of the Paper:**

The objectives of the paper can be stated as:

1. To unravel the situational analysis of the crises faced by Pakistani media and society regarding fake news and propaganda.
2. What are the significant potential challenges in resolving the disinformation crises?
3. Highlighting the policy measures and recommendations on short, medium and long term to tackle those challenges.

### **Scope of the Paper:**

The paper is an endeavor to highlight the fake news and propaganda crises in Pakistan, the challenges it has brought and the policy recommendations to tackle the crises. The paper will be an excellent read for the policy makers, organizations, thinktanks and academia.

### **Research Methodology:**

In order to conduct the research regarding the situational analysis of the crises faced by Pakistani media and society from disinformation and challenges posed in tackling the disinformation Qualitative approach has been utilized, as the research is qualitative in its approach and flexible in its design. The published books and research articles on the subject were considered important documented material. Discourse analysis and content analysis techniques were applied to documented material analyses. Analysis of systematic, substantive, and formal messages was the main emphasis of content analysis.

### **Situational Analysis/Policy Environment:**

After the 2018 general elections, Rehman, Hussain, and Durreshwar (2020) found at least 72 purportedly "fake news" pieces on Pakistani social media over the course of three months. The topics covered by this misinformation included politics, the military, the judiciary, and economy, and theological matters, supporting the assertion that the harmful proliferation of the state and society as a whole are being impacted by misinformation (Rehman, 2020). Ghani & Khan (2020b) employed a

nationwide representative survey of 503 people to investigate how the Pakistani public perceived online and offline disinformation as well as the tactics they employed to combat it. Roughly 60% of poll participants claimed they could only "sometimes" recognize false information when they saw it, while about 75% stated they came across it at least once a week (Ghani, 2020). In Pakistan, misinformation about health existed prior to the Covid-19 outbreak. The most famous of these is the 2019 event involving fictitious anti-vaccine videos that attacked Pakistan's polio vaccination effort. As a result, over two million children were left unvaccinated and there was burning, violent attacks on medical personnel, and the suspension of the vaccination drive (Rehmat, 2022). In a thorough examination of 227 public WhatsApp groups in Pakistan between March and April 2020, Javed et al. (2022) found that 14% of the more than 7,000 texts and images pertaining to Covid19 contained false material. The misinformation ranged widely, from invented death tolls and treatments to incorrect facts regarding the virus's origin (Javed, 2022). Since 2013, a number of social, religious, and political players in the nation have skillfully employed disinformation to incite "mass anxieties" in the populace in order to further their socio-political objectives by integrating incorrect information into narratives that are central to identity, nation, and culture. According to their thesis, local organizations may be purposefully spreading false information in Pakistan in order to benefit themselves (Cheema, 2019).

The PEMRA Ordinance, 2002 established PEMRA with the objective of regulating electronic media, encompassing radio and television. Among its responsibilities are licensing, content regulation, and standard compliance assurance. After that in 2007 PEMRA ordinance 2007 was passed that increased the powers of PEMRA regarding the standard of content to be displayed and media licensing (PAKISTAN ELECTRONIC MEDIA REGULATORY AUTHORITY ORDINANCE-2002 AS AMENDED BY THE PEMRA (AMENDMENT) ACT, 2007 , 2007). PEMRA (Amendment) Act, 2011 expanded PEMRA's authority to levy fines and penalties for non-compliance and strengthened its role in overseeing media content and advertising. PEMRA (Amendment) Ordinance, 2015 included content standards, cross-media ownership limitations, and media ownership regulations. Aimed to lessen conflicts of interest and increase openness. (PEMRA) Act, 2017 unified several modifications into a solitary legislative framework, enhancing PEMRA's capabilities and protocols. It also covered the expanding field of digital media, particularly the regulation of online material. Digital Media Policy launched in 2020 proposed rules and regulations for digital material in an effort to address the growth of social media and digital platforms. It aimed to strike a compromise between censoring offensive content and allowing freedom of speech (The Gazette of Pakistan).

### **Analysis and Findings:**

Pakistan is facing a variety of challenges regarding the implementation of contemporary media policy against disinformation. One of the main challenges in the policy framework is to maintain a balance between countering misinformation and disinformation while still protecting the freedom of speech of the citizens which is

their constitutional right. Pakistan media is already facing censorship issues and any attempt in curbing misinformation can be dealt with criticism from civil society, journalists and other stakeholders and considered an initiative to thwart press freedom (Rehmat, 2022).

Various Political and social factors can contribute towards hindering the misinformation tackling measures. Politicians and Political stakeholders utilize misinformation for their political agendas and thus the regulatory mechanisms that should be implemented may be regulated regarding their interests. In the past various fake news and misinformation has been reported by researchers. In one of the research conducted In relation to politics and politicians, a total of twenty-two falsehoods were exposed by various outlets, including journalists, government agencies, and the politicians themselves. A total of 26,154 shares, 10,728 likes, and 1,552 comments were received by these stories. It's interesting to note that throughout the three months of our investigation, fake news about politicians was the most common, but it received less attention than news about foreign relations (Haseeb Ur Rehman, 2020). In the same way on societal level that is more polarized its more prone and vulnerable to misinformation. It is argued that persons with higher levels of emotional polarization are more likely to believe in-party-congruent misinformation and less likely to believe out-party-congruent misinformation. This affective polarization has an impact on misinformation belief (Jenke, 2024).

With the emergence of Modern digital technologies in the shape of AI and social media, it has become hard for the regional actors and countries to cope up with them and frame their regulations regarding it. Digital technologies on one hand can be a source to curb misinformation through its fact checking mechanisms, Deepfake detection, social media algorithms, Natural language processing and other tools can also be a huge source of misinformation and can hinder the regulatory policy framework as majority of the misinformation cases are reported on modern technologies and social media and has severely impacted the public interest (Sadiq Muhammed, 2022 ).

Legal Framework regarding countering disinformation is another challenge regarding tackling the crises. As the framework must be suited according to the modern digital standards as well as it must be comprehensive covering each and everything and must be a consensus-based structure. The essential elements of effective regulation, such as necessity, proportionality, clarity, and public interest, must be identified. In the end, it highlights how difficult it continues to be to create flexible legal frameworks that safeguard social welfare in the digital age without sacrificing fundamental rights (Banchio, 2024).

The other significant challenge regarding disinformation is its international origin. Sometimes the disinformation campaign has an international root aimed at achieving certain national interests through it. One of the examples is Russia, s disinformation apparatus. Social media provides a favorable setting for Russia's actions, which are widely believed to have attempted to influence election outcomes in Western democracies. For a number of reasons, social media, which is currently utilized by

vast majorities in all European civilizations as well as other cultures, might be considered a crucial ally in Russia's efforts to prevail in the information war. They serve as uncensored spaces for people to communicate and consume information; they may quickly scale and create informational cascades; and social media algorithms tend to favor visually striking and emotionally charged material. In this case the local machinery to tackle disinformation is challenged to great deal and countering the campaign requires local and international collaboration (Jan Zilinsky, 2024).

Technical expertise of media and fundamental knowledge both at the public level and at the level of policy makers is a challenge. Without a doubt, media literacy is a vital tool in the war against misinformation. A critical and digitally literate population is far more likely to be able to evaluate the information they come across online, recognize reliable sources, and make informed assessments in their roles as customers, citizens, and other domains. Possessing media literacy makes it possible to interact more thoroughly and creatively with the online (and offline) media landscape. On the other hand, for Policy makers, it's the same, which needs proper technical expertise in the media field to resolve the crises on short-, medium- and long-term levels (The Importance Of Media Literacy In Countering Disinformation, 2024)

#### **Research Findings:**

1. Disinformation has significantly affected Pakistan on Political, Social, Economic, Cultural and other lines. While the common citizens with low literacy rates and increasingly less political education are easily prone to be affected by disinformation bias, the Policy makers have failed to curb the crises as they lack proper technical expertise and proficiency with the contemporary technological trends in this regard.
2. Tackling the issue of disinformation in Pakistan is a daunting and uphill task. Pakistan is facing various challenges in this regard like a policy balance between taking action against misinformation and still protecting fundamental right of freedom of expression, misinformation a source of interest for some selected few, increased polarization on societal level, framing regulations coping with modern technological standards, developing a systematic and comprehensive legal framework, tackling disinformation campaigns with international origin and lack of relevant technical expertise.

#### **Policy Recommendations:**

1. Increasing use of the contemporary digital tools of fact checking like news checking sources online Factchecking.org, PolitiFact, Snopes.com, Washington Post Fact Checker, logically. Ai etc.
2. The public on general and students and scholars in educational institutions in particular must be equipped with strategies and tools in recognizing fake news, check the credibility of the information provided on social media and other platforms and become aware of the danger's misinformation can cause.

3. The government must strengthen and review the contemporary prevalent legal framework system applicable and revise and regulate it regarding the new challenges presented by fake news.
4. Functional Specialization methodology must be applied in the media departments and experts related to Artificial intelligence, Cyber security, communication and misinformation must be hired that can quickly and efficiently address the issues.
5. Make a collaborative effort with politicians, religious leaders, influencers, motivational speakers and others in disseminating correct information to the public.
6. Involving Civil society in addressing the fake news and propaganda crises by defining different roles and different tactics like Cofacts platform utilized in Taiwan that uses crowdsourcing and Seoul National University Factcheck Centre used by South Korea.
7. The government must improve its accountability mechanisms in addressing the reported misinformation by enforcing strongly the real name registration policies and highlighting fake accounts.
8. Steps must be taken to make it difficult for different stakeholders to monetize the fake content based on disinformation on media platforms.
9. Funds must be invested by government and different stakeholders in technology-oriented solutions in identifying and addressing the fake news and accounts online.
10. Funded partnerships must be done with different stakeholders involved in the process like businessman, journalists, academic institutions and governmental and non-governmental organizations including non-profit ones.
11. Human Rights violations, freedom of speech and expression concerns are one of the grave issues in representative democracies that are highlighted by different national and international watchdogs in third world countries. Thus, it must be taken into consideration that while formulating the policy regarding misinformation the fundamental human rights granted by the constitution of Pakistan must not be jeopardized or effected.
12. In communication, honesty and integrity are highly valued in Islam. It cautions against disseminating lies. and promotes the confirmation of information prior to accepting or sharing it. Pakistan as a Muslim majority country can utilize role of Islamic preaching and practices that can play its integral part in the campaign against fake news and disinformation.
13. As Disinformation is a global phenomenon and not restricted to a particular country or a region. So, Pakistan should learn from the tools and tactics utilized by different advanced countries in combating it. Europe and United States are severely affected by the crises. As Digital technologies has made it happen; despite thwarting the technological change process, they are utilizing the same modern digital tools and technologies to fight it.



**Conclusion:**

In order to effectively combat disinformation in Pakistan, a multidimensional strategy based on media literacy, education, and community involvement is needed. People can learn to be better discriminating information consumers by developing their critical thinking abilities and encouraging a culture of verification. Encouraging transparency and fortifying journalism ethics inside media organizations are also critical to guaranteeing information accuracy. Furthermore, judicious use of social media and technology can aid in halting the spread of misleading information. Ultimately, creating a more knowledgeable and resilient society will require a shared commitment to honesty and accountability, backed by strong institutional and educational frameworks. There must be a realistic approach towards misinformation. As the menace cannot be ended overall. So, a coordinated approach from different stakeholders involved and effected by disinformation must be taken into action. Institutions must be on high alert in fact checking and other mechanisms of intercepting misinformation and timely response must be given.

**References:**

- Banchio, P. R. (2024). Legal Framework to Combat Disinformation and Hate Speech on Digital Platforms.
- Boyle, J. (2022). *European Voices For Healthier Democracies: Combatting Disinformation, Misinformation & Fake News*. Debating Europe.
- Cheema, A. C. (2019). Mobilising Mass Anxieties: Fake News and the Amplification of Socio-Political Conflict in Pakistan. *Fake News & Elections in Asia*, 17-37.
- Disinformation and the Freedom of Opinion and Expression . (2024 ). Media Matters for Democracy.
- Disinformation and the Freedom of Opinion and Expression . (n.d.). 1-11. Media Matters for Democracy.
- Duong Hoai Lan, T. M. (2024). Exploring fake news awareness and trust in the age of social media among university student TikTok users. *Cogent Social Sciences*, 10(1), 1-24.
- Ghani, A. &. (2020). *Misinformation in the Public Eye. Media Matters for Democracy*. Retrieved from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1atFtFJKAmMcjcQ0MO7HY9cTKeLJ68Ar/view?usp=sharing>
- Haroon Elahi, W. Z. (2023). The Dynamics of Disinformation: Understanding How Pakistani Social Media Users Navigate and React to Fake News. *Global Digital and Print Media Review*, 4(1), 124-132.
- Haseeb Ur Rehman, S. H. (2020). Social Media, Democracy and Fake News in Pakistan: An Analysis. *Global Political Review*, 5(1), 84-93.
- Jan Zilinsky, Y. T. (2024 ). Justifying an Invasion: When Is Disinformation Successful? *POLITICAL COMMUNICATION*, 1-22.
- Javed, R. T. (2022). A Deep Dive into Covid-19-related Messages on WhatsApp in Pakistan. *Social Network Analysis and Mining*, 12(5).

- Jenke, L. (2024). Affective Polarization and Misinformation Belief. *Political Behavior*, 825–884.
- Lance E. Mason, D. G. (2018). Media Literacy, Democracy, and the Challenge of Fake News. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 10(2), 1-10.
- Muhammad Tariq, A. S. (2023). The Proliferation of Inaccurate and Misleading Information through the Use of Social Media: The Impact on Pakistani Society. *Qlantic Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 4(4), 90-99.
- PAKISTAN ELECTRONIC MEDIA REGULATORY AUTHORITY ORDINANCE-2002 AS AMENDED BY THE PEMRA (AMENDMENT) ACT, 2007 . (2007). PAKISTAN ELECTRONIC MEDIA REGULATORY AUTHORITY.
- Rehman, H. U. (2020). Social Media, Democracy and Fake News in Pakistan: An Analysis. *Global Political Review*, 1, 84-93.
- Rehmat, W. N. (2022). *Countering Disinformation in Pakistan: Lessons and Recommendations for Digital Journalism*. Freedom Network.
- Sadiq Muhammed, S. K. (2022 ). The disaster of misinformation: a review of research in social media. *International Journal of Data Science and Analytics*, 271–285.
- The Gazette of Pakistan. (n.d.). The Government of Pakistan .  
*The Importance Of Media Literacy In Countering Disinformation*. (2024). Retrieved from The European Digital Media Observatory: <https://edmo.eu/areas-of-activities/media-literacy/the-importance-of-media-literacy-in-countering-disinformation/#>
- Waqas Ejaz, M. I. (2021 ). Understanding Influences, Misinformation, and Fact-Checking Concerning Climate-Change Journalism in Pakistan. *Journalism Practice* , 1-21.