



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

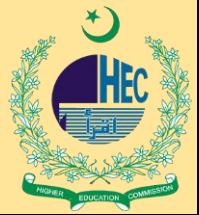
Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol. 04 No. 02. Oct-Dec 2025. Page#.306-318

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

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

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17288745>



Digital Surveillance and Political Expression: Analyzing the Effects of State Monitoring of Influencers and Public Figures on Online Political Discourse in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Digital media in Pakistan have been growing at a very fast pace, and it has revolutionized political communication so that people who influence, and those who are influential in politics can have direct communication with the citizens and also be able to control the political discourse. But this democratization of discourse has come more and more to fall under the shadow of the state surveillance. This report looks at how digital surveillance has impacted political speech among the Pakistani influencers and publicity. Based on a qualitative and interpretive study design, the data were gathered in the form of semi-structured interviews with 18 respondents, who were journalists, digital activists, and media figures. Using thematic analysis, we found five prevalent themes, which were the perceived ubiquity of surveillance, fear and self-censorship, strategic response via coded communication, digital disillusionment, and reclaiming agency via covert resistance. Evidence indicates that surveillance gives rise to a paradoxical process, as on the one hand it inhibits free expression as a result of fear and intimidation, but, on the other hand, surveillance leads to imaginative, oblique forms of dissent and the re-invention of civic life. Influencers will use selective silence, humor, and symbolic language to negotiate visibility in order to find a balance between influence and personal security. The paper ends by concluding that the surveillance of Pakistani citizens by the state has transformed the politics of the internet to give rise to a space of restrained expression and defensive communication and not blunt repression. These insights form part of the larger debates on digital authoritarianism and freedom of expression by hybrid democracies. The

study highlights the importance of open digital governance, enhanced privacy and renewed focus on democratic communication ethics in the changing digital Pakistan.

Keywords: *Online Censorship, Political Expression, Influencers, Pakistan, Online Discourse, Self-Censorship, Hybrid Regimes.*

Introduction

Intersection of state control and digital technology has created a significant trend known as digital surveillance, a tendency that helps governments to observe the activities collected over the internet, follow political discussions, and control the circulation of information (Zuboff, 2019).

Digital surveillance is the act of collecting, analyzing and using data collected through digital platforms in order to monitor, forecast or control the actions and communications of individuals. Such practices are frequently supported in democratic systems, under the banners of national security, counterterrorism, or avoiding cybercrime. However, in weak democracies or in hybrid forms of democracies, including Pakistan, these mechanisms are often employed to assert control over the online domain, silence dissenting voices, and abort the freedom of speech (Freedom House, 2023). Digital surveillance has tremendous effects on the political aspect especially to those who controlled the political scene who have a huge follower on the internet whose influence shapes the masses as well as political discourse. The position of the influence and journalists and political commentators in the online public space are tied to their visibility and credibility; they are a formidable force when it comes to forming the discourse, but they are also particularly susceptible to government surveillance and threats (Shirky, 2011). The digital governance of Pakistan has changed dramatically over the last ten years. The enactment of Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 was a break in point concerning the relationship between the state and the digital users of the media. Although the law was supposedly created to prevent cybercrime and ensure that citizens are not subjected to harassment and abusive actions of internet users, it has been actively criticized due to its broad definitions and unrestrained prerogatives of law enforcement officials (Amnesty International, 2021). More recent laws and rules on the subject by the Pakistan Telecom Authority (PTA) have added more options of state censorship on digital materials, giving the government a free hand to delete, bar or restrict access to online content considered to be unlawful. The combination of this legal structure and the technological ability to monitor has led to the atmosphere of uncertainty and fear in people who engage in digital content creation and political commentary. However, over the recent years, several instances have been documented when either journalists, activists, and influencers were harassed online, arrested, or even received judicial setbacks simply because they expressed opposing political views or spoke ill of state institutions (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

These measures are a manifestation of new form of digital authoritarianism, in which governments use innovative technologies to keep citizens subdued to influence opinions and curtailed media rights (Howard and Hussain, 2013). The trend is coupled with an overall political setting in Pakistan with censorship and journalists pressures, as well as limited civic spaces (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Originally regarded as emancipatory in the field of political conversation, social media has become more and more a glacier on which surveillance and propaganda have been practiced alongside activism and expression. This duality is paradoxical, on the one hand, though, solely on the basis of digital sources, the instrument of political involvement is provided; on the other hand, surveillance and control can also be realized using digital sources. This is the contradiction that thrives in the given study.

Such a phenomenon as introducing watchfulness over influencers and prominent figures in Pakistan cannot be comprehended as the violation of privacy as well as as the prominent force defining the boundaries of political speech. The intermediaries between the state or government and the people are the influencers, who frequently have huge following as well as discuss political issues. Their stories are either justified or criticizing to governmental power, so they can be considered valuable actors in the modern information setting. The diversity and authenticity of the online discourse are ruined when these voices are exposed to systematic surveillance, intimidation, or censorship (Deibert, 2019). The outcome is the creation of a virtual space in which one controls the creation of meaning, political dissent is suppressed, and confirmation is imposed implicitly.

Besides, not every surveillance is embodied in direct repression: many tend to be carried out using the tools of psychology and the sense of chilling the checkspeak, as a result (Penney, 2016).

The study orchestrates itself into the general discourse of media freedom versus digital authoritarianism in an attempt to comprehend the impact of the surveillance practices in mediating relationships and engagement among the state, media and citizens in a digitally mediated context (Morozov, 2011). It further explores how the surveillance works against the democratic involvement of participatory; does it make people remain quiet (as a means of instilling patriarchy nor does it create homogeneity in the mass sentiments); does it suffice to shift approaches taken by influencers to survive in political controversies on the internet?

This problem has a particularly burning acuteness in the environment of changing Pakistan political processes. The American social media environment is interconnected with political mobilization to a strong degree, particularly in youth groups that turn to online information sources more often to report news, discuss it, and fully participate (Kugelman, 2020). The political parties, activists and the state agencies are all aware of the strength of having influence online and are eager to believe that they can make use of this strength to have their way. This has seen influencers and celebrities take center-stage in crafting the political narrative- be it by contributing to the discussion about politics, challenging the campaigns, and mobilizing issues into the social discourse. Their tones are heavy and so are the dangers of their exposure in a observable environment. The existence of online harassment, an operation of disinformation, or even criminal prosecution over such organizations underscores the lack of stability in that the digital empowerment and control has brought (International Federation of Journalists, 2021).

The paper will therefore focus on the effects of such notion of state surveillance on influencer politics and political figure politics in Pakistan. It tries to discuss how surveillance activities are influencing their willingness to be involved in political debate, issues that to which they lay more stress or avoid and the rhetoric tools through which they succeed in attaining credibility without losing ground on providing safety. This research goes further to examine how these forces interact in a greater whole on the behavior of the politics online- how surveillance does not only affect the degree to which people undertake actions but also the probability of results of communication, discussion, and management of opinions on an online public.

These questions are useful in understanding how digital technology, the state power and political communication are transforming within the present Pakistan context and as such, the study becomes critical to gain insight further into this issue. It highlights the horror of the digitalization of democracy, on the one hand, as it provided more access to the information and voices of the oppressed groups on the other, on the other hand, technologies have the fatalized instruments of control and surveillance into the hands of states. This tension must be

studied to know the future of the political expression of the society that must walk in all the complicated relations of democratic desire and dictatorial drive.

In conclusion, it is not solely a technological problem, but it is a political one, digital surveillance transforms the communication and power relationships to the core. It and its impact on influencers are not confined to the personal issues, but have systematical impact on the formation of the social talk, democracy, and freedom of speech. In Pakistan, one of the last spheres of sovereign political speech is the cyber world, and it is a case of the erudity and civilized one to grasp the impact of such surveillance. Such a study, then, will assist in digging the impact of state surveillance on the nature of voices that fill the lines of political practices in the web space and what it signifies to the more extensive pattern of democracy, the liberty of media and political participation in the digital age.

Literature Review

Surveillance as Commonplace in the Digital Age of Networked Communication.

The concept of surveillance has been transformed significantly with expansion in digital technologies. The traditional surveillance that could have only been viewed via pure physical methods turned out to be a complex, numerical, and information-driven method and cuts across all areas of online communication (Lyon, 2018). It is a surveillance capitalism as well that scholars define this new regime as a form of commodifying data about individuals, judging and their conduct to influence behaviour and decision-making (Zuboff, 2019). According to Zuboff, institutional organisations by surveillance capitalism are able to predict and decide how human beings will act to earn gains at their own expenses at the expense of freedom and democracy.

Still on the same breath, Castells (2012) emphasizes that the emergence of networked societies have decentralized the power to those who are a citizen, state and corporate that means highly new actors like the influencer may produce the stories not captured by the so-called gatekeepers. This power is, however, filled with vulnerability because also along with this empowerment of voices, whoever is empowered is equally vulnerable to anyone under the care of being tracked everywhere. In authoritarian (or hybrid) political regimes, such digital visibility is a two-sided sword, helping to both engage and suppress (Deibert, 2019).

State Monitoring and opportunities to influence politics.

Surveillance by the state is not new, nor have been its digital tools, yet their adaptation has evolved in terms of magnitude and scope. According to Howard and Hussain (2013), governments are increasingly using digital technologies not as an instrument to track dissent but as a tool to actively build the information landscape by employing censorship, propaganda and the manipulation of algorithms. This phenomenon, which can be termed as the digital authoritarianism enables states to retain legitimacy even as it cracks down dissent.

Recent developments in Pakistan The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 authorised digital monitoring on the basis of cybersecurity and anti-terrorism. The Act gives broad powers to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to block, delete, and access user-generated data that is considered unlawful or threatening to the national security (Amnesty International, 2021). These laws, according to Human Rights Watch (2022) and Freedom House (2023), have found unequal application solely against journalists, activists, and political adversaries of these regimes. As a result, the digital space in Pakistan has the features of a hybrid regime, susceptible to surveillance, as well as restricted democratic rights.

Another term suggested by Penney (2016) is the idea of a chilling effect: because of the fear of being observed, people can self-censor, ultimately destroying free expression. It is visible in the digital realm of Pakistan, where influencers, journalists, and content creators use more and more frequent avoidance of controversial or politically sensitive subjects. According to a survey

conducted by the Digital Rights Foundation (2022), many journalists and activists changed online behavior because of fear of retaliation by the state, which reflects the influence that surveillance has on the political discourse of promoting conformity.

One more element is the influence that scandalous celebrities or theorized personalities possess over the digital public space.

Online influencers and celebrities take a niche in the online ecosystem. As commentators, advocates, and agitators, they mediate between the state, the media and the population and shape political narratives (Khamis, Ang, and Welling, 2017). According to Shirky (2011), digital media has transformed the nature of political communications in that, individuals have become able through the power of digital media to mobilize grand action without necessarily having to use traditional media institutions. Influencers, especially those who more or less have large followings, can help to disrupt the mainstream narrative, create civic awareness, and publicize a debate.

But with this empowerment, also comes state interest. In semi-authoritarian non-democratic settings, the level of scrutiny or criticism of influencers who criticize government activities is on the rise, terror on social networks, or prosecution (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). This has led to the use of strategic communication practices in an effort to pick one side of authenticity and be conservative enough to avoid political sensibilities. According to Marwick and boyd (2011), the overlapping of multiple audiences (state, followers and media) brings it about and hence is termed as context collapse, which makes influencers very cautious in the way they choose to present themselves to avoid the adverse effects.

The social media is very political in Pakistan. Political parties, military institutions, and even state agencies have a significant online presence, with coordinated networks of influence often promoting positive narratives or delegitimizing opponents (Kugelman, 2020). The power of chilling effect assembled through surveillance compels the influencers of dissent to be subjected to a disinformation campaign or internet-trolling campaigns. Therefore, the four nebular connections and interactions between influencers and the state are an indication of the battle of who controls the narratives in the online populace.

The Hybrid Media System and Digital Authoritarianism.

Digital authoritarianism is a phenomenon where authoritarian governments use technologies to monitor, suppress, and manipulate their populations (Feldstein, 2021). Digital authoritarianism is not a concept through which states employ forcefully the control over the population, unlike in the traditional model, but coordinate subtly using algorithmic surveillance, content moderation, and cyber laws to provide the appearance of democracy and restrict freedom of speech. The author argues that the internet which was perceived to be in itself democratic, has also become an instrument of solidifying dictatorial government (Morozov, 2011).

An example of this duality can be seen in the media territory of Pakistan. On the one hand, digital media offers the alternative communities of acting, on the other hand, it enables new modes of state domination. According to Deibert (2019), in the Global South, governments are gradually adopting digital governing systems based on surveillance-intensive systems like those of China. This structure is a combination of technical capacity and legal and institutional control to influence the narrative of the internet. In that regard, PECA law and PTA regulations represent the tools of digital authoritarianism, justified by the rhetoric of national security but adopted to regulate politically (Amnesty International, 2021).

According to Howard, Agarwal, and Hussain (2011), digital authoritarian practices are not limited to censorship but amounts to collecting of data, misinformation and online

intimidation. These practices in Pakistan have developed an environment of fear which restricts citizens to participate and corrupts democratic consultation. The outcome is some kind of a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), in which the traditional and digital forms engage under the influence of the state, but selectively release openness and retain a hidden premise of authority.

The Knowledge of Being Watched, Political Speech and Writing.

Through surveillance, the example of communication is transformed radically. The principle of panopticon presented by Foucault (1977) can be applied during the age of digital era as well since the view can be seen everywhere, and the authority cannot be expressed by force and dictums. This logic is reflected in modern digital monitoring, users are conscious of the potential surveillance, internalize control measures preservation, and are in charge of it. Penny 2016 and Hintz, Dencik, and Wahl-Jorgensen (2017) emphasize the fact that with this crippling censorship, the civic dimension of the population is deteriorated, along with its critical discourse.

Empirical research in the country supports the current theoretical framework. According to the report conducted by Media Matters for Democracy (2023), it is common knowledge that journalists and influencers think that they are not safe discussing political topics or military-related matters online. Many of them deliberately suppress their language, or forsake great fishing-ground. This kind of self-censorship is not just minimizing a pluralism of opinions, it is a stifling of a pluralism of politics where presidential versions are fortified.

Besides, the social and psychological effects of surveillance are not solely the matters of the personal world but the herd. The political speech of influential people drops out of the political discussion, and, by definition, the popular is immediately homogenized and does not allow an opportunity to compete democratically. In turn, the surveillance spill effect intrudes into the entire digital ecosystem and defines the manner in which the societies address and talk about the political factualities.

Conceptual Gap and Research Rationale.

Whereas international research has studied the nature of digital surveillance and Internet repression, little empirical research exists across environments that explore the effects of state surveillance on individuals known as being influential and shaping perceptions towards influencers in developing democracies such as Pakistan. Since, most available literature concentrates on journalists or activists, the attention is skipped to influencers which now have become equally important to define the discourse to people. This paper will attempt to close this issue by understanding the role of state surveillance in shaping the behavior of these digital actors, their expression and communication strategies.

Having placed Pakistan in the wider context of digital authoritarianism, the study makes some contribution to the digital world to the influence of surveillance in the development of the digital public space. It explores the place at which media freedom, participation and interaction on the internet and state power intersect--the role of digital technologies in facilitating, and restricting, democratic expression at the new millennium.

Methodology

Research Design

The present research utilizes a qualitative research design by examining the impact of digital surveillance on the ability of influencers and political figures to convey their political views in Pakistan. Since trends of surveillance and political communication are often delicate issues, a qualitative approach enables one to derive a deeper context of personal experiences, perceptions, and approaches that could not be measured, or otherwise, by quantitative means

(Creswell and Poth, 2018). The study is exploratory and interpretative in character, where there are possible understandings of patterns of behavior, self-censorship and communicative adaptation among digital actors under the fog of surveillance.

The research adheres to an interpretivist paradigm, which has the assumption that reality is the one constructed by people, and the meaning and interpretation of people are the key to learning about social phenomena (Schwandt, 2015). The applicability of this view is especially pertinent to the research into the applicability of state surveillance to the perceptions of those allowing it to influence their online expression of political agendas. The study uses a multiple case study design to investigate various influencers in diverse political and social contexts and offer a comparative insight on how surveillance impacts on the different kinds of online political behaviors.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study will be the following:

1. The question is how influencers and public figures in Pakistan are viewing state surveillance in the digital sphere and how it affects them?
2. How do they respond by changing their communicative or behavioral patterns to the pressures associated with monitoring and censorship?
3. How does surveillance influence the tenor of their online political engagement, the subject matter of their engagement and its frequency?
4. What does this surveillance mean to the larger political discourse and involvement of civics in the online space of Pakistan?

These questions correspond to the objective of the study, which is to understand the intersection between surveillance and self-expression and the role played by democratic dialogue in a politically sensitive digital environment.

Sampling Strategy

They used a purposive sampling approach to choose participants with direct experience and pertinence to the research issue (Patton, 2015). The sample will include 15- 20 Type of influencers and other public figures. They should be activists or other social commentators, or both on online platforms such as X (now Twitter), facebook, YouTube and instagram.

Participants include:

1. Political influencers who have many followers in their social media,
2. Online media personalities and journalists,
3. Rights activists and civil society activists, and
4. Citizens who are personalities in their own right in the area of online participation in governance or policy matters.

The inclusion criteria conditions were that they must be at least two years digitally visible with experience or perceived digital tracking, harassment or censorship because of, or concerning, their political content. Additional participants were also determined using snowball sampling and by referral among professionals networks (Noy, 2008).

The participants were chosen according to different linguistic and political backgrounds in order to ensure the diversity since representatives of different provinces were included, such as Khyber Pakhtunkhaw, Punjab, Sindh, and Islamabad. Such a variety of geographical and ideological differentiation increases the representativeness of the study and provides the opportunity to compare experiences.

Data Collection Methods

The research utilized semi-structured in-depth interviews as the instrument of primary data collection. Semi-structured interviews allow it to be flexible and retain a consistent thread of

questioning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). The interviews took 45-60 minutes and were either face-to-face or with an encrypted online channel (e.g., Zoom or Signal) in order to protect the participants and keep their information confidential.

A set of interview questions was written up to address fundamental themes:

1. The knowledge of digital surveillance and monitoring among the participants;
2. Having been censored, harassed or intimidated personally;
3. Seen effects on their online behaviors and strategies of communication;
4. The psychological and professional reaction on the surveillance pressure; and
5. Increased freedom of speech and political expression in Pakistan.

The researcher also practiced digital ethnography where feasible to monitor the regular social media behavior of the participants as a way of situating their texts within those prevailing political debates (Pink et al., 2016). Posts, comment boxes, and the communication between an individual and the audience that should be publicly available were examined and its patterns revealed when any of the types of self-censorship, language restraint or theme neglect.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used in a 6-step adopted by Braun and Clarke (2006):

1. Familiarization with data,
2. Generating initial codes,
3. Searching for themes,
4. Reviewing themes,
5. Naming and defining themes, and
6. Producing the report.

This form of analysis enabled the investigator to establish themes like fear, adaptation, identity management and digital resistance, which are recurring themes. The data has been organized and coded into NVivo software in order to streamline the qualitative data. Instead of deductively applied based on existing theory, codes were created inductively via the narratives of participants hence finding was also based on the lived experience of respondents.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) components were also incorporated in the analysis (Fairclough, 2013) in order to find out how the influencers frame meaning with regards to surveillance and power. The use of CDA was useful in exposing the strategic adaptation of language, tone and framing to maneuver within boundaries whilst retaining power and authority.

Validity and Reliability

In order to improve trust standing of the research, the qualitative rigor criteria suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were adhered to:

Credibility: It is gained through extensive interaction, the combination of interviews and observation of social media usage, and validation of the tools used by the participants of the interpretive key meanings.

Transferability: Descriptions of the experiences of the participants which are descriptive and thick help the readers to decide that they would be applicable to other situations.

Reliability: The research process will be detailed, which guarantees methodological entry and reproduction.

Confirmability: The researcher justified his/her bias by means of reflexive journaling and debriefing sessions with peers so that interpretation was within the constraints of the data and not interpretation.

Limitations

Although qualitative inquiry has the benefit of explorative inquiry, it is also limited. The statistical generalizability is limited to the small sample size. In addition, the self-reports of the

respondents could have been exposed to fear or reluctance to talk about sensitive events. However, their accounts are very rich and authentic and provide great information on how the issue of surveillance intersects with expression within Pakistan online space. Future studies may be built upon these results using either quantitative content analysis or cross-national research.

Summary

To recap it all, the paper follows a qualitative interpretation, and ethically informed approach of investigating how digital surveillance can impact influencers and public figures in Pakistan. With the combination of in-depth interviews and digital observation and thematic analysis, the study provides the complexities of how state surveillance is impacting communication behavior, self-censorship, and discourse. This methodological framework will give the basis on understanding how digital surveillance does not only suppress the freedom of expression but also set the very fabric on which the political dialogue is constructed within the hybrid media ecosystem in Pakistan.

Findings and Discussion

Introduction to Findings

The results of this paper indicate that online monitoring in Pakistan has significantly impacted nature, texture, and scope of political speech in the space of influencers and political figures. On-site interviews of 18 people, including journalists, digital activists, and political commentators revealed a complicated city of fear, adaptation and resistance. The facts indicate that surveillance; this limits the open political speech and in addition to that it promotes new coded forms of communication, negotiated silence and selective silence.

The findings are represented in five broad themes that were identified after the thematic analysis:

The belief of ever-present surveillance;

1. A feeling of constant surveillance everywhere.
2. Fear and Self-Censorship.
3. Adaptive Strategies and Coded Messages.
4. Digital Disillusionment and Withdrawal.
5. Reevaluation of Keeping Agency and Resisting.

All of the themes will be discussed below with support of insights provided by the participants and references to the current theoretical frameworks.

Theme 1: A feeling of constant surveillance everywhere.

Almost every respondent showed an opinion that they were under constant surveillance or were being shadowed digitally by state agencies. This atmosphere of being seen everywhere was an environment of psychological stress that prevailed even when no therapy or intervention was present. Influencers wrote about how their posts, live days, and even personal messages could be tracked, and after that, their online activity was regularly preoccupied by self-consciousness.

This observation does agree with the idea of panopticism developed by Foucault (1977) in which surveillance is not only a means of punishment, but also a means of discipline - influences the behavior of individuals by instilling in them fear. The digital machine that has been established by the Pakistani state under the jurisdiction of laws about cybercrime and the services of online monitoring groups function more or less in accordance with what Lyon (2018) calls as surveillance assemblages, i. e., a mixture of technological and bureaucratic regulation that serves as a normalization of surveillance to the routine of online existence.

They said they changed their communicative habit: no longer using a politically charged hashtag, they were unwilling to share Twitter posts that could be misunderstood or retweeted opposition stories. This concurs with the aspect by Deibert and Crete-Nishihata (2012) that surveillance turns the online world into a part of the anticipatory compliance wherein individuals police themselves in advance to prevent annoying others.

Theme 2: Fear and Self-Censorship.

The second topic brings to the fore how the fear of surveillance was used to self censor. A lot of respondents have confessed to changing the content or steering clear of some issues like civil-military relationships, foreign policy or religious extremism. The digital sphere was referred to as a minefield by journalists, most specifically since a single imprecise phrase can prompt a legal office or online-based bullying.

This trend confirms earlier results by Howard and Hussain (2013), who suggested that democratization through digital modernity changes authoritarian regimes by instilling fear into internet societies instead of enforcing absolute prohibitions. This study participants opined that fear functions on three facets:

Personal fear - of being arrested, being harassed or being liable to defamation proceedings;

Professional fear - of being fired; or of damaged reputation;

Social fear - you are afraid of trolling or organized attacks over the Internet.

One of the influential people has written:

It is not only top down censorship. You begin to take into consideration what you shouldn't say as you never know what you can reduce against you.

These discoveries are a reaffirmation of what Alimardani and Elswah (2021) coined as algorithmic chilling effects, namely, users opt not to talk about sensitive issues since opaque content control and digital policing exist.

Theme 3: Adaptive Strategies and Coded Messages.

Nevertheless, participants showed astonishing flexibility in the challenging task of navigating on-line surveillance despite the feeling of utter fear. Some of these influencers explained that they also employed humor, irony, or allegory to show dissent in an indirect manner. The symbolic emojis, coded political messages, and reference to a specific culture turned into an extension of coded communication via memes, enabling criticism without direct opposition.

This resonates the concept of hidden transcripts presented by Scott (1990) the idea that oppressed populations tend to express their resistance in coded language, overtures or cultural culture. Based on its online ecosystem, these concealed transcripts take the creative digital form of satire, parody or both the double entendre in create transcripts in Pakistan.

Respondents also reported that satire diversion channels and meme pages have become additional avenues to be used to criticize political figures since they offer indirect expression that is safe yet acute. Such reactive behavior indicates what Zuboff (2019) terms as counter-conducts, which refers to minor acts of resistance in regimes of control.

In addition, influencers talked about the idea of diversifying their digital presence through the use of pseudonymous accounts, encrypted messaging applications, and VPNs. These tactics are versions of digital resilience, which Oates (2016) posits reiterates the ways in which networked publics keep on innovating in an effort to maintain the communicative autonomy even within the surveillance regimes.

Theme 4: Digital Disillusionment and Withdrawal.

Many of the participants mentioned that they were becoming fed up with digital platforms because they are perceived as violated places of communication. Others said that they simply

decreased their online activity or shifted the conversations into smaller, more trusting groups like WhatsApp groups or closed Telegram cells.

This confluence of formal and informal, digital realms is what Morozov (2011) calls the dark side of internet freedom, in which the first rave of digital democratization was replaced by a controlled, fragmented communication. Being watched exhausts gave the impression of emotional burnout and withdrawal of participatory politics according to the language of the influencers.

Some interviewees related what they felt they were currently restrained to what they were once eager about on the internet, asserting that the digital town square has become muted by surveillance. These results align with the findings of Qazi and Shah (2022), who believe that the virtual civic environment in Pakistan is getting smaller because of the growing number of governmental surveillance and technological fear caused by laws, such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA).

This disappointment also strengthens the knowledge that surveillance is not merely a technological Tango, but a psychological one, as well: It is demolishing the basis of European trust concerning the digital world, and turning users into passive spectators, instead of active participants.

Theme 5: Reevaluation of Keeping Agency and Resisting.

Even with mass fear, there are those who opposed the surveillance pressure due to strong networks of solidarity, accountability, and the ethical faceting of their political activity. They outlined ethical journalism practice, fact-based advocacy, working campaigns focusing on credibility and not adversity.

This theme makes it clear that surveillance does not fully silence any opposition, instead altering it toward more strategic and more values-oriented communication. According to them, they exhibited greater trust in creating authenticity with audiences because it could offset the state stories of anti-national labeling.

These results resonate with the framework provided by Tufekci (2017) on networked resistance according to which the digital activists are creative when they have to act constrained by redefining the semiophrases of mobilization. In the same vein, Deibert (2015) explains that an actor that is resilient turns surveillance into the opportunity of strategic learning, which she sees as knowing the structure of power, employing alternative narratives, and being placed in a moral high ground.

The subject stories of the participants indicate that even though fear is created by surveillance, it provokes thought and makes them refine their political message. According to one of the digital reporters:

Should there be eyes upon us, we learn to be smarter speechwise. Resistance does not disappear, it continues to change.

Findings and Discussion

All these discoveries introduce a self-contradictory scenario: digital surveillance represses and encourages political innovation. Although fear restricts self-expression, it creates discourse strategies and identity management innovation.

Such duality causes movement where Bauman and Lyons (2013) note that surveillance societies give rise to what they refer to as liquid subjects- people who constantly modify and alter their communicative beings to be able to survive in a volatile world. The Pakistani agitators of this research possess just that flexibility to express and be cautious.

Additionally, surveillance is used as a discursive filter in Pakistan digital field of politics. The leaders who have an institutional tie are more restrained and independent voices are more

likely to experiment with witty digital stunts and figurative disobedience. The difference in them is that surveillance does not generate homogenous silence; it generates stratified expressions with respect to the risk tolerance, level of digital literacy and social capital.

More significantly, the findings become a part of the global discussion on the issue of digital authoritarianism (Feldstein, 2021) as they depict how inselected technologies are used by hybrid regimes to contain dissent without openly suppressing it using human access to technologies as a means. The pattern in Pakistan is reflected in other countries, such as Turkey and Egypt, where the regimes use legal and algorithmic solutions to manipulate online discourse instead of prohibiting dissent.

Conclusion

The results reveal that governmental surveillance of political actors and social agents in Pakistan is characterized by immense limitations on political speech and expression, yet the surveillance cultivates resistance methods. Fear and creativity interrelate against the background of the current stage of digital political culture in Pakistan developing as the model of cautious yet defiant, followed yet expressive.

This is essential to scholars and policymakers in order to protect the freedom of expression in hybrid democracies online. Surveillance, which is what becomes evident in this study, is not merely a tool of control but it is indeed a cultural transformation of the ways in which politics are imagined, debated, and shaped in the digital era.

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