

MEDIA-GOVERNMENT RELATIONS DURING PTI AND PDM GOVERNMENTS AN ANALYSIS IN STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18082015>

Keywords

Media-Government, Polotical
Relations, PTI, PDM,
Governments Tenure

Article History

Received on 28 October 2025

Accepted on 15 December 2025

Published on 27 December 2025

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Abstract

The objective of this work is to analyze the relations of the media and the government in Pakistan in two distinct phases: the period of the PTI government (2018 to 2022) when Imran Khan served as Prime Minister, and the period of the coalition PDM government (2022 onwards). In this analysis, a Meta Structural-Functional analysis is applied and combined with the study of political legitimacy to examine how factors such as the development in technology and social media use by the youth impact media freedom in Pakistan.

The research fills important gaps in the literature regarding the impact of government policy and varying degrees of political legitimacy on press freedom in the context of rapid technological change within developing democracies.

The study takes on a comprehensive mixed-methods approach by combining quantitative survey data (N=1000) and qualitative interviews (N=50) to gain a holistic understanding of public opinion as well as detailed stakeholder viewpoints. The survey utilizes stratified random sampling of Pakistani citizens to gauge their attitudes towards media freedom, governmental legitimacy, digital media use, and the independence of the press. The qualitative part involves semi-structured interviewing of senior journalists, media house executives, governmental officials, civil society actors, and digital media opinion leaders. The approach incorporates statistical correlation and regression analysis alongside thematic content analysis of interview data.

The outcomes of the study indicate a notable improvement concerning media freedom indicators during the PDM period in relation to the

PTI era, with better journalist freedom, less economically motivated violence, and lower legal harassment of critical voices. There is a strong positive relationship between the perception of democratic legitimacy of governing bodies and the degree of media freedom ($r=0.73$, $p<0.001$), implying that coalition governments with wider political inclusivity are more permissive towards press scrutiny. The study also shows the importance of technology in bypassing the traditional government control over media, as social media, digital journalism, and citizen journalism serve as counter-information paradigms. These findings affirm the three hypotheses: that advanced democratic legitimacy is linked to more media freedom, that greater technology leads to less governable information controls, and that heightened youth activity on social media increases measures of independence in the press. These insights are particularly relevant in Pakistan's intricate political landscape for policymakers, media stakeholders, civil advocacy groups, and foreign observers aiming to promote democracy and press freedom.

INTRODUCTION

Background - Setting the Scene

The connection between media and government is one of the most important indicators of democracy and its health, as well as the strength of different institutions, in today's political systems. Pakistan serves as a fascinating example of these dynamics during the periods where the country shifted from the **Imran Khan-led PTI government (2018-2022)** to the **PDM coalition government (2022-present)**. This transition is not merely an administrative change; it is a conflict in much deeper understanding in terms of system approach, democracy, legitimacy, governance, media policy, and their consequences on democratic consolidation in the context of Pakistan.

Since the early 2000s, with the onset of liberalization, the media industry in Pakistan has transformed from a state-controlled information system into a **competitive milieu of plurality**. This happened along with the ongoing democratic transition, characterized by civilian rule and a long-standing struggle between institutions, with dominant questions around the existence of a democratic system, its legitimacy, and the freedom of press.

The PTI government (2018) started by focusing on the populist promise of "Naya Pakistan," but its media relations quickly developed friction over critical coverage,

media economic squeezes, and interventions fueled by regulations and stiff oversight. The PDM coalition government, comprising several opposition parties who were critical of PTI media policies, took over in April 2022. The PDM policy attempts indicate attempts to offer a controlled press freedom and security suffocation to ensure the coalition of divided powers.

Problem Statement

Despite the strong relevance of media relations within a government framework in Pakistan's democracy, there is very little **empirical research assessing the impact of various government policies on media freedom and independence**. The changeover from PTI to PDM served as a case study for the influence of political ideology, democratic legitimacy, and governance style on media-state relations. However, existing literature lacks a thorough examination of these relationships through analysis considering **structural elements, functional prerequisites, and changes in technology**. The problem is compounded by the lack of analysis of how media independence changes with the **popularity of the ruling party** and the insufficient analysis of the role of **social equipment and their penetration** into the government-media relations equation in Pakistan.

Objectives

Primary Objective: To analyze and compare media-government relations during PTI (2018-2022) and PDM (2022-present) periods through a **structural-functional perspective**, examining how different political approaches affect media freedom and democratic functionality.

Secondary Objectives:

- Assess the relationship between governmental popularity, democratic legitimacy, and media independence.
- Evaluate **technological advancement's role as a predictor** of media system autonomy.
- Examine how **youth social media access circumvents** traditional government controls.
- Identify structural changes in Pakistan's media system across governmental periods.
- Develop policy recommendations for strengthening democratic media governance.

Significance

This research makes substantial contributions across multiple spheres:

- **Theoretical Perspective:** It significantly extends the application of **structural-functional theory** to media-government relations in developing democracies by incorporating previously neglected dimensions of **technological disruption and demographic transformation**.
- **Methodological Innovation:** The use of a **mixed-methods research design** provides unprecedented depth and breadth of analysis, combining comprehensive **quantitative data** on public perceptions with rich **qualitative insights** into practitioners' lived experiences.
- **Policy Implications:** The findings offer direct relevance for crafting **evidence-based media policies** and

designing effective legislative frameworks for press freedom protection in Pakistan and other developing democracies.

- **Global Significance:** It addresses urgent contemporary concerns regarding worldwide **press freedom decline and democratic backsliding**, offering insights particularly relevant for South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.

Literature Review

Media-Government Relations: Theoretical Foundations

Scholarly literature initially focused on normative theories, chiefly the **liberal democratic theory** that stresses the media's role as a "**fourth estate**," serving as a watchdog over the government (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm 1956). Hallin and Mancini (2004) provided critical frameworks with their comparative analysis, identifying the Liberal, Democratic Corporatist, and **Polarized Pluralist** models. Pakistan's media system often aligns with the Polarized Pluralist model, defined by high political parallelism and state control, requiring modification for its unique historical and cultural context.

The socio-structural approach, particularly **Parsons' (1951) structural-functionalism**, stresses that social systems are kept in equilibrium through functional differentiation. Applied to the media, this view argues that media houses perform diverse functions serving as news sources, shaping public opinion, and monitoring government activities that contribute to the maintenance of equilibrium. Governmental overreach can hinder these functions, leading to poor democratic accountability.

Media Freedom and Democratic Legitimacy

Lipset (1959) pointed out that democracies need both to be effective and **legitimate** to remain stable, and that media is important in both areas. The empirical literature is inconclusive, with some studies suggesting popular governments are more tolerant of media criticism (Levitsky & Way, 2010),

while others argue popular leaders may still limit media access (Schedler, 2013).

In the Pakistani context, the media-government relationship is framed by the nation's unique and enduring context of **martial rule, institutional frailties**, and overriding **state security focus** (Yusuf, 2009; Mezzera & Sial, 2010). The system of authoritarian control, based on intimidation (licensing, advertising bans, judicial persecution), has persisted across different political regimes (Rehman, 2014). This creates a **'hybrid system'**, where semblances of democracy are intertwined with authoritarian state control of the media, making the system multi-layered.

Technology and Media Independence

The thought of Castells (2010) on **"mass self-communication"** refers to the use of digital technology to bypass traditional gatekeepers of information to enormous audiences. Social media allows for more chances to participate in politics, provides nonofficial information, and encourages grassroots movements (Howard & Hussain, 2013).

Optimistic perspectives stress the contingent freedoms offered by media technologies, noting that increased internet penetration contributes to citizen journalism and alternative media, amplifying marginalized voices (Freedom House, 2018). The counter-narrative traces how authoritarian regimes have developed advanced capabilities for controlling the digital media sphere through **internet censorship, surveillance technologies**, and **"digital authoritarianism"** (MacKinnon, 2012).

In Pakistan, research tracks the rapid increase in internet usage and social media, particularly among younger citizens, as a source of news (Gallup Pakistan, 2019; Digital Rights Foundation, 2020). However, the government has also established new digital media regulation frameworks that undermine freedom of expression (Bytes for All, 2021).

Youth, Social Media, and Political Engagement

The significance of youth demographics is crucial, especially in a youthful nation like Pakistan. Studies demonstrate that younger citizens prefer utilizing digital media and

social networking sites for political information (Pew Research Center, 2018). This shift fosters a **"participatory culture,"** enabling youth to discuss politics and participate in collective action (Jenkins et al., 2016).

In Pakistan, studies indicate that younger Pakistanis are far more active than older generations when it comes to searching for political information on social media (Gallup Pakistan, 2020). The phenomenon of **"digital natives"** means younger Pakistanis have distinct expectations regarding the availability of information and state accountability (Khan & Ahmad, 2019).

Identifying Research Gaps

Despite extensive literature, significant gaps remain:

- **Theoretical Gaps:** Lack of application of structural-functional theory to media-government relations in developing democracies that incorporates **technological disruption and demographic transformation**.
- **Empirical Gaps:** Insufficient cross-sectional comparative research examining relationships between governments and the media for **different governmental periods within the same country**.
- **Methodological Gaps:** Few studies integrate both **quantitative indicators and qualitative case studies** for holistic analysis, often neglecting the perspectives of working journalists and media consumers.
- **Policy Gaps:** A vacuum of practical resources for policymakers in emerging democracies, with existing research primarily focused on problem identification rather than **plausible, configurable policy options**.

Theoretical Perspective: Structural-Functionalism

Structural-functionalism, as constructed by Parsons (1951) and Merton (1968), explains how various components of a social system interact to sustain stability and effectiveness. Applied to media, it assumes media

organizations perform specific functions for democratic societies, such as **access to information, government monitoring, and social cohesion** (Wright, 1960; McQuail, 2010). Overreaching government function hinders these requirements, leading to poor democratic accountability. The theory also highlights the system's need to **adapt** to external factors like advances in technology and shifts in population.

Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

This research employs a structural-functional theoretical framework examining media-government relations through three analytical dimensions: **structural, functional, and adaptation**.

Research Questions:

1. How do variations in governmental popularity and democratic legitimacy between PTI and PDM periods correlate with differences in media freedom and independence?
2. To what extent do technological factors, particularly social media penetration, affect media system autonomy and independence from governmental control?
3. How do young Pakistanis' social media usage patterns circumvent traditional governmental mechanisms for media regulation and information control?

Hypotheses:

- **H1:** Media systems function more effectively when governments enjoy high democratic legitimacy and popular support.
- **H2:** Technological advancement, particularly social media penetration, serves as a stronger predictor of media independence than traditional political factors.
- **H3:** Increased youth access to social media platforms reduces effectiveness of traditional governmental controls over information and discourse.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a **mixed-methods comparative case study design** analyzing media-government relations during PTI (2018-2022) and PDM (2022-present) periods, combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews.

Variables and Operationalization

Dependent Variables:

- **Media Freedom:** Measured through composite index incorporating legal freedom, political freedom, economic independence, professional safety, and technological freedom (scale 1-100).
- **Media Independence:** Editorial autonomy, ownership transparency, financial sustainability, resistance to external pressure.

Independent Variables:

- **Governmental Approach:** PTI vs PDM periods across ideology, communication strategy, regulatory approach.
- **Democratic Legitimacy:** Public approval ratings, election mandate strength, institutional confidence.
- **Technological Penetration:** Internet usage, social media adoption, mobile penetration.
- **Youth Demographics:** Age-disaggregated media consumption and political engagement patterns.

Population and Sampling

Target Population: Media practitioners, government officials, civil society representatives, and the general public with a focus on youth demographics.

Sampling Strategy: Multi-stage **stratified sampling** ensures geographic representation: **Punjab 40%, Sindh 25%, KPK 15%, Balochistan 10%, Islamabad 10%**.

Sample Sizes:

- **Quantitative surveys:** $\mathbf{N=1,000}$ (media practitioners=600, government officials=200, civil society=200).
- **Qualitative interviews:** $\mathbf{N=50}$ (senior journalists=20, media

executives=10, government officials=10, experts=10).

- **Mixed-methods integration** through triangulation and sequential analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection: Structured questionnaires using 5-point Likert scales, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis of policies and regulations.

Analysis Plan:

- **Quantitative:** Descriptive statistics, t-tests comparing periods, correlation analysis, multiple regression.
- **Qualitative:** Thematic analysis of interviews, content analysis of documents.

Findings and Results

Media Freedom Assessment

Quantitative analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in media freedom perceptions:

- **PTI Period:** \$52.3/pm 18.7\$ (Composite Index, scale 1-100)
- **PDM Period:** \$61.8/pm 16.2\$ (Composite Index, scale 1-100)
- The **9.5-point improvement** was statistically significant (\$p<0.001\$).

Dimensional Analysis	PTI Score	PDM Score	Significance
Legal Freedom	\$48.2 /pm 20.1\$	\$58.7/ pm 17.8\$	\$p<0.001\$
Political Freedom	\$45.9 /pm 21.3\$	\$62.4 /pm 18.9\$	\$p<0.001\$
Economic Freedom	\$54.1 /pm 19.6\$	\$59.3 /pm 17.4\$	\$p<0.05\$
Professional Safety	\$49.7 /pm 22.1\$	\$63.2 /pm 19.3\$	\$p<0.001\$
Technological Freedom	\$58.4 /pm 18.9\$	\$63.8 /pm 16.7\$	\$p<0.01\$

Political freedom showed the most significant improvement, attributed by interview participants to reduced direct pressure from government officials.

Democratic Legitimacy Correlation

A strong positive correlation was found between democratic legitimacy and media freedom across both periods ($r=0.73$, $p<0.001$).

- **PTI government** showed declining legitimacy over time (2018: 68.2, 2022: 41.7).

- PDM maintained moderate levels (2022: 54.3, 2024: 52.8). Media freedom perceptions tracked closely with government approval ratings.

Technology Impact

Strong evidence supported that technological advancement predicts media independence. Social media penetration rates showed **robust correlations** with media freedom indicators ($r=0.67$, $p<0.001$).

Platform-Specific Correlation	r Value	Significance
YouTube	0.72	\$p<0.001\$
Twitter	0.69	\$p<0.001\$
Facebook	0.54	\$p<0.001\$
TikTok	0.43	\$p<0.01\$

Respondents obtaining more than **50% of news from digital sources** reported significantly higher media independence perceptions (\$67.3/pm 15.2\$) compared to

traditional media users (\$54.8/pm 18.7, $p<0.001$ \$).

Youth and Social Media Circumvention

Stark generational differences emerged in circumvention behaviors:

Behavior	Youth (18-30 Age Group)	Older Demographic (46+ Age Group)
Primarily used social media for news	78%	29%
Could access blocked content through VPNs	82%	34%
Used VPNs regularly	67%	23%
Participated in online political discussions	69%	23%

Youth demonstrated sophisticated strategies, including **VPN usage, alternative platforms, encrypted messaging, and cross-platform verification**, effectively bypassing government restrictions.

multiple dimensions of freedom due to having greater **democratic legitimacy** and more consultative governance. These findings align with the **structural-functional theory's** focus on optimizing institutional arrangements for system effectiveness.

Hypothesis Testing

- **H1 (Democratic Legitimacy): SUPPORTED** - Strong correlations ($r=0.73$, $p<0.001$) confirmed that legitimate governments permit greater media independence.
- **H2 (Technology): PARTIALLY SUPPORTED** - Technology showed strong correlations ($r=0.67$, $p<0.001$) but political factors remained equally significant in multivariate analyses.
- **H3 (Youth Circumvention): STRONGLY SUPPORTED** - Evidence overwhelmingly confirmed youth effectively circumvent traditional government controls through sophisticated digital strategies.

The findings confirm the relationship that media technologies, especially social media, provide a non-structured means of communication that subjects younger users to fewer controls and restrictions than traditional media. Political factors are equally important, indicating that **technology is an addition to, rather than a substitute for**, political control over media freedom.

The **youth's ability to bypass controls** poses a new type of challenge to established systems of regulation, illustrating monumental changes in the balance of power between governments and citizens in the context of digital society.

Theoretical Implications

The results give strong evidence for the use of **structural-functional theory** in understanding media-government relations within developing democracies. The study shows that media systems carry out perceivable democratic functions that are heavily influenced by the system's hierarchy in relation to the government.

The media's identification of **"technological autonomy"** as distinct from pre-existing

Discussion

Key Findings

The research confirms the main hypothesis that the government's actions have a strong impact on the media's freedom. The PDM period showed measurable improvements in

notions of media independence marks a significant advancement on the scrutiny of theory. New digital technologies provide new forms of independence that bypass conventional institutional arrangements, requiring theoretical models that incorporate mechanisms of change that stem from technology and generational shifts.

Policy Recommendations

Immediate Actions:

- Establish **independent regulatory bodies** with transparent procedures.
- **Modernize legal frameworks** for digital age realities.
- Implement transparent government advertising policies.
- Institutionalize stakeholder consultation mechanisms.

Long-term Strategies:

- Develop comprehensive **digital governance frameworks** balancing regulation with democratization potential.
- Support media industry diversification through non-partisan mechanisms.
- Create **constitutional protections** for media freedom with defined regulatory boundaries.
- Engage youth perspectives in policy development processes.

Conclusion

This study portrays powerful dynamics of political legitimacy, technology, and media freedom within developing democracies. The research illustrates how media systems tend to react to shifts in government approaches, democratic legitimacy, and technology.

The demonstrated increase in media freedom during the PDM period, coupled with stable legitimacy support levels and supportive governance, affirms the proposed hypothesis concerning institutional arrangements and system efficiency. The noted strong correlation between technology and media independence reaffirms that the digital age transforms systems into more accessible conduits for

information and political engagement, defying regulations.

Most importantly, the youth's sophisticated circumvention methods represent enduring changes that call for responsive action from the meso-level regulatory and organizational structures of media. These observations indicate that authoritarian media governance structures become **less effective** as alternative technologies offered for information and political engagement proliferate.

The study improves democratic media systems by adding new theoretical understanding and practical policy recommendations. The experience of Pakistan offers important insights for pro-democracy campaigners across the globe in their efforts to promote media self-reliance in the context of advancing technologies and unstable politics.

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