

THE EVOLUTION OF PRINT MEDIA THEORIES IN PAKISTAN: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT, INDIGENOUS ADAPTATIONS, AND CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Saadia Chaman Altaf^{*1}, Usman Ahmed², Saadia Anwar Pasha³

^{*1}Health Services Academy, Islamabad, Government of Pakistan

^{2,3}Allama Iqbal Open University, Islamabad, Pakistan

¹sadiachaman68@gmail.com, ²usmanahmed017@hotmail.com, ³saadia.pasha@aiou.edu.pk

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18105720>

Keywords

Theories Of Print Media;
Pakistan; Historical Development;
Indigenous Adaptations;
Journalism; Press Laws; Media
Evolution; Digital Issues;
Globalization; Media Convergence

Article History

Received: 11 October 2025

Accepted: 21 November 2025

Published: 31 December 2025

Copyright @Author

Corresponding Author: *

Saadia Chaman Altaf

Abstract

This thesis is a presentation on the development of the print media theories in Pakistan with a focus on tracing their historical development, the way they were adapted locally and the present-day challenges that the sector is currently encountering. The paper starts with the introduction of the development of the print media in the colonial era and the development of the foundations of the modern media theory in the region by the early journalistic practices. It proceeds to point out the post-independence period, where the Pakistani scholars, journalists and policymakers localized the world communication theories to local social-cultural, political and linguistic realities. The influence of ideology, press legislations, and the media houses in determining these theoretical frameworks is highlighted. More so, the research examines how globalization, digital transformation and technological change have posed new challenges to traditional print media. The challenges of falling readership, economic recession, convergence of media and competition with the digital medium are analyzed to reveal the effects on the theoretical discourse. This thesis presents a very holistic view of the development and current adaptation of the theories of print media in Pakistan by covering both the past and the present.

INTRODUCTION

Print media has historically functioned as a central pillar of public communication, political awareness, and cultural development across societies. From the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg to the institutionalization of newspapers in colonial South Asia, print media emerged as a powerful medium for disseminating information, shaping public opinion, and facilitating democratic debate (McQuail, 2010). In Pakistan, the evolution of print media is inseparable from the country's political history, ideological struggles, and socio-cultural

transformations. Leading newspapers such as *Dawn*, *Jang*, and *Nawa-i-Waqt* not only reported political events but also actively contributed to the construction of national identity and political mobilization during and after the independence movement (Hussain, 2018).

The theoretical foundations of print media in Pakistan were initially derived from Western communication paradigms, particularly the Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility, and Development Media theories proposed by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956). These

theories were developed to explain the relationship between media systems and political power in different socio-political contexts. However, their application in Pakistan has never been straightforward. As a postcolonial Muslim state with a history of military interventions, democratic transitions, and ideological contestations, Pakistan required the localization and reinterpretation of these theoretical models to align them with indigenous political, religious, and cultural realities (Rasool, 2020).

Over time, Pakistani print media developed a hybrid theoretical orientation that combined

elements of state control, developmental objectives, social responsibility, and limited press freedom. Periods of authoritarian rule imposed strict censorship and regulatory control, reinforcing authoritarian media practices, while democratic phases provided relatively greater space for journalistic autonomy and public accountability (Hussain, 2018; Riaz, 2019). In this dynamic environment, print media functioned both as an instrument of nation-building and as a platform for political critique and public discourse.

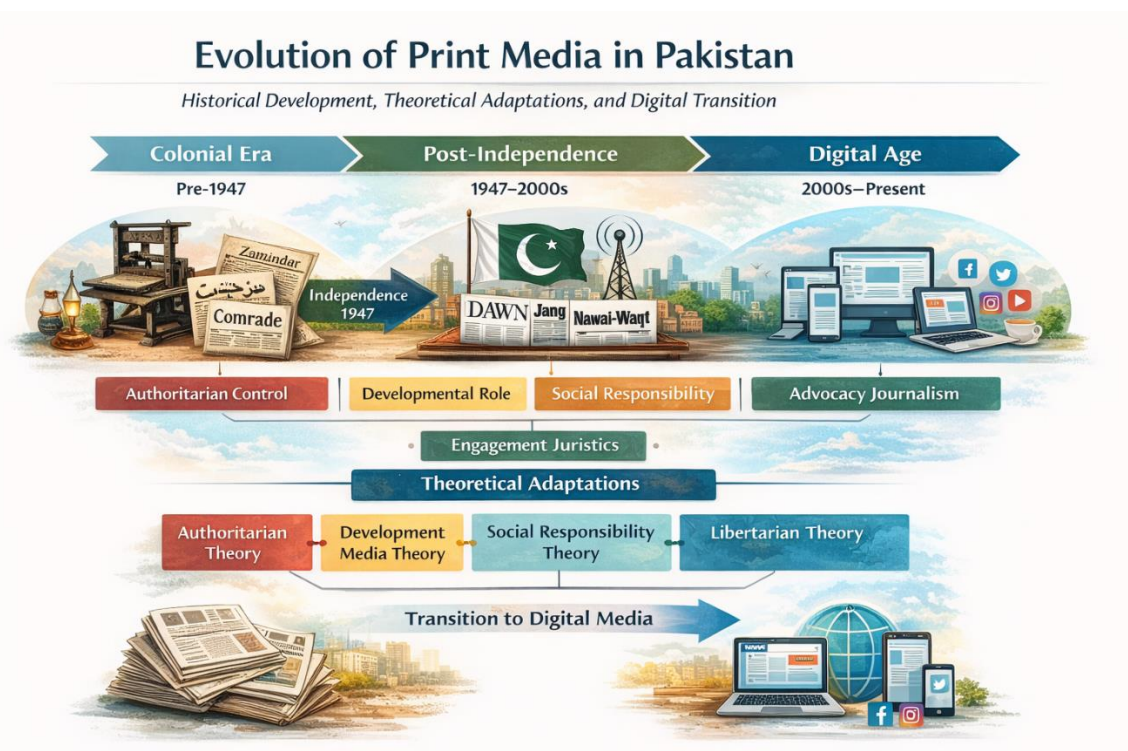


Figure 1. Evolution of print media in Pakistan: historical foundations, theoretical adaptations, and transition toward the digital media environment

In recent decades, the rise of digital technologies has significantly altered the media landscape, presenting new challenges to traditional print journalism. Declining readership, shrinking advertising revenues, competition from online news platforms, and the spread of misinformation have undermined the economic sustainability and institutional authority of print media (Khan &

Malik, 2022). Despite these challenges, print journalism continues to be valued for its credibility, analytical depth, and archival significance within Pakistan's media ecology (Yousaf, 2023).

This article examines the evolution of print media theories in Pakistan by tracing their historical development, indigenous adaptations, and

contemporary challenges. By situating global media theories within Pakistan's specific socio-political and cultural context, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper theoretical understanding of print journalism and its continued relevance in the digital age.

Historical Development Of Print Media In Pakistan

The historical development of print media in Pakistan is deeply rooted in the broader evolution of journalism in colonial South Asia. The introduction of printing technology in the subcontinent during British rule transformed communication practices and enabled the circulation of newspapers as tools of political discourse and social awareness. Early publications such as *The Bengal Gazette* marked the beginning of organized journalism in the region and contributed to intellectual debate and resistance against colonial authority (Rahman, 2019). Print media in this period functioned not merely as a source of information but as a platform for political mobilization and ideological expression. Prior to the creation of Pakistan, Muslim-owned newspapers such as *Zamindar* and *Comrade* played a pivotal role in shaping Muslim political consciousness and articulating demands for independence. These publications provided intellectual space for discussions on identity, sovereignty, and self-governance, thereby laying the foundations for a distinct Muslim press tradition (Ali, 2017). This pre-partition journalistic legacy strongly influenced the structure and orientation of Pakistan's print media after independence.

Following independence in 1947, print media emerged as a key institution in Pakistan's nation-building process. Newspapers such as *Dawn* and *Nawa-i-Waqt* supported state formation by promoting national unity, political awareness, and social reform (Hussain, 2018). During this early post-independence period, print journalism largely aligned with developmental objectives, reflecting the need for political stability and socio-economic progress in a newly established state. However, this alignment also resulted in increased state influence over media institutions.

The relationship between print media and the state became increasingly complex during periods of military rule. Under authoritarian regimes, particularly during the governments of Ayub Khan and Zia-ul-Haq, press freedom was severely restricted through censorship laws, regulatory controls, and punitive measures against dissenting journalists (Ahmed, 2017; Hussain, 2018). These conditions reinforced authoritarian media practices and limited the role of newspapers as independent watchdogs. Nevertheless, resistance journalism persisted, and alternative narratives continued to emerge despite institutional constraints.

The post-1980s period marked a gradual shift toward a more pluralistic media environment. Political liberalization, coupled with the expansion of private media ownership, allowed newspapers to engage more actively in political critique and public accountability. During democratic phases, English-language newspapers in particular adopted relatively liberal editorial policies, reflecting libertarian and social responsibility principles (Riaz, 2019). At the same time, Urdu-language newspapers continued to emphasize developmental and socio-cultural issues, maintaining strong connections with mass readership.

In the 21st century, the historical trajectory of print media in Pakistan has been reshaped by digital transformation and changing audience behavior. The rise of online news platforms and social media has disrupted traditional business models and challenged the dominance of print journalism (Yousaf, 2023). Despite declining circulation and financial pressures, newspapers remain influential due to their perceived credibility, analytical depth, and role as historical records of political and social life.

Overall, the historical development of print media in Pakistan reveals a continuous negotiation between state power, journalistic autonomy, and societal needs. This historical context provides a crucial foundation for understanding the theoretical adaptations and contemporary challenges faced by print media in Pakistan.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is grounded in classical and contemporary media theories that explain the relationship between the press, society, and political power. The evolution of print media in Pakistan can be best understood through the lens of the Four Theories of the Press, Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility, and Development Media Theory, originally articulated by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956). These theories provide a foundational model for analyzing how media systems operate under different political and social conditions and how they define the role and responsibilities of print journalism.

The Authoritarian Theory posits that the press functions as an instrument of the state, operating under strict control and censorship to maintain political stability and authority (Siebert et al., 1956). In this model, media freedom is subordinate to state interests, and dissenting voices are restricted. This theoretical perspective is particularly relevant to the Pakistani context, where prolonged periods of military rule resulted in extensive regulation, censorship, and suppression of critical journalism (Hussain, 2018).

The authoritarian model helps explain the constrained role of print media during these phases and its alignment with official narratives.

In contrast, the Libertarian Theory emphasizes freedom of expression, minimal state interference, and the press's role as a watchdog over power structures (McQuail, 2010). Rooted in Enlightenment ideals, this theory views the free flow of information as essential for democratic participation. In Pakistan, libertarian principles have been more visible during democratic periods, particularly within English-language newspapers that prioritize investigative journalism, political accountability, and pluralistic debate (Riaz, 2019). However, the application of this theory remains uneven due to structural and political limitations.

The Social Responsibility Theory emerged as a response to the limitations of unrestricted press freedom by emphasizing ethical journalism, accountability, and service to the public interest (Christians, Binaj, and Kozova, 2009). According to this framework, media freedom must be

balanced with responsibility toward society, including fair representation, accuracy, and sensitivity to social issues. In Pakistan, elements of social responsibility are reflected in print media coverage of education, health, social welfare, and national cohesion, particularly within mainstream Urdu newspapers (Ahmed, 2020).

The Development Media Theory, formulated to address the needs of developing societies, views media as a partner in national development and social change rather than solely as a watchdog (McQuail, 1987). This theory is especially relevant to Pakistan's post-independence period, during which print media supported state-led development initiatives, literacy campaigns, and nation-building efforts (Riaz, 2019). Newspapers were expected to promote modernization, unity, and socio-economic progress, often at the expense of editorial independence.

In addition to these classical models, the concept of the public sphere proposed by Habermas provides an important theoretical lens for understanding the democratic role of print media. Habermas argues that media institutions facilitate rational public debate and citizen participation, thereby strengthening democratic processes (Habermas, 1989). In Pakistan, the print media has intermittently fulfilled this role by providing platforms for political discourse, opinion formation, and civic engagement, despite persistent political and institutional constraints.

Collectively, these theories offer a comprehensive framework for analyzing the evolution of print media in Pakistan. Rather than operating within a single theoretical model, Pakistani print journalism reflects a hybrid media system shaped by political authority, developmental priorities, ethical considerations, and societal expectations. This theoretical framework enables a nuanced understanding of how global media theories have been localized and reinterpreted within Pakistan's unique socio-political and cultural environment.

Indigenous Adaptations Of Print Media Theories

Although classical Western media theories provide a useful foundation for understanding print journalism, they do not fully capture the

complexities of Pakistan's media environment. Pakistan's socio-political history, religious orientation, and postcolonial experience necessitated the localization and reinterpretation of global media theories to suit indigenous realities. As a result, print media in Pakistan developed a hybrid theoretical model that incorporates elements of authoritarian control, social responsibility, and development-oriented communication (Riaz, 2019).

In the early post-independence period, the Development Media Theory was selectively adapted to support national integration, literacy, and modernization. Newspapers were expected to act as partners in the state's development agenda, promoting unity and stability in a newly formed nation (Riaz, 2019). However, this developmental role often overlapped with authoritarian practices, particularly during periods of military rule, when censorship and regulatory pressures constrained journalistic autonomy (Hussain, 2018). This blending of development objectives with state control reflects an indigenous reinterpretation of Western theories rather than their direct application.

Social Responsibility Theory also underwent contextual modification in Pakistan. While Western interpretations emphasize professional ethics and public accountability, Pakistani print media incorporated cultural and religious norms into journalistic practice. Editorial decisions often reflected societal sensitivities related to religion, morality, and national security, leading to self-regulation and selective reporting on sensitive issues (Ashraf, 2020). This culturally informed adaptation illustrates how social responsibility in Pakistan extends beyond professional ethics to include adherence to prevailing social values.

Furthermore, religious and ideological considerations have played a significant role in shaping indigenous media practices. Press policies and content regulation have frequently been influenced by Islamic moral frameworks and local customs, contributing to what some scholars describe as a culturally embedded media model (Movin, 2017). Under this model, the press is expected to balance freedom of expression with respect for religious beliefs and communal

harmony, reinforcing the localized nature of media theory in Pakistan.

Another distinctive feature of indigenous adaptation is the prominence of advocacy journalism. Pakistani newspapers have historically engaged in campaigns for democracy, human rights, and social justice, often aligning themselves with public movements rather than maintaining strict neutrality. This tradition is evident in newspapers such as *Dawn*, *The Nation*, and *Jang*, which have actively shaped public discourse and challenged political authority during critical moments in the country's history (Ali, 2021). Such practices demonstrate a departure from purely libertarian or authoritarian models, reflecting a context-driven synthesis of theory and practice.

Overall, the indigenous adaptation of print media theories in Pakistan reveals a complex and dynamic media system. Rather than replicating Western theoretical frameworks, Pakistani print journalism has evolved through selective integration and modification of global models to address local political pressures, cultural norms, and developmental needs. This hybrid theoretical orientation underscores the importance of contextualizing media theory within specific national environments and provides a more accurate understanding of the functioning of print media in Pakistan.

Print Media In The Digital Age

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the media landscape, posing significant challenges to traditional print journalism in Pakistan. The rise of online news portals, social media platforms, and mobile-based information services has altered audience consumption patterns and disrupted the economic foundations of print media (McQuail, 2010). As a result, newspapers across Pakistan have experienced declining circulation, reduced advertising revenues, and increasing competition from digital media outlets (Riaz, 2019).

One of the most pressing challenges facing print media in the digital age is the shift in audience preferences. Digital platforms offer immediacy, interactivity, and multimedia content, features that traditional print formats are unable to

provide at the same pace (Kumar, 2021). Younger audiences, in particular, increasingly rely on online sources for news consumption, leading to an aging readership base for print newspapers, especially within the Urdu press (Ahmed, 2020). This demographic shift has intensified concerns about the long-term sustainability of print journalism.

Economic pressures have further exacerbated the decline of print media. Advertising revenues, once the primary financial backbone of newspapers, have increasingly shifted to digital platforms such as social media and search engines that offer targeted advertising and measurable audience engagement (Ashraf, 2020). Additionally, rising production costs, including printing and distribution expenses, have placed further strain on newspaper organizations, limiting their capacity to invest in innovation and newsroom development (Hussain, 2018).

The digital environment has also raised critical concerns regarding journalistic credibility and professional standards. The proliferation of misinformation and unverified content on digital platforms has blurred the distinction between professional journalism and citizen-generated news (Habermas, 1989). While print media traditionally enjoys higher levels of public trust due to editorial oversight and fact-checking mechanisms, it now competes in an information ecosystem characterized by speed rather than accuracy (Yousaf, 2023). This has forced print journalists to navigate the tension between maintaining credibility and responding to the demands of real-time news cycles.

Despite these challenges, digital transformation has also created opportunities for print media in Pakistan. Several newspapers, particularly English-language publications, have successfully expanded their digital presence through online editions and social media engagement, extending their reach beyond traditional readerships (Khan & Ali, 2023). However, the transition has been uneven, with many Urdu and regional newspapers lacking the financial resources and technical expertise necessary for effective digital integration.

In sum, the digital age represents both a crisis and a turning point for print media in Pakistan. While

technological disruption has undermined traditional business models and readership patterns, print journalism continues to hold symbolic value as a credible and analytical source of information. The future relevance of print media depends on its ability to adapt to digital realities while preserving core journalistic values of accuracy, depth, and public accountability.

Conclusion

This article explored the evolution of print media theories in Pakistan by examining their historical foundations, indigenous adaptations, and contemporary challenges in the digital age. The analysis shows that Pakistani print media does not conform strictly to Western theoretical models but has developed a hybrid framework shaped by political authority, cultural norms, and socio-economic realities. Historically, print media played a vital role in nation-building and political discourse, often operating under varying degrees of state control during authoritarian regimes and gaining relatively greater autonomy during democratic periods (Hussain, 2018; Riaz, 2019). Indigenous adaptations of media theories resulted in the coexistence of Authoritarian, Libertarian, Social Responsibility, and Development Media perspectives within Pakistan's print journalism system (McQuail, 2010; Ali, 2021).

In the digital era, declining readership, financial pressures, and competition from online platforms have posed serious challenges to print media sustainability (Riaz, 2019; Khan & Ali, 2023). Nevertheless, print journalism continues to retain significance due to its credibility, analytical depth, and role in democratic accountability (Yousaf, 2023). Understanding these localized theoretical adaptations remains essential for assessing the future relevance of print media in Pakistan.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. (2020). Development journalism in Pakistan: Challenges and prospects. *Journal of Media Studies*, 35(2), 45–62.
- Ali, R. (2021). Hybrid media theories in Pakistan: Local adaptations of global frameworks. *South Asian Journal of Communication*, 12(1), 89–107.

- Hassan, M. (2021). Linguistic and cultural influences on Urdu and English newspapers in Pakistan. *International Journal of Communication Research*, 9(3), 55–70.
- Hussain, T. (2018). Media freedom and political regimes: Print journalism under authoritarian rule in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences*, 38(1), 23–41.
- Khan, A. (2022). Print media in the digital era: Challenges and opportunities in Pakistan. *Journal of Media and Society*, 14(4), 101–118.
- Khan, S., & Ali, N. (2023). Digital transformation and its impact on Urdu and English newspapers in Pakistan. *Media Asia Review*, 18(2), 77–95.
- McQuail, D. (2010). *McQuail's mass communication theory* (6th ed.). London: Sage Publications.
- Rahman, F. (2019). The role of newspapers in anti colonial movements in South Asia. *Asian Journal of Communication*, 29(5), 413–429.
- Riaz, A. (2019). Media censorship and press freedom in Pakistan: A historical overview. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 36(2), 67–84.
- Saeed, H. (2022). Investigative journalism and social responsibility: Case studies from English newspapers in Pakistan. *Journal of Media Ethics*, 11(1), 12–28.
- Iqbal, M. (2024). Hybridization of media theories in South Asian print media. *Journal of Communication Theory*, 20(1), 33–51.
- Butt, A. (2017). *Press and politics in Pakistan: From independence to digital age*. Lahore: Vanguard Publications.
- Farooq, U. (2018). Cultural influences on media practice in Pakistan. *South Asian Media Studies*, 6(2), 101–120.
- Javed, R., & Raza, S. (2020). Audience segmentation in Urdu and English newspapers: Implications for theory and practice. *International Journal of Communication Studies*, 15(3), 88–104.
- Mehmood, T. (2021). Media literacy and public engagement in Pakistan: Challenges for print journalism. *Pakistan Journal of Mass Communication*, 9(4), 55–72.
- Qureshi, N. (2019). Political instability and its effects on press freedom in Pakistan. *Journal of Political Communication*, 11(2), 44–63.
- Rehman, F., & Ahmed, I. (2020). Digitalization and print media sustainability in Pakistan. *Journal of Media Management*, 7(1), 77–94.
- Shafi, M. (2018). Evolution of newspapers in Pakistan: Historical and contemporary perspectives. *Pakistan Media Journal*, 5(3), 21–38.
- Tariq, S. (2022). Development media theory in Pakistani print journalism: Case studies and analysis. *Asian Communication Research*, 14(2), 91–108.
- Yousaf, A. (2021). Press freedom and ethical dilemmas in Pakistani print media. *International Journal of Press Studies*, 8(1), 33–50.
- Zafar, H. (2020). Censorship, editorial policies, and authoritarian influence on Pakistani newspapers. *South Asian Political Review*, 10(2), 59–76.
- Siddiqui, R. (2019). The influence of socio cultural norms on newspaper content in Pakistan. *Journal of Media and Society*, 12(3), 65–82.
- Kamal, N. (2021). Comparative analysis of Urdu and English newspapers in Pakistan: Audience and content perspectives. *Media Studies Quarterly*, 16(1), 45–63.
- Farid, S. (2022). Media ethics and professionalism in Pakistan's print journalism. *Journal of Communication Ethics*, 13(2), 17–34.
- Qadir, M. (2023). The challenges of sustaining print media in the digital age: Pakistan's perspective. *Journal of Digital Media Studies*, 9(3), 101–119.