Navigating Media Capture: A Case Study on Activist Circumventing Strategies in Baluchistan (2018–2023)

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ABSTRACT: This study examine that how freelance journalists and activists navigate the media capture environment in Baluchistan categorised by the surveillance, institutional control and systemic censorship. In the context of political economy of media theory this research examined which kind of circumventing strategies in the situation of information repression in Baluchistan between 2018-2023 has been employed. This period is important as at the time unusually the media capture and intensified security pressure was on peak in this region. By using semi structure interviews of the twelve activists and freelance journalists selected through snowball sampling and data was analysed through the thematic analysis approach. The findings of the research revealed that the activists and freelance journalists are using circumventing strategies to overcome the media capture such as using alternative media, encrypted messaging, engagement with diaspora networks, flexible communication behaviour and sophisticated surveillance avoidance techniques. Taken together, these findings illustrate how individuals in Baluchistan construct parallel information pathways that enable resistance within a tightly controlled media landscape. The study contributes to broader debates on media repression, digital activism, and communication resilience in conflict-prone environments, offering insights relevant to scholars, journalists, and human rights practitioners.

KEYWORDS: Media capture, Baluchistan, Political Economy of Media, Circumventing Strategies

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Introduction

Over the past 20 years Pakistan's media landscape has drastically changed evolving from a strictly regulated state-run system to one that is more diverse and pluralistic even though there are still major structural political and security issues (Khan, 2022). Many private TV and radio stations were made possible by the liberalization of electronic media in the early 2000s especially under General Pervez Musharraf's rule. There were very few state-run television channels in Pakistan prior to 2000 by the 2010s the number of private channels had greatly increased. One study claim that Pakistan has more than 100 electronic media channels with hundreds of millions of viewers (Iram et al., 2022).

In Pakistan press safety and freedom of expression are still precarious despite the expansion of media outlets and reach. Common concerns include self-censorship legal intimidation censorship and journalist safety. High risks for journalists are often highlighted in reports from media rights organizations including threats violence arrests and legal harassment. For instance, 140 instances of threats and attacks against media professionals in Pakistan were recorded in Freedom Networks 2022–2023 Press Freedom Report. Additionally, the Pakistan Press Foundation has documented multiple instances of censorship hostile legal environments and physical danger for journalists especially in more unstable areas (Qayyoum et al., 2023).

The media landscape in Baluchistan stands out as being especially limited unstable and undeveloped within this difficult national context. Press freedom groups and human rights organizations have long characterized Baluchistan as a high-risk region for journalism with far fewer opportunities for independent reporting serious security threats and inconsistent media coverage outside of major cities (Jamil, 2023). Baluchistan's journalists face a variety of dangers. The province continues to be a minefield for journalists where reporting can be exceedingly risky according to a Dawn report. Baluchistan is described by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) as a black hole of information where there are still lethal risks associated with speaking the truth. Self-censorship is often used as a survival strategy in an environment where structural political and military forces in addition to non-state actors raise security concerns. After 2002 private electronic media spread throughout Pakistan but these outlets still don't adequately serve many Baluchistan districts. The provincial capital Quetta is where most media activity takes place (Abbas et al., 2023).

The national media coverage in Baluchistan is peripheral, and many studies identified that national press of Pakistan and TV channels are framing this province in terms of insurgency, security, proxy wars rather than portraying the socio economic and political issues. Baluchistan specifically neglected in the realm of mainstream media of Pakistan, this led to exclusion of local perspective and reinforcing the perception of being neglected among other provinces. These dynamic of Pakistani media while covering the Baluchistan are deeply conditioned by persistent political and ethnolinguistic fault lines which automatically compel the journalist freedom and shape the pattern of presentation (Hussain et al., 2023).

According to report of Global Political Review the media persons in Baluchistan used to face continues threats and forcing them to enter in the self-censorship environment. It is very hard for journalists to investigate and report on the allegations of corruption and human rights violation among this province. Pakistan's consistent low ranking in the press freedom index and in this context many studies are indicated that the journalistic true duties are being compromised (Abbas et al., 2023). The legal regularity bodies like Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) which permits the concerned authorities to punish journalists for online coverage on social media platforms make the situation more worsen. These laws allegedly being used for abusing the journalists as from of legally terrifying. Recent amendments in this law give more powers to the authorities as they can now arrest, and fine media workers have worsened these concerns. In this ten's environment, it is very difficult for journalists and activists to avail freedom of speech on traditional and social media while doing their practices (Aftab, 2024). In the sensitive areas like Gwadar, Turbat and Panjgur activists, media outlets and journalists forced to remain silence to drop stories in these areas.

Local independent platforms and freelance journalists have gain popularity as major sources of information but still in danger. Baluchistan's state-controlled media allegedly declared as its reporting

regarding this region either underrepresenting or misrepresenting (Haider, 2022). The residents of this region express their grievances in the terms of social, political and economic issues but on the other hand the national media always altered these issues in security related issues. Several studies based on comparative content analysis investigated that national press of Pakistan often framed Baluchistan as security sensitive area and all other province's frames are usually developmental categories (Raza, 2022).

Due to the structural limitations of all traditional media outlets the alternative platforms appeared and gaining significant attention among the people of Baluchistan. Independent digital media outlets, social media accounts and pages and citizen journalists and activists are filling the information gap. These all actors are posting their reports and information through social media, mobile technologies, and different kind of encrypted communication resources as the citadel truth or emancipatory way to get themselves as relevant. Nevertheless, such platforms are still highly vulnerable, running under severe resource constraints and pervasive surveillance in an environment marked by hostility and insecurity (Rehman et al., 2023).

The regulatory environment in which bodies such as the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) operate stays extraordinarily complex and politically sensitive. While the expansion of commercial media has been enabled through broadcast licensing, state influence over regulatory mechanisms persists. Concurrently, the intensification of digital surveillance and the deployment of technological and legal instruments to restrict online expression have compounded these challenges, leaving journalists and their sources increasingly exposed to significant risks (Saadia & Naveed, 2024).

Pakistan Electronic Meida Regularity Authority (PEMRA) in this situation operates in Baluchistan uncommonly politically sensitive and complex. Although there are high chances in the era of commercialization of media to build any media channel by any wealthy entity, but issue will remain the same when state has specific influence in the shape of regularity authorities(Antoine et al., 2022). Recently the intensified digital monitoring and locating the legal and technological instruments by the government limit the freedom of expression online, these challenges are compelled the journalists and their recourses in Baluchistan into the dangerous situation.

International Press freedom organizations explore the need of safety mechanism for the journalists in Baluchistan. According to the report by the Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) there is an urgent support needed for the protection of journalists in Pakistan especially in the conflict zone like Baluchistan including security, digital security, legal aid and the networks for the rapid response(Ul Hassan et al., 2023). But on ground realities are different and it's nearly impossible to grant them such facilities especially outside the urban areas.

For this research it's critical to investigate that how activists in Baluchistan navigate the media capture when there is a complex media landscape. Security based, legal, economic and political challenges shape them to make such strategies (Shirazi, 2017). Studying media capture in Pakistan is not just a matter of censorship and ownership in Baluchistan but its deeply rooted with marginalization, risk, conflict and surveillance. The main objective of this research is to explore the risk, motivations, constraints and strategies of activists in Baluchistan when they try to mobilize, resist and communicate.

Literature Review

The responses from the activist in the context PECA has been investigated through the qualitative analytical approach. The authors used document analysis of the legal and policy aspects of this law and conducted semi structure interviews of the digital activists, journalists and civil society actors. They find out that due to vast powers and unclear difination of PECA allow immoderate monitoring capacity to state authorities and ultimately its creating chilling effects on expression (Malik Ramzan et al., 2020). These findings are aligned with this research because of the structure of the regulatory bodies compelled the activist to by-pass the state-controlled mechanism.

A mixed method approach has been adopted for assessing that how PECA influence on the freedom of expression, journalistic practices and what are the difference of opinion exists among the journalists. The sample size comprised on journalists responded that the PECA used as a tool of censorship and they hold many stories to avoid any legal troubles. The media owners deliberately constrain their reports to avoid the risk related to PECA. The authors concluded that for the protection of journalists there should be more transparent, and clear laws must be introduced (Khan & Bhatti, 2012). The activists in Baluchistan are facing similar situation, and this law shape their decision that which platforms are better for them to communicate and raise their voices.

The critical analysis of the balance between the controlling misinformation online in Pakistan with the protection of freedom of expression in the context of PECA. The main purpose was to find out that how this law is affecting the freedom of expression on the name of protection of disinformation with the alignment or misalignment of human rights norms. With the help of legal policy analysis of the PECA's law text and how it has been applied in different cases this research finds out that this law's vague definition of cybercrime seems to be politically motivated when come to in enforcement mechanism(Critelli, 2010). It creates a serious risk to human rights this law might be invented for making silence rather than combating the online harm. Its suggest that media capture or regulations by the states are not neutral, it is shaping the digital activism into more cautiousness and navigating the risk.

Digital journalists in Pakistan are facing the challenges in the terms of legal threats under PECA, online expression regulations and ethical difficulties. These all aspects are explored through the case studies and interviews. They find out that the journalists are not afraid about the state sponsored censorship but also, they are going into the self-censorship system like fear of legal vengeance that led them to avoid sensitive topics. On the name ethics the digital journalists must decide that in what ways they can cover the digital activism by avoiding implications of such laws(Raza et al., 2023). It means the activists in Pakistan senses these risks and now they are in position to navigate the media capture by adopting some strategies.

To understand that how youth in Pakistan politically engaged on social media and expressing their opinions, participation in activism and negotiates their identities. Netnograghy on social media platforms with the combination of in-depth interviews has been used for the exploration of these objectives. The research finds out that social media is a central or major platform for the youth for political mobilization and activism(Besley & Prat, 2006). The discourse generated from youth was related to corruption, development and morality. They are challenging the traditional gatekeeping, and this indicted that especially youth in

Pakistan circumventing the traditional barriers by using digital media. They are not leaving the activism and also searching the ways if social media didn't work for them.

Youth in Pakistan is creating their own digital public sphere on social media and engaged in political activism. The quantitative investigation of 403 university students has been carried out to measure the online activism. The study shows that students are actively involved on social media to discuss political issues, generating public discourse and questing the leadership on specific matters. This is not a traditional activism based on traditional media discourse its purely online and it give a sense that the youth are themselves are the major source to circumventing the captured or controlled traditional narratives and creating the parallel digital places of discourse (Mabweazara et al., 2020).

Social media is influencing the youth of Pakistan in terms of political awareness, activism and their real-world political participation. Survey-based research identified that yes there are positive correlation among the youth and political awareness on social media, but less evidence has been found that this online activism transmitted into the offline activism (Wang et al., 2020). Due the structural institutional limitations are the barriers in a way that this online activism can't be transformed into the real-world participation.

Another research similarly investigated that either online activism or social media exposure can lead the Pakistani youth towards considerable political knowledge and possibility of meaningful participation. Among the 600 university students responded that they use social media often for political discussion and information. But very a smaller number of students are actively involved in the political debates (Khan et al., 2023). They slightly touched the political discussion and gained the knowledge but that cant lead them into the active participation. This highlights the importance of social media as a tool of political awareness and activism, but activists avoid the engagement on the political issues due to the risks.

Social media platforms are the major source of dissemination of the disinformation and the research carried out to examine that how misinformation spread on the cross social media popular platforms. The researchers conducted the cross platforms analysis over the period of 8 months and focused that what are the main tactics of the misinformation has been disseminated on the social media platforms, and they find out that the conspiracy narratives, emotional manipulation, parody of credible sources, religious polarization and political dispersion are the main tactics of the misinformation (Rashid, 2019). Among the popular social media platforms, WhatsApp is the most used platforms for the spreading to misinformation. So, misinformation is the high risk for the activists, this study recommends the activists that they must adopt such strategies that can raises their voices and protect the risks of misinformation.

There are very low digital literacy populations exists in Pakistan but in this situation how education can intervene in a way to build ability to find out the fake news on social media. The general education about the fake news among the participates helped them to identify the fake news better and easy as compared to those who don't have such education. The education clearly intervenes and builds the ability to judge the fake news among the selected population (Mir et al., 2023). The activists must develop the ability to check the fake news as they can push their narrative.

In Pakistan political actors and malicious users are using bots to manipulate the twitter trends. It was necessary to identify that either this manipulation was through real accounts or using bots. This research find

out that not all the political trends are made by the bots the users are using their account in the participating the trends on X (Huma et al., 2023). But these campaigns are not usually organic they are pre planned and it is a suggestion for activists that these trends or manipulation are the threat to circumventing media capture environment.

It is important to explore that how activists in Pakistan perceived the use of social media for creating awareness, organization of protest and its effectiveness in social justice matters. Obvious methods of in-depth interviews were used to explore this objective. The activists express their point of view that the social media provide them a major visibility especially for underrepresented issues which are neglected by the social media (Farid et al., 2022). They said we can broadcast on X, Facebook and Instagram human rights violations issues and generate a mobilization for support and action. Although the reach of their online protect remain limited due to in tangible involvement of the authorities that this mobilization often failed to transform in offline environment. This research indicated that social media is not just platform, but it provides the communication channel that can be used for justice oriented based issues, but activists must use it strategically in media capture environment.

These studies draw an attention towards that how activists in Pakistan and in highly controlled media environment are using social media for navigating the mainstream media discourse. These researchers also highlight the complex between the visible and invisible risks involved in online mobilization in context of regulatory authorities. Due to these multifaceted strategies by the government authorities the activists compelled to resist media capture.

This research provides the solid background of the activists which are already adopting some strategies to overcome media capture, but Baluchistan is key area where journalists and activists are at high risk, and they compelled to navigate the media capture environments.

Research Methods

This research used a qualitative exploratory investigation based on ground experiences of the activists and freelance journalists located in Baluchistan. Due to their existence in high-risk media environment qualitative method was chosen to gain in depth contextualization and primary real times experiences of this sensitive research phenomena. Qualitative research method come up with through and deep knowledge of a phenomenon by describing the experience and internal perspectives of the peoples(Aspers & Corte, 2019). In might be unsafe or impractical to use quantitative approach in the sensitive and conflictual region like Baluchistan. However, the open-ended questionnaire allowed participants to convey their important insights. So the semi structured interviews were selected to balance the flexibility and consistency.

The researchers were already knowing some population and to reach out the feasible sample size this research employed the snowball sampling strategy. Afte the initial knows participate were identified, by using their own local network each of them refereed to other participants on predetermined criteria. This approach is feasible when it's hard to find the relevant population (Busetto et al., 2020). Due to security concerns, the activists and independent journalist may be reluctant to participate in this research openly that's why the snowball was the convenient way to reach out and make them available (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). This

sampling strategy is known to recruit the population in the logistics and security contains which often other approaches are infeasible.

The sample size comprised on 12 individuals' mixture of activists and independent journalist from Baluchistan. They were all adults and had active and direct engagement in local media and civic activism. No further grouping was made on demographic details as the sample size reflect those who were willing and available for this study based on their ethical safeguards. Such kind of qualitative research involved in interviews when often achieved 9 to 12 participants which can be able to find the thematic saturation they are usually enough and the sample of 12 in feasible to explore the relevant themes.

Data Collection

Through the semi structured interviews, the data was collected online and face to face, questionnaire was built to cover the topics of media capture perception of the participants, coping strategies, pressure on journalism and navigating methods. Open ended questions were enabled the possibility of interesting points and clarity of responses (Gill et al., 2008). Each interview session was approximately 40-50 minutes, and it was recorded with the permission of the participant on his preferred language. It was transcribed into the English language, however the researcher tool the field notes for the contextualisation of the details (Galanis, 2018).

Ethical considerations were implemented because of the sensitivity of the topic. Verbally and written possible risks were communicated to each participant before the interview, consent has been taken formally and also, they received the purpose, procedures and probable benefits of the study.

They informed that their name will be anonymous and in the transcription of interviews their name will be replaced with codes. The data was stored in protected files and only available for research team. The interview guide clearly avoided the most sensitive topics and participants were allowed to refuse such answers which made them uncomfortable.

Thematic analysis was used to examine the interview transcripts in accordance with Braun and Clarkes (2006) framework. A technique for finding, examining, and summarizing patterns in data is called thematic analysis. This popular method provides an approach to qualitative analysis that is both theoretically flexible and approachable (Byrne, 2022).

The six phases of the analysis process were as, familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes against the dataset, defining and naming the final themes and creating a cohesive narrative report of the findings. Rather than already determined codes, the themes and codes were established on the participant's real wording, and it called inductive coding process.

Not a single theme was generated unanimously, the research team revised the themes until they all agreed on the generated themes. The generated themes are explained and highlights the activists and journalists' activities under the media capture situation and their coping mechanisms. The final analysis aims strict with the faithfulness to the collected data that can enriched the research findings

Data Analysis

The systematic thematic approach has been adopted for the analysis of the texts of collected interviews. It allows the better understanding and highlights of how freelance journalists and activists in Baluchistan responded the media capture and what are the strategies they adopted to cope this situation. The transcription of each interview was analysed through the interactive coding and the reason behind this to find the repetitive themes based on different approaches and similar experiences.

Accordance to the situation of sate surveillance, media capture and pressures the initial codes were compound into more classificatory schemes which was the true representation of whatever the participants experienced in their real life. The main focus of this process was the two exploration of the meaning which can present their behaviours, forms of resistance, fear of being caught and the specific strategies for navigating the media capture.

The results demonstrated the particular and specified categories of navigating tactics to overcome the media capture environment. The coded were converted into such themes which are findings of the main objectives of this research. These themes are based on the strategies adopted by the journalists and activists in response to the media control, censorship, digital repression and the main assumptions of the political economy of media theory.

Theme 1: Mediated Technologies as Tactics

According to the participants the major navigating tactic adopted by them was mediated technologies. They revealed that alterative media technologies are the main sauce for navigate media capture for example using disappearing massages function in WhatsApp, telegram by using VPN's and encrypted communication platforms. They were used for secure and less risky methods of reporting.

They feel the fear that everything they are using the government is watching and using end to end encryption is not need or choice its ultimate the lifeline to survive and taking maximum risk in the certain situation. Most of the participants mentioned that instead of sending a sensitive massage through text they used to adopt short call it can leverage them to leave least digital footprint. When all the apps are encrypted, they are used alternative media platforms run or created by the students including small independent websites, online news pages and other human rights groups. They are usually hides and not easily accessible for the government agencies. On the other hand, the human rights groups are the same and not solely influenced by the government and these groups used to help transmitting such stories which are neglected by the traditional media outlets. This is the strategic use of alternative media for doing their journalistic practices in the media capture environment.

Baluch diaspora which are mostly located in Middle East, Europe and North America is helpful the strategic engagement of the activists and journalists. The participants informed that they used to communicate the diaspora and then they are the major source for spreading their news and stories on different social media platforms. They are external helping factors for them to navigate the media capture. They are safe for them and the major source of publishing the hidden local issues of the Baluchistan on different channels. This partnership is significance in the situation when all other media outlets and social media platforms are being strictly monitored and there is no way to communicate their concerns. Independent media platforms,

diaspora partnership and encrypted media technologies serves as alternative way to do their duties in the severely censored and controlled media environment.

Theme 2: Forms of Communication Behaviour Under Media Capture

The participants emphases on the adaptation of different communication behaviours in accordance with the changing media capture situation. For example, they used to stay silent or go into self-censorship situation when they know their reporting can cause a serious problem for them. They avoid specific or known political words in their stories they use only those code words which are only recognized by the activists and journalists. They use same language in their groups and other activists understand the situation and again they go for different strategies to spread these kinds of stories.

The participants said that in their devices where all the news or reporting are saved, they also kept these massages and information in the code words. In case of they caught and their devices will be checked they can save themselves by these communication patterns. Most of the participants experienced the most used tactic for minimize the risk of sate surveillance by altering their places, jobs, professional and communication places. For example, they never use single place, device, sim and social media account. They multiples of all these things and it leads them to take safe passage of being caught. They all have different audience on different platforms and its ease them to communicate their massages in the media capture situation.

The major benefit of this strategy they are all being unknown on social media and no one knows their real identity and when they used to get attention of the government officials, they easily change the account or page. They are safe by tagging by others under the sensitive posts and remain unknown but regularly raise their voices.

The activists and freelance journalists used to avoid the surveillance risks by adopting these communication behaviours. They informed that by doing all such things they were in the sense of fear, and they always calculated the risks of being caught or anticipated the danger which can come anytime. They made their own communication culture which is different the common culture of media and these all the results of media capture.

Theme 3: Strategies for Avoiding Surveillance

The activists are using verity of strategies to avoid the sate surveillance, they are navigating the digital, relational and physical surveillances. For example, for avoiding the digital monitoring they employed the security measures related to digital devices like changing their passwords on regular basis, stopping the cloud backups, erasing chat and search histories, using VPN's and storing the sensitive information in their personal's phones. They informed that they commonly used non smart phones for avoiding the digital footprints, data extraction, no social media involvement and other location-based risks. They all have healthy information about the digital device and nature of security risks related to them.

On the front of their physical security, they are all one page. For example, they never revealed their travel plans, they continually change their locations, they used to meet on uncommon and unpredictable places and negligence of public gathering. Activists and journalists are differing in the meeting culture most of the times the activists avoid the same places of the meeting with the same people and journalists used indirect source

or places of meeting. They planned the meeting on one place but on time they used to change the location and avoid the risks. This physical alteration of their places is the most common strategy to avoiding the surveillance.

Their association with the social network was another major risk for them because there is always a monitoring on such systems. They informed that their colleagues are captured by the agencies often tracked though their connections. The participants highlighted that they used to limit their connections and groups, and they never add any unknown to their encrypted groups. They maintained certain boundaries around their trusted groups. For example, they used to filter the new connections and never integrated them fully until they passed the trust criteria. There procedures are their safeguard measures to ensure their security culture where they collectively reducing the risk and navigating the media capture.

These all-surveillances avoidance methods highlight the commitments and the activities of journalists and activists in Baluchistan though which they are operating under the stricter monitored situations. Their communication behaviours, using mediated and alternate technologies, sophisticated knowledge of secured digital footprints and their changing dynamics of social connections are the major methods to operate in such media capture environments. The intertwining of digital, physical, and relational security measures not only supports their survival but also reflects broader patterns of resistance and adaptation found in media-restricted environments globally.

Conclusion

This research highlights the strategic, adaptative and highly impulsive communication practices by the activists and freelance journalists as response to media capture in Baluchistan. The media capture environment is shape of constraints by the politics and economic powers shows that vulnerable groups still operate in this situation. The results of results reinforce the philosophy of political economy of media that the political and economic control over media like infrastructure of communication, media outlets and flow of information by state powers is visible through the legal pressure, institutional pressure, informal coercion, intimidation, and technological monitoring.

The result of the study shows that journalists and activists replied to these all controlling mechanisms of the state with stratified circumventing strategies associated with the diaspora engagement, encrypted technologies and their own independent media. These tactics are the reflection of the individuals' commitments how can they creatively increase their communication agency despite the systemic suppressions.

The findings of the research revealed that working under the surveillance is not easy as technological challenge, but survival-based condition shapes the trust, identity and collective work. And for neglecting the surveillance conditions became a form of social and political practice. Through device flawlessness, vigilant mobilization, relationship straining, and careful visibility, participants build a design of personal and collective security that is constantly evolving in response to perceived threats.

This study contributes the emerging trends of circumventing strategies of media capture all over the world especially in the sensitive area like Baluchistan. This region is known as backward province of Pakistan, but the study revealed that the local journalists and activists are creating their own communication networks and

they technological literate persons even in their personal groups comprised on local population they also take precautions which can prevent them to be caught because they ae compelled to be marginalized communities. This research also contributed the value of semi structure interviews as qualitative inquiry. Such sensitive communication phenomenon cannot investigate perfectly through the quantitative research alone. Although sample size is not fully covered the diverse areas of Baluchistan, but the future researchers can take sample size based on the multiple areas of this province.

In conclusion, this study establishes that despite media restrictions in Baluchistan, political activists and independent journalists' discovery institutional space through systematized communication, technological variation, and international collaboration. Their experiences validate the resilience of local actors and challenge traditional assumptions that censorship is inevitable. Understanding these processes is not only useful for academic research but also for informing policy, advocating for digital rights, and designing future interventions aimed at protecting press freedom in a politically charged environment.

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