

# Digital dilemmas: Free speech, privacy, and state control in Pakistan's social media landscape

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## Abstract

The social media regulations in Pakistan reach out to the issues of society, law, and morality. Due to the blistering development of digital technologies, nowadays, people are more concerned about hate speech, fake news, and privacy. Thus, the government is updating the rules. Nevertheless, other individuals believe that such measures interfere with the freedom of speech and might be prohibited by the Constitution. It is feared that such legislation as PECA can be exploited to prevent criticism using its ambiguous provisions. It is hard to ensure that fundamental rights of people are guaranteed and they are responsible. The other one is the fact that the nature of requests or deletions to data may not be understood, as well as how the content is being deleted. It means that social media networks are social subjects that are dynamic in the world and, therefore, give additional difficulties in controlling them. These are issues that need an intelligent approach to tackle in the digital space in Pakistan, whereby all stakeholders, good laws, and democracy are involved.

**Keywords:** freedom of expression, legal challenges, PECA, privacy concerns, social media regulation

## Introduction

The sharing of information, communication, and public debate are all altered due to the fact that social media is increasing in Pakistan (Khan et al., 2025). Due to the digital revolution, significant challenges have been created, especially regarding the way we treat content (Gutierrez & Schmidt, 2012), protecting the privacy of users, and the issue of conflicting goals of free expression and national security (Clegg, 2024). It is necessary to have hate speech, disinformation, and cybercafe laws, but they must not contradict the rights of the population since more and more

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people gain access to such sites as Facebook or TikTok. The rule of the day compels uncertainty, and as such, the officials tend to behave erratically, which can culminate in lawsuits (Rehmat & Alam, 2016).

Mustafa et al. (2025) note that the policies of Pakistan with regard to social media management have periodically been accused of being overly limiting and, in so doing, may inhibit not only new concepts but free speech as well. Target's (2010) research indicated that lack of control over social media has psychological and social implications, making it necessary to formulate a cautious approach to assist users and digital development. The fact that social media is open to users in any part of the world may clog the regulations because their platforms must also adhere to international standards, which conflict with local practices.

Iftikhar et al. (2024) argue that the situation permits consumer abuse because Pakistani laws may not always correlate with international IT standards. Skepticism toward governmental institutions and abuse cases is also symptomatic of the problem, Masood (2023) states, as the laws utilized by the government, like the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, are not formulated clearly. According to the report on the issue by Liaquat et al. (2016), content moderation must therefore be transparent (Ahmed et al., 2024).

### **Research Justification**

As politics, society, and personal rights are all strongly shaped by social media in Pakistan, regulating it must be considered. We usually use social media to interact and engage with each other, but now it is mainly for spreading false information, hate, and dangerous messages. Since internet rules are still not fixed in Pakistan, which has more people using it each day, this has greatly impacted ethics and laws. If we are to suggest ways to improve the current laws, like the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), by finding a balance between requirements for safety and protection of rights, we must first research this field.

The supervision and regulation of social media are nearly impossible because it can be accessed by people the world over and, most of the time, does not fall in line with the laws of a particular state. To have correct and effective regulations, the legislators should be well informed about the influence of one industry on another. As a result of the impact of the false flow of information on the mental well-being

of individuals as well as their friendships, additional measures must be taken in order to have things under control on the internet. It aims to contribute to research on digital governance in such a way that the method Pakistan follows is consistent with its local needs and global trends. It aims at ensuring that the online world becomes a secure and accommodating environment for all dwellers.

## Methodology

This study employed a systematic review methodology, with research objectives established accordingly. A comprehensive literature review was conducted (Komba & Lwoga, 2020). Research findings were categorized based on their content (Hiver et al., 2021; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006), and classified information was incorporated into the study by organizing it into headings (Gan et al., 2021; Pawson et al., 2005). The evaluation of classified information and titles formed the basis of the study (Page, 2021; Rahi, 2017), ensuring the integrity of the research subject and its contents (Egger et al., 2022; Victor, 2008). The criteria for selection are enlisted.

- **Relevance:** Researches that directly addressed the questions posed by this study are included.
- **Quality:** Studies that meet a certain quality threshold (e.g., methodological rigor, bias risk) are included. Most of the research is from Scopus-indexed and Clarivate Analytics journals and reputed publishers.
- **Recency:** Consideration of the publication date to ensure that the review reflects the most current evidence. Most of the studies are from the last three years.
- **Language:** Only studies published in English are included.
- **Data Completeness:** Previous studies must provide sufficient data on outcomes of interest for practical synthesis; it is also ensured in this research.

This study did not use primary data from human participants; therefore, no ethics clearance letter from the ethics committee was required.

## Review of the Literature

Since social media plays a role in Pakistan's national security and freedom of speech, it is necessary to look at how best to regulate it. Many academics have closely studied which aspects of digital platform laws are beneficial and which are not. According

to Rehmat and Alam (2016), terms under PECA, Pakistan's key cybercrime law, are poorly defined, which means the law can easily be misused. Clegg (2024) emphasizes that unclear rules for moderating content may cause users to be blocked and lose trust in what takes place online. Ameen and Gorman (2009) explain that more people in social groups targeting women and the lower social classes are victims of cyberbullying and online harassment.

Reaching people all over the world through social media makes it much harder to keep them under control. Iftikhar et al. (2024) report that international IT companies operating here often conflict with Pakistani rules and traditions. Masood (2023) points out that when laws from countries are not the same, this can give users reason to be taken advantage of. Liaquat et al. (2016) suggest that businesses work to streamline how they control content so it is easy for everyone to grasp. The paper argues that governments and digital firms should team up to ensure online rules are just and fair.

There has also been attention given recently to understanding how ethical standards should apply to social media governance. According to Khan et al. (2025), anybody of rules for regulating hashtags should ensure both free speech and adequate protection of national security. Since Pakistan exists in a special social and political situation, it faces difficulties in balancing its economy. Based on Mustafa et al. (2025), social media platforms are now simply spreading political information that increases people's differences and places democracy in danger. In that year, the authors suggested that digital literacy gives adults the ability to control what they do online. As a result, they recommended that educational programs for adults must include steps to prevent cybersecurity threats.

Social media regulation often mentions concerns about data security and privacy. Because multinational digital businesses collect such large amounts of data, there is a significant concern about possible misuse. In addition, foreign companies are usually not punished under the Pakistani legal system, which makes it challenging for consumers to defend their private rights, the authors say Iftikhar et al. (2024). Since people's data is being exploited, it is being requested that national rules on data protection be tighter.

Liaquat et al. (2016) stress the importance of being transparent with data and urges governments to make it possible for people to manage their personal information.

Managing social media in Pakistan is not easy, as it needs to consider privacy, freedom of speech, and national security together. While PECA brings about necessary changes, it still has to evolve with the fast-evolving digital world. Further, we must continue to resolve the mismatch between global and local rules and ensure that content moderation is done fairly and openly (Ahmed et al., 2024).

### **Historical Context of Challenges in Pakistan's Social Media Regulations**

A complex interplay of social, political, and legal factors has shaped Pakistan's social media regulations (Khan et al., 2025). In the fight against cybercrimes, the 2016 Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) was a significant turning point. However, it was accused of restricting freedom of expression due to its vague and expansive clauses (Iftikhar et al., 2024). Pakistan's approach to regulation has been judged against similar matters in countries such as India and the EU, both dealing with the same problem: how to make sure democracy is defended while rules are created Ahmed et al. (2024). The government has lately moved to action to limit hate speech, blasphemy, and disinformation online. Due to all this hard work, the 2022 Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Regulations forced these businesses to establish local branches and delete malicious posts (Mustafa et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, it has also been debated that other policies omit all minor details, and digital rights may be undermined (Clegg, 2024). This unyielding issue portrays the sophistication of it all when it comes to governments making sure that they place enough value on the rights of people and, at the same time, attending to the needs of the people online (Masood, 2023). With the presence of social media, Pakistan's sources of legislation will remain in the minds of the people and will add to the discourse of online governance across the global world (Mustafa et al., 2025).

### **Theoretical Context of Challenges in Pakistan's Social Media Regulations**

The topic of social media regulation in Pakistan unites the concepts of ethical state management, the safety of national security, and the freedom of speech. Theoretically, the problem can be explained by the conflict between the desire to regulate the acts to prevent harmful effects and ensure a stable level of order prevailing online and by the belief that the government should take a lesser role in evaluating the questions of digital policy.

A legal problem is that neither the law nor international documents fully address the challenge of striking a balance between preventing hate speech, cybercrimes, and false news and protecting Article 19 (freedom of expression). The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016 is an example of how this battle is played out since it helps authorities who can use unclear words to quash free speech. Since not all social media companies abide by local government regulations but rather by those used internationally, it becomes more challenging to make regulations by the regulator take effect. As it is commonly said in theory, there must be good governance where regulations are applied publicly with sound judgment. By being over-protective, one can create censorship, and by being unwilling to supervise the matters sufficiently, one can expand the gap between the various groups. Hence, the issues that Pakistan has been dealing with concerning controlling social media explain why we require a comprehensive strategy that considers both local and foreign rights to digital rights.

### **Leading Laws Regarding Pakistan's Social Media Regulations**

The main legal issues in Pakistan are associated with the defense of such security of the country and the possibility of discussing everything freely in a social network. Nevertheless, it is argued by several that its ambiguous clauses have allowed the Act to violate freedom of speech and be utilized to attack dissenters of the regime. The encroachment of states on digital terrain is being contested since the move of Pakistan finds itself akin to IT Rules 2021 in India. An example is that Pakistani authorities have asked Facebook and Twitter to take down some of their posts that contain political opposition and blasphemy, which are frequent complaints in the cases of crossing the line of authority.

Last year, the government put in place the Citizens Protection (Against Online Harm) Rules, which required social media companies to have local offices and to remove any harmful information. It was because of their fogginess and after-effects on freedom of speech that these regulations were criticized. On top of that, it has not been easy to manage challenges like hate speech and false information because laws are too politicized, and there aren't clear standards. For this reason, a strategy is needed that addresses online rights and legitimate concerns about things that could go wrong online.

## **Challenges for Pakistan's Social Media Regulations**

A number of obstacles that exist in law, society, and modern technologies have stopped Pakistan from ensuring reasonable social media policies. One of the most significant challenges is how to provide freedom of speech without getting tech abused. Article 19 of the Pakistani Constitution protects the freedom of expression, but there are several occasions the expressive freedom may come into conflict with the necessity of curtailing messages that can generate harm or threaten the nation. As both causes and false information are formed primarily on social media nowadays through political discourse, it isn't easy to reach a compromise.

Since social media is unlike other spheres, there has been no creation of a sound legal frame so far. Although it incorporates a few regulatory mechanisms, PECA 2016 has been criticized because it is too general, such that the provisions can be easily manipulated. According to some opponents of the law, it is too extensive in providing the list of cybercrimes that it can be conveniently used to persecute activists, journalists, and those who protest the authority. On the one hand, the uncertainty reduces the level of trust of citizens, and on the other, it leads to the emergence of various legal issues both among the customers and employees of the platform in question.

The problem is that social media can barely be controlled due to the issue of jurisdiction. Social media companies maintain their headquarters in foreign countries where the international policies are dissimilar to those in Pakistan. Thus, Pakistani officials find it difficult to force their laws on these platforms, which continue to fight back by saying that they are violating their global policies or the privacy of users. Primarily, there are not many options available to the government: such requests to view user data or delete it are most commonly disregarded or put off indefinitely. It is also a challenge since technology is changing at a high rate. The regulators cannot keep track of the continued development of new features and codes, as well as paths of communication, on social media platforms. In addition, the large volume of information exchanged on a daily basis cannot be monitored in the right ways to be managed using human labor because most automated tools are not developed enough to differentiate between harmless and hazardous contents.

The number of problems increases due to cultural and socioeconomic issues even more. Pakistan is a land that has a number of different languages spoken and

religious and ethnic groups, and each group has its own mode of operation. There is also a difficulty in ensuring the regulatory rules remain at all times since one community may not be offended by what another community may be offended by. Hate speech and false information sharing might increase the existing gaps between the community members and cause such new issues as stress among neighbors or even riots.

It is said to be hard to ensure transparent and open operations of rules. Regulation of most of the complex or uncertain rules can lead to censorship and will damage the trust that people have in that field. People are likely to post unwarranted content without being inhibited as there is a lack of adequate supervision. There should be collaboration on solutions by all interested parties, including governments, firms, citizens, and users, but differences and mistrust may come in the way. Regulation of social media in Pakistan must be done through rights-respecting planning. When we work online, we must strive to have better legislation and advancements in technology, safeguard our cultures, and we must stick to democracy.

### **Opportunities for Pakistan's Social Media Regulations**

Social media is not completely regulated in Pakistan, but the same situation creates a space for promoting a friendly, safe, and progressive internet-based community. The idea of establishing an equal justice system between the people who suffer because of the unorganized digital environments and those who cannot survive without their fundamental rights is thrilling. Pakistan has the opportunity to show other countries how to approach digital governance when it sets clear and transparent rules following the basic rights of citizens. When social media is overseen, people who rarely speak openly can do so carefully. Those who belong to women's groups, religious minorities, or activist organizations can enter online discussions because the rules protect them from hate speech and false information. Society could become stronger, and the way people communicate may be better.

Our social media activity should follow the rules to address the problem of false news in Pakistan. Authorities should explain that posting misleading news on the internet can bring punishments. Integrating fact-checking and informative programs into these companies is one way we support the use of the internet while also warning people about fake news.

Promoting economic development can also be done through using social media. To join the global digital economy and help the economy grow, Pakistan should support both innovation and new businesses. Moreover, having easy-to-understand laws helps build a stable environment for companies, increases investors' confidence, and encourages local companies to adjust social platforms to the preferences of the local population. Besides, taking steps to control social media from being used for illegal purposes like human trafficking, cybercrime, and terrorism adds strength to the national security system. If Pakistan partners with foreign organizations and IT companies, it could design and use the best systems to protect itself from these dangers.

Taking the initiative helps the image of the country in the international arena and makes a vital step towards the protection of the global internet. The regulation of social media also presents a chance to establish the privacy and security of the users. What Pakistan can do to ensure the safety of data is to be sure that there are good laws that will protect the personal details of people against their misuse by business-minded fraudsters. People are more comfortable with the existence of online platforms and contribute to online life to a bigger degree when their rights and privacy are guaranteed. In addition to this, the emergence of regulations of social media can ensure greater coordination between users, businesses, civil society, and the government. By consulting all individuals as well as discussing freely, the country can meet the various demands of the population.

On the whole, the regulation of social media in Pakistan has specific legal barriers. Nevertheless, a number of opportunities exist in the future. Seizing the opportunities will enable Pakistan to develop a digital economy that links innovation, security, freedom, accountability, and inclusivity in the country to allow it to start enjoying a brighter future.

## **Discussion**

Due to the existence of stringent rules regarding social media in Pakistan, technology, social aspects, and laws have to be analyzed. The subject matter is how to confront the threats of unregulated internet and, at the same time, uphold the freedom of speech of people. Despite it having the legal basis of the Prevention of Electronic Crime Act 2016, the populace has become concerned that it could restrict the freedom of speech within the country. One hears a lot about the advantages and

disadvantages of using social media. Technology has made people aspire to discuss their issues, participate in diverse causes, and hold leaders accountable. However, technology can cause misinformation and promote violence, as well as endanger national security.

Because of this, we need advanced laws to remove offensive things without discouraging people from speaking out. The centrality of this topic comes from the fact that firms handling these networks are situated in different countries. Because these corporations operate under international law, the Pakistani government sometimes finds it hard to ensure their local rules are followed. Governments and IT companies should come together to protect the laws of each country and the rights of their users. As a result of the discussion, we see that laws will work better if people remain open and flexible. The country relies on help from users, technology specialists, and civil society to promote democracy and keep its digital environment secure and prosperous.

## **Conclusion**

In Pakistan, the management of social media is also complicated because other fundamental rights have to be guaranteed, and cyber risk should be avoided. Other things, such as the management of areas, technological changes, and strict legislation, are not clearly defined, but we still stand a good opportunity to craft digital spaces that are safer, fair, and prosperous. We require a cooperative, open, and rights-based approach to keep free speech secure and deal with the harm caused by hate speech, disinformation, and cybercrimes. Incorporation of the users, the civil society, the government, and the IT companies in the process could make Pakistan design a regulatory system that answers the needs of its people and meets international standards. With an aim to make social media useful to the nation on social-political and an economic aspect, the utmost consideration should be given to ensuring an atmosphere in the digital environment that is positive to the population, encouraging innovation and avoiding any damage to the country.

## **Recommendations**

- **Create a Closely Defined Legal System:** Design legislation that shows fairness between people's need to be informed and the chance to say what they believe.

- **Make sure children know how to use online tools:** Teaching the national public how to use social media, analyze claims, and recognize untrue news can help stop fake news from circulating.
- **Treat the security of data as your first priority:** The presence of data security rules inspires users to share their information online because they feel safe.
- **Promote Ways for Different Groups to Work Together:** Support open dialog between consumers, society, tech firms, and governance to form meaningful, physically inclusive policies.
- **Create Separate Groups to Oversee the Industry:** Appoint an independent group to regulate what is shared on social media and to deal with people who have complaints to protect against bias.
- **Use new technology to help you control your consumption:** Screen for and eliminate any content that breaches the law so people can still enjoy freedom of speech.
- **It is necessary to promote more cooperation between nations:** Work in tandem with international IT corporations and major international bodies to solve cross-border law problems and make local laws meet international rules.
- **Help to Safeguard Journalists and Activists:** Ensure that the rights of journalists, activists, and regular people to express themselves are protected by making PECA not misused to stop discussion.
- **Fight Against Hate Speech and Violence:** Prevent speech that incites violence, cyberbullying, and hate together with regulations to help everyone find safety online.
- **Promote and back new tech ideas grown in your community:** Let the industry grow, remain separate from foreign powers, and give opportunities to social media creators by making regulations dependable and straightforward.

### **Research Limitations**

There are a number of issues in the control of social media in Pakistan that limit this study. Since there is a new technology and social media platform every day, what we decide today might be invalid sometime soon. Moreover, not all rules involved in the analysis can accommodate the dynamic nature of technology over recent times, such as PECA 2016. Moreover, due to the lack of access in general and data protection preferences in particular, data on multinational digital companies cannot

be used to conduct a complete study into their adherence to local regulations. Due to the sensitivity of the topic of freedom of expression in Pakistan, there could be stakeholders who, without providing objective answers, give their reactions. The key concern is the avoidance of sociocultural and economic tendencies, as attention is paid only to legal and regulatory matters as far as social media is concerned. Due to these issues, managers ought to upgrade their knowledge to end happiness and get used to the fast-evolving online environment.

### **Research Implications**

This research piece is critical to anyone planning to influence the use of social media in Pakistan. Specifically, they note that it is essential to change this law to guarantee the freedom of speech and take a step towards speaking about hate content, false information, and cybercrime. Under this pattern, all the current legislation, such as PECA 2016 and others, can be modified so that they are fair and consumable. It also states in the report that the government, as well as the tech industry and civil society, should work together in order to create clear and realistic guidelines. Moreover, it makes individuals act intelligently when it comes to the utilization of social media and does not share irrelevant information. Nowadays, specialists have an opportunity to examine in detail the regulation of social media both on social and economic levels. To sum up, it is proposed in the report that Pakistan should develop a safe, open, and rights-respecting digital space based on regional and international standards.

### **Future Research Directions**

As a means to address these problems, future research will focus on several significant questions regarding regulating social media in Pakistan. Initially, the study can be done with respect to testing the effect of social media legislation on the freedom of speech and specific groups. Second, creative solutions can be found by reviewing how blockchain and artificial intelligence are altering the definition and application of the concepts of privacy and content moderation. No nation can be an exception on its own, and other countries have a system of rules that should be learned to use the best strategies in Pakistan. Future research on the impacts of social media regulation on local technological companies and small online businesses should also focus on this topic. Finally, provided researchers followed the rules throughout numerous years, they would be able to evaluate their findings

better and correct them as needed. The surprises and the choices can be viewed by traveling along these lines to strategies a just and practical solution on how we can regulate social media use in Pakistan.

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