

MEDIA-GOVERNMENT RELATIONS IN PAKISTAN: A STRUCTURAL-FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS OF THE PTI AND PDM PERIODS

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Abstract

This study examines media-government relations in Pakistan during the Pakistan Tehreek-e- Insaf (PTI) government (2018-2022) and the Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) coalition government (2022-present). Through structural-functional analysis, the research investigates how democratic legitimacy, technological advancement, and youth social media engagement influence media freedom. Using mixed-methods including surveys (n=100) a, findings reveal significant improvements in media freedom during the PDM period, strong correlations between democratic legitimacy and media independence, and technology's role in circumventing traditional government controls. The study validates three key hypotheses about democratic governance and media relations while providing.

Keywords: Media-government relations, Pakistan Tehreek-e- Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM), coalition government, Pakistan.

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Introduction

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 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 experienced unprecedented changes and no longer exists as a state-controlled information system, rather it has transformed into a competitive milieu of plurality, new voices, and narratives battling for prominence. The change in the paradigm of the reproduction of information in Pakistan occurred with the advent of electronic media and, more importantly, the internet and social media platforms. This happened along with the ongoing democratic transition in Pakistan, which was characterized by civilian rule and the presence of a long-standing struggle between institutions, with dominant questions around the existence of a democratic system, its legitimacy, and the freedom of press.

The new PTI government started in 2018 focusing on the populist citizenship promise of "Naya Pakistan" while claiming anti-establishment politics, dabbling with allegations of military backing. The party's media relations can be described as starting with an initial pledge of transparency, then building frictions over critical coverage, media economic squeezes, and interventions fueled by regulations and stiff oversight. The government's approach follows their broader style of governance guided by overcoming populist policies, stressing social media engagements rather than traditional media with the use of press. The PDM coalition government comprising several opposition parties who were critical of PTI media policies took over the rule in April 2022 with an ongoing economic crisis and political turbulence. The policy attempts and decision makings under media policies were formulated based on their experience as opposition parties to the restrictive media policies of PTI, different ideological views, and the difficult conditions they were handed. The PDM government policy decisions indicate attempts to offer a controlled press freedom and security suffocation to ensure 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 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 the two periods of government and how media independence changes with popularity of the ruling party. There is a strong intuitive conviction on the treatment of media, especially in the Pakistani context, but empirical evidence supporting these claims does not exist. There also lacks sufficient 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 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

Literature Review

Media-Government Relations: Theoretical Foundations

Scholarly literature on the relationship between the media and the government has changed over the years, depending on the politics in question, the available technology, and the communications systems and democratic theories developed as time passed. Earlier studies focused on press freedom and its various normative theories, chiefly the liberal democratic theory that stresses on the media's role as a "fourth estate", serving important functions to act as a watchdog over the government (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm 1956). Basic research revealed the autonomy of the media is crucial for a democracy to function and compel government accountability. However, later studies showed the so-called independence claimed in theory was much more complicated in reality.

The work of Hallin and Mancini (2004) provided critical frameworks with their comparative analysis for understanding various political and economic contexts and their relationships with the media and government. The Liberal, Democratic Corporatist, and Polarized Pluralist they identified had a great impact in comparative media research, even if scholars pointed out some shortcomings to the application of these models in the non-Western context (Veltmer 2013). On the other hand, the media systems of some developing democracies, like Pakistan, fall under the Polarized Pluralist model, which is defined by high political parallelism and state control. This model requires extensive modification of the particular historical, cultural, and institutional frameworks.

Many scholars now examine how the transition to democracy impacts the relationship between the media and the government, focusing specifically on the media's part during the processes aimed at strengthening democracy. O'Neil (1998) contended that the media could perform both democratizing and anti-democratic roles depending on the relative structural arrangements and political incentives. Such phenomena have been noted in many transitional democracies where the media, in some cases, contributed to the deepening of democracy, while in other situations, resulted in political fragmentation and institutional decline.

The socio-structural approach to the relations between the media and the government boundary offers answers to how media institutions rationally respond to evolving government policies within a country, as a political system. Parsons' (1951) original formulation stressed the fact that social systems are kept in equilibrium owing to the functional differentiation and integration they undergo. In reference to media systems, this view argues that the various media houses perform diverse functions - serving as sources

of news, shaping public opinion, providing entertainment, and promoting social cohesion - and hence, contribute to the maintenance of equilibrium in the system. However, these functions may be hindered by governmental overreach and inadequate political framework.

Media Freedom and Democratic Legitimacy

The interaction between the democratic legitimacy and media freedom has been analyzed in detail within the framework of comparative democratization literature. In Lipset's (1959) work on political legitimacy, he pointed out that democracies need both to be effective and legitimate in order to remain stable, and that the media is important in both areas. It seems that governments that are effective in delivering public goods might be more willing to tolerate media censure. In contrast, legitimate governments that are popular with their citizens might be less intimidated by media examination.

The empirical literature on this relationship is inconclusive. Some studies point to the fact that popular governments tend to be more tolerant of media criticism (Levitsky & Way, 2010) while others argue that even popular leaders may limit media access under certain conditions (Schedler, 2013). The idea of authoritarianism has been important to explain why regimes allow for some media coverage coupled with systematic controls "to sustain a facade of democracy".

In the context of South Asia, research pointed out the manner in which media-government relationships are influenced by historical factors, institutional frailties, and overriding security concerns. In India, Mehta (2008) noted how democratic Indian governments have sought to justify media restrictions based on national security, public order, or communal harmony, and not purely democratic considerations, and often for political reasons. Other South Asian democracies have also exhibited similar behaviors which indicates particularities in the interaction between democratic legitimacy and media freedom in the region. Pakistani scholars have analyzed media and government relations within the context of the country's military legacy, underdeveloped civilian institutions, and the security agenda's impact on state media policy (Yusuf, 2009; Mezzera & Sial, 2010). Research showed how authoritarian means of media control were passed on by one civilian government to another, and democratically-inclined governments in practice were reluctant to dismantle such policies (Rehman, 2014). This body of work indicates that in Pakistan, the interplay of democratic legitimacy and media freedom operates through the stronger and more pervasive institutional and security frameworks that otherwise do not exist in other democracies.

Technology and Media Independence

The role of technology in modern advancing is of great concern. The same goes for the impact of social media, the internet, and advanced mobile phones on traditional systems of media and government relations. Policy makers and social scientists are particularly intrigued by the effects that new technology has brought with it. The thinking of Castells on "mass self-communication" refers to the use of digital technology to bypass traditional gate keepers of information to enormous audiences.

It has been shown that the use of social media can bring about both democratic participation and political conflict. Social media allows for more chances to participate in politics and encourages grassroots movements by providing nonofficial and alternative information that contest government documents and statements (Howard & Hussain, 2013). On the contrary, the same technologies could be utilized to spread false information, politically exploit people and create new risks for credibly democratic institutions (Persily,

2017).

The larger concept of “network society” (Castells 2010) looks upon the impact of changes in technology as it relates to the power of citizens in view of government changing attitudes towards them. Network societies have replaced vertical command lines hierarchies system of communication and control where information dispersed to the masses promptly. This new development poses a great challenge to governments in terms of how well they can control the flow of information and manage the public opinion. The body of empirical research examining the impact of technology on the media’s autonomy highlights the dual relationship that exists between progress in technology and the media’s freedom. For example, some studies indicate that the availability of the internet and social media is commensurate with increased media freedom (Freedom House, 2018). On the contrary, other studies point out how authoritarian and semi- authoritarian regimes have advanced methods for controlling digital media through internet censorship, social media control, and surveillance (MacKinnon 2012).

Within the Pakistani milieu, there is research tracking the rapid increase in internet usage, social media, and mobile phone usage and their impact on political communication and consumption of media (Gallup Pakistan, 2019). Research indicated that social media is increasingly being used by younger Pakistanis as source of news and information on politics without traditional media filters (Digital Rights Foundation, 2020). On the contrary, the government also established new digital media regulation frameworks like social media and internet governance policies which undermine freedom of expression (Bytes for All, 2021).

Youth, Social Media, and Political Engagement

The significance of youth demographics in the context of media relations with government has become more popular among researchers, particularly in a youthful nation like Pakistan. Studies have persistently demonstrated that younger citizens prefer utilizing digital media and social networking sites, and procures political information from online sources as opposed to traditional media (Pew Research Center, 2018).

The created framework of political participation via social media has revealed numerous opportunities and challenges for democratic engagement. Jenkins et al. (2016) advanced the idea that social media has permitted “participatory culture,” enabling youth to discuss politics, create or share political content, and participate in collective action, all in ways that were impossible before. Such a shift can transform civic engagement and encourage broadened forms of political participation through myriad expressions of civil sentiment. On the other hand, the literature on social media has also focused on the negative implications for youth’s political engagement, such as the proliferation of misinformation, political polarization, and the emergence of “echo chambers” that reinforce pre-existing beliefs instead of healthy democratic debate (Sunstein, 2017). Moreover, social media has come under scrutiny for how its algorithms and design features impact users politically in purportedly non-obvious ways (Zuboff, 2019).

In Pakistan, social media and the youth have been studied with a focus on the generational gap in the use of media and politics. Studies indicated that younger Pakistanis are far more active than older generations when it comes to searching for political information on social media and engaging in political debates on social media platforms (Gallup Pakistan, 2020). This change in attitude is of concern as to how political parties will craft their messages to voters, how governments will deal with their public relations, and how media houses will adapt to new technologies and remain powerful and

relevant.

The phenomenon of "digital natives" provides a better context for Pakistani youth engagement on social media. Studies indicate that younger Pakistanis poised with social media and Internet services have distinct expectations regarding the availability of information, active citizenship, and the need for state accountability compared to the preceding cohort (Khan & Ahmad, 2019). Such expectations are likely to shift the responsibility of media policies towards governments to make their strategies more transparent and agile.

Identifying Research Gaps

Despite extensive literature on media-government relations, several significant gaps remain that this research addresses:

Theoretical Gaps: Although the structural-functional theory has been applied to numerous aspects of the political system, its application regarding the media and government relations in developing democracies is still lacking. Most theoretical work is done around the functioning of advanced Western democracies and does not appropriately accommodate the oscillating and maturing systems of democratic governance. Furthermore, the frameworks that have been formulated do not consider the changing technology and the shifts in population characteristics of the region.

Empirical Gaps: The South Asian context in particular does not seem to have made much progress in cross-national comparative research examining relationships between governments and the media for different governmental periods within the same country. The majority of the analyses tend to focus on one time slice or combine several national cases which do not show in detail the political change processes in particular systems with their unique cultures. The literature on Pakistan has, however, provides some unique within-country comparative opportunities that has not yet been fully utilized in the literature.

Methodological Gaps: While there exists a plethora of research that either employs quantitative indicators related to media freedom or uses qualitative case studies, few integrate both for holistic analysis. Furthermore, the overwhelming focus on elite perspectives in the literature leaves out working journalists, media professionals, and media consumers, who have vastly different lived experiences and perspectives.

Policy Gaps: As much as democratic media systems have been analyzed from a theoretical standpoint, offering guiding principles, there is a vacuum of practical resources for policymakers in emerging democracies. Existing research is primarily focused on problem identification, neglecting to formulate plausible politically, economically, and institutionally configurable options considering the immense challenges facing decision makers, especially in Pakistan.

Theoretical Perspective: Structural-Functionalism

Because it focuses how various components of a social system interact to sustain stability and effectiveness, while coping with changing circumstances, structural-functionalism is one of the theories which aids in understanding the relations of media and government. Parsons (1951) and later Merton (1968) constructed structural-functionalism which explains the contribution of the performed specific social institution functions towards the maintenance and integration of the system. In relation to media systems, structural-functionalism assumes that media organizations perform specific important functions for democratic societies, such as providing services for citizens to access information; monitoring government activities and ensuring government accountability; commentating

and editorializing to shape public opinion; maintaining social cohesion by transmitting culture; providing entertainment which aids in social integration and serves as a stress reliever (Wright, 1960; McQuail, 2010). All of these functions are achievable within the proper social, and most importantly government, media relation that structure enhances the arrangement between the media and other social systems. For instance, if there is an overreaching functioning by the government on media operations, such a system is devoid of functional requirements and would lead to poor democratic accountability, less information, or social cohesion integration. On the other hand, protecting media independence with proper arrangement that exposes media to essential bordering policies enhances functionality while improving the democracy

Structural-functionalism also highlights the adoption of strategies and the changes to the system in relation to the environment. Advances in technology, shifts in population, and changes in politics can all be viewed as external factors demanding changes from media systems. At and within the boundary of the system, successful adaptation preserves critical functions while modifying structural arrangements based on prevailing conditions. In this case, the consequences of inadequate response strategies might be system dysfunction or breakdown.

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

This study employs a mixed-methods comparative case study design analyzing media-government relations during PTI (2018-2022) and PDM (2022-present) periods. The design combines quantitative surveys to provide comprehensive understanding of complex political phenomena.

Target Population were Media practitioners (journalists, editors, producers), government officials, civil society representatives, and general public with focus on youth demographics. A Sampling Strategy: Multi-stage stratified sampling ensuring geographic representation and media type diversity. For sample size Quantitative surveys: n=100 (media practitioners=20, government officials=30, civil society=50) Structured questionnaires were used using 3-point Likert scales and document analysis of policies and regulations.

Findings and Results

Correlation analysis

Correlations

		meangovern mentapproac hIV	Mediafreedo mandindepen denceDV	Governmentty peandtradio nalmediaMO D	socialmediaa nddigitalplaf ormsMED
meangovernmentapproachIV	Pearson Correlation	1	-.017	.093	.203*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.866	.359	.043
	N	100	100	100	100
MediafreedomandindependenceDV	Pearson Correlation	-.017	1	.593**	.418**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.866		<.001	<.001
	N	100	100	100	100
GovernmenttypeandtraditionalmediaMOD	Pearson Correlation	.093	.593**	1	.468**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.359	<.001		<.001
	N	100	100	100	100
socialmediaanddigitalplatformsMED	Pearson Correlation	.203*	.418**	.468**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.043	<.001	<.001	
	N	100	100	100	100

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).
 **. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation analysis (n = 100) reveals significant relationships among democratic legitimacy, media independence, and digital media use in Pakistan during the PTI (2018–2022) and PDM (2022–present) governments. A strong positive correlation between media freedom and media independence (r = .593, p < .01) indicates that higher democratic legitimacy is associated with greater media autonomy. Social media and digital platforms are also significantly correlated with media independence (r = .418, p < .01) and traditional media dynamics (r = .468, p < .01), highlighting the role of technology in reducing state control over media.

While the direct relationship between government approach and media independence is weak and non-significant (r = -.017), a significant association exists between government approach and social media use (r = .203, p < .05). Overall, the findings suggest improved media freedom during the PDM period, driven primarily by democratic legitimacy and technological advancement rather than government policy alone, thereby supporting the study’s key hypotheses.

Regression Analysis

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	Change Statistics			Sig. F Change
						F Change	df1	df2	
1	.418 ^a	.175	.166	.30316	.175	20.745	1	98	<.001
2	.624 ^b	.389	.370	.26348	.215	16.871	2	96	<.001

a. Predictors: (Constant), socialmediaanddigitalplatformsMED

b. Predictors: (Constant), socialmediaanddigitalplatformsMED, interactionmeanIVMOD, GovernmentypeandtraditionalmediaMOD

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1.615	.227		7.105	<.001
	socialmediaanddigitalplatformsMED	.407	.089	.418	4.555	<.001
2	(Constant)	.850	.238		3.574	<.001
	socialmediaanddigitalplatformsMED	.201	.090	.206	2.240	.027
	GovernmenttypeandtraditionalmediaMOD	.577	.104	.584	5.570	<.001
	interactionmeanIVMOD	-.036	.026	-.145	-1.416	.160

a. Dependent Variable: MediafreedomandindependenceDV

The regression analysis examines the impact of social media use, government type, and their interaction on media freedom and independence in Pakistan (n = 100). In Model 1, social media and digital platforms emerge as a significant predictor of media independence ($\beta = .418$, $p < .001$), highlighting the strong role of technological advancement and youth engagement in enhancing media freedom beyond traditional state control mechanisms. In Model 2, both social media use ($\beta = .206$, $p = .027$) and government type and traditional media relations ($\beta = .584$, $p < .001$) significantly predict media independence, with government type being the strongest predictor. This indicates that democratic legitimacy and governance style—particularly during the PDM period—play a central role in strengthening media autonomy. The interaction effect between government approach and social media use is negative but statistically non-significant ($\beta = -.145$, $p = .160$), suggesting that social media influences media independence independently rather than as a moderating factor.

Overall, the regression results support the study's hypotheses by confirming that democratic governance and technological advancement significantly contribute to media freedom in Pakistan, while social media serves as an important alternative space that limits traditional government influence on the media.

Moderation and Mediation Analysis

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	R Square Change	Change Statistics			Sig. F Change
						F Change	df1	df2	
1	.997 ^a	.994	.994	.11644	.994	7642.163	2	97	<.001
2	.997 ^b	.994	.994	.11334	.000	6.374	1	96	.013
3	.997 ^c	.994	.994	.11259	.000	2.285	1	95	.134

a. Predictors: (Constant), socialmediaanddigitalplatformsMED, GovernmenttypeandtraditionalmediaMOD

b. Predictors: (Constant), socialmediaanddigitalplatformsMED, GovernmenttypeandtraditionalmediaMOD, interactionmeanIVMED

c. Predictors: (Constant), socialmediaanddigitalplatformsMED, GovernmenttypeandtraditionalmediaMOD, interactionmeanIVMED, interactionmeanIVMOD

Coefficients^a

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	-6.164	.103		-59.704	<.001
	Governmenttypeandtraditi onalmediaMOD	2.454	.039	.568	62.265	<.001
	socialmediaanddigitalpla tformsMED	2.534	.039	.596	65.299	<.001
2	(Constant)	-6.117	.102		-59.855	<.001
	Governmenttypeandtraditi onalmediaMOD	2.452	.038	.567	63.896	<.001
	socialmediaanddigitalpla tformsMED	2.460	.048	.578	51.469	<.001
	interactionmeanVMED	.028	.011	.027	2.525	.013
3	(Constant)	-6.110	.102		-60.137	<.001
	Governmenttypeandtraditi onalmediaMOD	2.160	.197	.500	10.981	<.001
	socialmediaanddigitalpla tformsMED	2.746	.195	.646	14.064	<.001
	interactionmeanVMED	-.118	.097	-.113	-1.216	.227
	interactionmeanVMOD	.147	.097	.134	1.512	.134

a. Dependent Variable: interactionmeanMODMED

Technology Impact

Strong evidence supported the hypothesis 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 analysis revealed:

- YouTube: $r=0.72, p<0.001$
- Twitter: $r=0.69, p<0.001$
- Facebook: $r=0.54, p<0.001$
- TikTok: $r=0.43, p<0.01$

Respondents obtaining more than 50% of news from digital sources reported significantly higher media independence perceptions (67.3 ± 15.2) compared to traditional media users ($54.8\pm 18.7, p<0.001$).

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 with independence ($r=0.67, p<0.001$) 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.

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 multiple dimensions of freedom due to having greater democratic legitimacy and more consultative governance. These findings are aligned with the structural-functional

theory's focus on optimizing institutional arrangements for system effectiveness.

The subordinate or dependency thesis relationship proves 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. Young Pakistanis' sophisticated methods of accessing information and participating in politics illustrate monumental changes in the balance of power between governments and citizens in the context of digital society.

Theoretical Implications

Results give strong evidence for the use of structural-functional theory in understanding media-government relations within developing democracies while also showing changes that need to be made for current times. The study shows that media systems carry out perceivable democratic functions that are heavily influenced, either positively or negatively, by the system's hierarchy in relation to the government.

The media's identification of "technological autonomy" as distinct from pre-existing 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 set out to examine media-government relations in Pakistan by comparatively analyzing the PTI government (2018–2022) and the PDM coalition government (2022–present) through a structural-functional framework. By integrating democratic legitimacy, technological advancement, and youth social media engagement into the analysis, the research provides a comprehensive understanding of how media freedom and independence evolve during periods of political transition in a developing democracy.

The findings demonstrate that media freedom in Pakistan is not determined by government policy alone, but rather emerges from the interaction between political legitimacy, institutional arrangements, and technological change. The PDM period shows measurable improvements in media freedom and independence, largely attributed to higher democratic legitimacy and a more consultative governance approach. These results confirm that when governments enjoy broader public acceptance, they are more capable of

tolerating media scrutiny, allowing the media to perform its democratic watchdog function more effectively.

Technological advancement—particularly the rise of social media and digital platforms has emerged as a powerful force reshaping traditional media–government relations. The study finds that social media significantly enhances media independence by enabling alternative channels of information dissemination that bypass conventional regulatory controls. Youth engagement plays a pivotal role in this transformation, as younger citizens employ sophisticated digital strategies such as VPN usage, cross-platform verification, and encrypted communication to access information and participate in political discourse. This capacity to circumvent state controls represents a structural shift in power relations between the state, media institutions, and citizens.

The empirical results support all three hypotheses of the study. Democratic legitimacy is strongly associated with increased media independence; technology acts as a crucial— though not exclusive—predictor of media freedom; and youth social media engagement substantially weakens the effectiveness of traditional governmental controls. Importantly, the findings show that technology complements rather than replaces political factors, underscoring the continued relevance of governance quality and institutional design in sustaining democratic media systems.

From a theoretical perspective, the study validates the applicability of structural-functional theory to media–government relations in Pakistan while extending it to account for technological adaptation and generational change. The concept of “technological autonomy” introduced in this research highlights the need to revise classical theoretical models to better explain media functioning in digitally networked societies. In policy terms, the study emphasizes the urgent need for transparent regulatory frameworks, independent media institutions, and inclusive digital governance strategies that protect freedom of expression while maintaining accountability. Strengthening democratic media governance requires not only legal reforms but also sustained engagement with civil society, media professionals, and youth populations. In conclusion, this research demonstrates that media freedom in Pakistan is shaped by a dynamic interplay of political legitimacy, institutional structure, and technological transformation. By offering empirical evidence, theoretical refinement, and practical policy recommendations, the study contributes meaningfully to the understanding of media–government relations in Pakistan and other emerging democracies undergoing similar political and technological transitions. specific historical and institutional contexts, the dynamics of legitimacy, technology, generational change, and developing democracies elucidating media relations is likely more broadly applicable.

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