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# Media Literacy and Digital Rights:

## Exercising Rights of Access to Information, Privacy, and Freedom of Expression in the Digital Age



September, 2025

**Title:** Media Literacy and Digital Rights: Exercising Rights of Access to Information, Privacy, and Freedom of Expression in the Digital Age.

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**Production:** Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI)

**Disclaimer:**

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## Acknowledgements

The Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI) acknowledges efforts of the individuals who have contributed to the successful completion of this manual, titled "Media Literacy and Digital Rights: Exercising Rights of Access to Information, Privacy, and Freedom of Expression in the Digital Age."

Mr. Zahid Abdullah: We thank Mr. Zahid Abdullah for his dedicated efforts in compiling this manual and ensuring its content is both comprehensive and practical for training purposes.

Ms. Moonus Kainat, Project Manager: We acknowledge the significant contribution of Ms. Moonus Kainat, whose feedback and oversight ensured that all thematic aspects were addressed effectively, maintaining the clarity and coherence of the manual.

Mr. Muhammad Bashir: Our thanks go to Mr. Muhammad Bashir for his work in designing and formatting the manual, making it accessible and user-friendly for diverse audiences.

Mr. Mukhtar Ahmed Ali, Executive Director: We are deeply grateful to Mr. Mukhtar Ahmed Ali for his expert guidance and leadership throughout the process of preparing this manual. His vision and direction have been invaluable in ensuring its relevance and quality.

## List of Abbreviations

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| 2FA             | Two-Factor Authentication  |
| AFP             | Agence France-Presse   |
| AI              | Artificial Intelligence  |
| CNIC            | Computerised National Identity Card  |
| CRPD / UNCRPD   | United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities       |
| CEDAW           | Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women |
| CRC             | Convention on the Rights of the Child                                      |
| ECP             | Election Commission of Pakistan  |
| EOBI            | Employees' Old-Age Benefits Institution                                    |
| ETO             | Electronic Transactions Ordinance, 2002                                    |
| FIA             | Federal Investigation Agency   |
| GEO Fact Check  | Geo News fact-checking unit  |
| HTTPS           | Hypertext Transfer Protocol Secure   |
| ICCPR           | International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights                       |
| ICESCR          | International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights             |
| ICT (Territory) | Islamabad Capital Territory  |
| ICT Act 2020    | Islamabad Capital Territory Rights of Persons with Disability Act, 2020    |
| InVID           | Video verification toolkit for fact-checking                               |
| KP              | Khyber Pakhtunkhwa   |
| NADRA           | National Database and Registration Authority                               |
| NCCIA           | National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency                                  |
| NCHR            | National Commission for Human Rights                                       |
| NCRC            | National Commission on the Rights of Child                                 |
| NCSW            | National Commission on the Status of Women                                 |
| PECA            | Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016                                  |
| PECA (Amendt.)  | Prevention of Electronic Crimes (Amendment) Act, 2025                      |
| PEMRA           | Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority                             |
| PIA             | Pakistan International Airlines  |
| PKR             | Pakistani Rupee  |
| PTA             | Pakistan Telecommunication Authority                                       |
| RTI             | Right to Information   |
| SDG             | Sustainable Development Goal   |
| SMS             | Short Message Service  |
| SNGPL           | Sui Northern Gas Pipelines Limited   |
| Soch Fact-Check | Independent Pakistan-based fact-checking outlet                            |
| UDHR            | Universal Declaration of Human Rights                                      |
| UNCAC           | United Nations Convention against Corruption                               |
| UN              | United Nations   |
| VPN             | Virtual Private Network  |
| W3C             | World Wide Web Consortium  |
| WCAG            | Web Content Accessibility Guidelines                                       |

## Part 1: Understanding the Context and Foundational Concepts

### Introduction

#### Media Literacy Gaps in the Exercise of Digital Rights in Pakistan

According to the report *Media Literacy in Pakistan: Needs Assessment for Strengthening Democratic Engagement and Countering Digital Threats*, conducted by the Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI) in July 2025, smartphones and social media have become the dominant sources of news and information in the country. This heavy reliance on social media to access information coupled with lack of basic skills to verify authenticity of the news and to protect digital rights has serious consequences for the exercise of fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, right to information and privacy. This also poses challenges for ensuring safety and equal participation for women, transgender persons, religious minorities, and activists in the digital domain.

The effective participation in public affairs like taking part in democratic processes is only possible when citizens are aware of how to exercise their fundamental rights in digital domain in a safe manner. These realities form the foundation for the training content and objectives.

#### Objectives:

This training manual seeks to achieve following objectives:

1. Improved understanding of freedom of expression, right to information and right to privacy related provision in international legal commitments, constitutional articles to this effect and legal framework applicable in the country.
2. Improved understanding and skills to exercise these rights in digital domain in a safe and responsible manner to enjoy fundamental freedoms.
3. Improved skills to identify and respond to misinformation, disinformation, and deepfakes.
4. Improved understanding about right to information, legislation about this right and how to exercise this right in digital domain to effectively participate in democratic processes.
5. Improved skills to identify gaps in the media portrayal of women, transgender persons, and persons with disabilities and how to depict and describe these groups.
6. Improved understanding about access barriers faced by persons with disabilities in exercising their fundamental rights in digital domain.
7. Improved skills to use complaint mechanisms for the exercise of constitutionally guaranteed rights.

#### How to Use This Manual

This manual has been designed to provide flexible training options for different audiences. A comprehensive training programme of three full days can be delivered by covering all modules in sequence, ensuring participants gain a thorough understanding of the rights to information, privacy, and freedom of expression in the digital age.

Each module is also structured to function as a standalone training session. This allows facilitators to design short, focused workshops based on a single module, depending on the specific needs of participants or the thematic priorities of the training event. The modular design enables both in-depth multi-day programmes and targeted one-day or half-day sessions.

This training manual benefits a broad spectrum of users including faculty members, students, journalists, civil society actors and media professionals by strengthening their media literacy

skills. It equips them to critically evaluate information, safeguard their digital rights and participate responsibly in the evolving online information ecosystem.

### Key Terminologies

It is important to note that UNESCO's Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training (2018) classifies false and misleading content into three categories: 'misinformation', 'disinformation', and 'malinformation'. UNESCO discourages the use of term fake news. It defines them as follows:

- **Misinformation:** "Information <sup>1</sup>that is false, but not created with the intention to cause harm and the person who is disseminating it believes that it is true"
- **Disinformation:** "Information <sup>2</sup>that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organisation or country."
- **Malinformation:** "Information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, social group, organisation or country."
- **Deepfake:** "Deepfakes <sup>3</sup>are AI-generated forgeries—false images, audio, or video—that appear convincingly genuine."
- **Algorithm:** "A sequence <sup>4</sup>of step-by-step instructions or rules designed to perform a specific task or solve a problem, especially by a computer."
- **Echo Chamber:** "An environment <sup>5</sup>in which a person encounters only beliefs or opinions that coincide with their own, so that their existing views are reinforced and alternative ideas are not considered."
- **Filter Bubble:** "A situation <sup>6</sup>in which an internet user encounters only information and opinions that conform to and reinforce their own beliefs, caused by algorithms that personalize their online experience."
- **Fake News:** "False stories <sup>7</sup>that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke."
- **Trolling:** Posting rude or hurtful content to provoke others
- **Clickbait:** Misleading headlines or images made to grab attention
- **Privacy Settings:** Controls that manage who sees your digital content.
- **Phishing:** Fake messages designed to steal personal information.
- **Two-Factor Authentication (2FA):** A login method needing a second code
- **Cyberstalking:** Online monitoring or harassment
- **Bot or Fake Account:** Automated accounts used to spread content
- **Digital Footprint:** All traces left from online activity

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<sup>1</sup> UNESCO. Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training. Paris: UNESCO, 2018. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265552>

<sup>2</sup> UNESCO. *Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*. Paris: UNESCO, 2018, p. 7. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000265552>

<sup>3</sup> CrowdStrike. *What is a Deepfake Attack?* CrowdStrike Cybersecurity 101. 2024. Available at: <https://www.crowdstrike.com/en-us/cybersecurity-101/social-engineering/deepfake-attack/>

<sup>4</sup> Here's the **footnote reference** for *Algorithm*:  
Oxford English Dictionary. *Algorithm*. Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/algorithm>

<sup>5</sup> Cambridge Dictionary. *Echo Chamber*. Cambridge University Press. Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/echo-chamber>

<sup>6</sup> Oxford English Dictionary. *Filter Bubble*. Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/filter-bubble>

<sup>7</sup> Cambridge Dictionary. *Fake News*. Cambridge University Press. Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/fake-news>

- **Fact-Checking:** Verifying if content is true using reliable sources
- **Digital Literacy:** The ability to use phones, computers, apps, and websites effectively and safely
- **Media Literacy:** The ability to understand, question, and respond to messages from various media sources
- **Online Fraud:** Deceptive practices conducted over the internet to steal information, money, or resources
- **Identity Theft:** Stealing someone's personal information to impersonate them
- **Doxing:** Malicious act of publicly revealing someone's private or identifying information online without their consent.

## Module 1- Media Concept, Evolution and Reporting Style

### Background and Rationale

To understand and exercise digital rights it is important to know how media has developed over time and how reporting practices influence what people read, watch, and share.

### Objective

By the end of this module participants will be able to

- Define media and identify its main forms including print, broadcast, digital and social platforms.
- Trace key stages in the global and Pakistani growth of media and explain how major inventions changed the speed and style of communication.
- Explain how technology and ownership patterns shape the flow of information and influence audience behaviour.
- Identify and compare reporting styles, objective, investigative, advocacy, sensational and citizen journalism, and explain how each operates in today's fast moving information ecosystem.

### Media

Media refers to all means of collecting, producing, and sharing information with the public. It includes traditional forms such as newspapers, magazines, radio, and television, as well as digital platforms like websites, podcasts, and social media networks. Media can be print, broadcast or online. It serves as a bridge between information sources and audiences by informing, educating, entertaining, and enabling public debate.

### Global Evolution of Media

#### Early Human Communication

Before the invention of printing, people shared news through word of mouth, public gatherings, and town criers. Messages were carried by runners or riders on horses, and merchants, travellers and community elders spread stories and information along trade routes and in marketplaces. Written communication was limited to hand-copied manuscripts prepared by scribes for kings, religious leaders, and wealthy patrons. Research on oral cultures shows that these early networks not only transmitted practical information but also preserved collective memory and social norms, shaping the first forms of public opinion and governance.

#### Invention of the Printing Press

A breakthrough in mass communication came with the invention of the printing press with movable type by Johannes Gutenberg around 1450 in Mainz, Germany. This technology allowed books, pamphlets, and newspapers to be produced quickly and in large numbers. Printed material spread new ideas across Europe, increased literacy and supported movements for scientific discovery, political reform, and freedom of thought. Historians

have linked the rapid spread of Martin Luther's 95 Theses in the 1520s to the availability of inexpensive printed pamphlets, showing how the press accelerated social and religious change. Studies of early print markets in Britain and the Netherlands demonstrate how expanding literacy created new readerships and commercial opportunities that strengthened demands for free expression.

### **Development of the Telegraph**

The nineteenth century introduced the electric telegraph, which made it possible to send messages over long distances within minutes. Samuel Morse demonstrated a working telegraph in 1837, and the first commercial line opened in 1844 in the United States. Telegraph networks soon linked continents and allowed newspapers to report events from distant places almost in real time. Analyses of the Crimean War (1853–1856) and the U.S. Civil War (1861–1865) show how telegraphic dispatches changed war reporting, enabling correspondents to influence political debates at home and creating the first global wire services.

### **Rise of Newspapers**

The telegraph and cheaper printing made daily newspapers the dominant source of information in the late nineteenth century. Newspapers created shared national conversations and provided a regular platform for political debate and commercial advertising. Historical studies of the penny press in New York and the growth of provincial papers in colonial India reveal how low-cost mass circulation expanded political participation and pressured governments to respond to public concerns.

### **Birth of Recorded Moving Images**

Before the arrival of broadcast television, inventors and early filmmakers developed ways to capture moving images on film. In the 1890s the Lumière brothers in France and Thomas Edison in the United States created cameras and projectors that could record and display motion pictures. Short films of real events—such as workers leaving a factory or a train arriving at a station—were shown to public audiences and became the first examples of recorded news. These early newsreels were screened in theatres and served as a new form of visual journalism long before television. Contemporary press accounts describe how screenings of films like the 1896 arrival of the Paris-to-Lyons express train amazed viewers and hinted at the future of live visual reporting.

The word movie comes from the phrase moving pictures, first used in the United States in the early twentieth century. Audiences began to call these short films movies because they showed pictures that moved. As technology improved, filmmakers started to tell longer stories, leading to the first narrative films and the birth of the motion picture industry. Studios in Europe and later Hollywood developed techniques for editing, special effects and storytelling that turned simple recordings of daily life into full-length movies with actors, sets and scripts. Early feature films such as *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) demonstrated both the cultural power of cinema and the dangers of racial stereotyping in mass entertainment.

### **Introduction of Radio**

In the early twentieth century radio brought live sound to mass audiences. News, speeches, music, and entertainment reached people in their homes regardless of literacy levels. Radio played a critical role during wars and emergencies by delivering fast and direct information. Research on World War II broadcasting shows how the BBC's wartime service shaped morale in Europe and how President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "fireside chats" helped build public trust in government policy.

### **Advent of Television**

Mid-twentieth century television added moving pictures to sound and created a powerful new way to experience news and culture. Live broadcasts of major events allowed people

to watch history as it happened and made television a central part of daily life. The shift from newsreels shown in theatres to scheduled television news programmes created continuous and immediate access to visual information. Studies of the 1963 coverage of U.S. President John F. Kennedy's assassination and the 1969 Apollo 11 moon landing illustrate how television created shared global experiences and set new standards for real-time reporting.

### **Digital Revolution**

The late twentieth century introduced computers, the internet, and mobile phones. Email and online news sites in the 1990s allowed instant global communication. The early twenty-first century saw the rise of smartphones and social media platforms that enabled anyone to create and share content in real time. This stage of media growth removed the traditional barriers between producers and audiences and set the stage for today's digital information environment. Recent research on social networks shows how viral content spreads faster than verified updates, while global reports on disinformation warn that economic and political pressures continue to threaten the independence of online news ecosystems.

## **Media Growth in Pakistan**

### **Background**

The development of media in Pakistan reflects global technological trends while showing distinct local patterns of state control, market expansion, and digital disruption. Research by Freedom Network, the Media Ownership Monitor project and international press-freedom assessments highlights how Pakistan's media landscape has moved from a tightly controlled public service model to a commercially driven, highly connected environment shaped by domestic regulation and global digital platforms.

### **Early Period of Radio**

Pakistan began its media journey in 1947 with radio as the only national medium. Radio Pakistan broadcast news, education and cultural programmes and served as the voice of the new state during the post-partition period. Historical studies of South Asian broadcasting show how radio programming was used to promote a shared national identity and to reach citizens regardless of literacy.

### **Introduction of Television**

Television started in 1964 when Pakistan Television (PTV) began live transmission from Lahore. Colour broadcasts were introduced in 1976, extending the reach and visual appeal of state messaging. Archival research and media histories document how PTV became a central tool for shaping narratives during key events such as the 1971 war and the political upheavals of the 1970s and 1980s.

### **First Private Television Channel**

In the 1990s the Shalimar Television Network broke the state monopoly by partnering with private producers and rebroadcasting international content. Although limited in scale, this experiment signalled the beginning of a transition from exclusive state control to a more pluralistic broadcast market.

### **Expansion of Private Channels**

A major shift occurred in 2002 when the government created the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority and opened licensing to private broadcasters. This policy triggered rapid growth of private news and entertainment channels and introduced a continuous twenty-four-hour news cycle. Studies of media liberalisation link this boom to greater political debate but also to commercial pressures and the spread of sensational content.

### **Arrival of the Internet**

Commercial internet access began in the early 1990s but remained limited for several years. Usage expanded steadily through the 2000s as connectivity improved and prices fell. The lifting of the multi-year YouTube ban in 2016 after the launch of a localised version illustrates how platform governance and state regulation continue to shape access.

### **Rise of Social Media**

After 2010 affordable smartphones and mobile data services drove a sharp increase in online activity. Digital landscape reports for 2025 estimate more than 116 million internet users and nearly sixty-seven million social-media identities in Pakistan, with YouTube and Facebook reaching tens of millions of users each month. Social platforms have become primary spaces for news and political debate, especially among younger audiences.

### **Current Media Landscape**

Today television remains a powerful medium with dozens of private channels, while digital media continues to expand rapidly. Courts and regulators periodically test the limits of online speech, as shown by recent court orders suspending proposed bans on critical YouTube channels. Press-freedom reports also document periodic nationwide throttling and platform restrictions, highlighting the tension between growing online participation and state attempts to control digital space.

## **Media Ownership and Power**

### **Ownership Structure**

Major news outlets are controlled by a small number of families and corporate groups that run leading newspapers, television channels, radio networks, and online platforms. The Media Ownership Monitor assessment found very high concentration, with top players in each sector capturing more than half of the audience share.

### **Cross-Media Control**

Many of these groups own multiple types of media. A single company may operate television channels, newspapers, and online news sites at the same time. Academic studies and watchdog reports link this cross-ownership to reduced diversity and to editorial alignment across platforms.

### **Legacy Groups and New Players**

Older groups such as Jang, Dawn and Nawa-i-Waqt continue to dominate the print sector and have expanded into television and digital outlets. New business-backed networks have entered the market, but most remain linked to powerful families or corporate investors rather than independent community ownership.

### **Market Power and Audience Reach**

Ratings data and audience surveys show that a small cluster of networks commands the majority of viewers and readers. This concentration limits the range of opinions and sources available to the public and creates incentives for soft censorship through advertising boycotts or content leverage.

### **Political and Commercial Influence**

Owners have clear political and business interests that can shape editorial decisions. Press-freedom reports describe repeated episodes of government advertising withdrawals, regulatory pressure, and private-sector influence over coverage. Recent human-rights monitoring also documents new surveillance measures, including a Lawful Intercept Management System and an upgraded national firewall, which raises additional risks for independent journalism.

### **Effect on Public Debate**

When ownership is concentrated the diversity of voices is reduced. Some topics receive priority while others are ignored or framed from a narrow perspective. Surveys of audience trust show declining confidence when viewers perceive economic or political interests behind editorial choices. These dynamics are reinforced by social-media algorithms that reward engagement and amplify polarising content.

## **Reporting Styles**

### **Objective Reporting**

Objective reporting presents verified facts without personal opinion and separates news from commentary so that audiences can form their own judgment. This style remains the foundation of credibility in Pakistan's competitive multi-platform environment.

### **Investigative Reporting**

Investigative reporting digs deep to uncover hidden facts and expose wrongdoing. Landmark cross-border collaborations such as the Panama Papers illustrate how investigative journalism can reveal corruption and shape public accountability even in challenging legal and security conditions.

### **Advocacy Reporting**

Advocacy reporting openly supports a cause or policy and uses facts to push for change. It can highlight human rights issues, environmental concerns or social reforms but may overlook opposing views or present information selectively.

### **Sensational Reporting**

Sensational reporting focuses on drama, conflict, or shock value to attract attention. Studies of breaking-news cycles show how sensationalism can fuel polarisation and weaken public trust when accuracy is sacrificed for excitement.

### **Citizen Journalism**

Citizen journalism allows ordinary people to share news through mobile devices and social media. It gives voice to communities that lack access to mainstream outlets and provides immediate coverage of breaking events. Because it often lacks professional editing and verification, it can also spread unverified claims or manipulated images at great speed.

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## Module 2-Impact of Emerging Technologies, Artificial Intelligence and Media Information Ecosystems

### Changing Communication Landscape

New technologies are reshaping how information is produced and shared. Earlier inventions such as the printing press, telegraph, radio, and television expanded the speed and reach of communication. Today's digital tools go further by altering how news is created, delivered, and understood.

### Role of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence is now part of everyday media work. It assists in writing articles, analysing data, editing video, and creating synthetic voices and images. Social media algorithms decide which stories appear on individual screens, while automated bots spread information across networks within seconds. A 2024 systematic review, *Digital Newsroom Transformation: The Impact of Artificial Intelligence on Journalistic Practices, News Narratives, and Ethical Challenges*, found that news organisations across several countries now routinely use AI for tasks such as automated writing, large-scale data analysis, and audience personalisation.

### Risks and Challenges

These tools increase the speed and amount of content but also bring serious risks. Mistakes, hidden bias, false information, and manipulation are more likely. Concentration of power in a few major platforms raises concerns about transparency and public trust. Interviews conducted in 2023 by the Oxford Internet Institute, documented in the study *Artificial Intelligence and the News Industry*, showed that editors worry about reputational harm if AI systems fail and about the growing dependence on technology companies that control key infrastructure.

### Impact on Reporting Patterns and Styles

AI is influencing how journalists write and structure news. Introductions are becoming more formulaic, and conclusions often remain human-written. Newsrooms adopt hybrid roles where journalists spend more time verifying AI output and less time generating first drafts. Smaller outlets use AI for routine tasks, leading to more uniform writing and less local nuance. A 2025 study, *Echoes of Automation: The Increasing Use of Large Language Models in Newsmaking*, examined more than forty thousand news articles and reported that AI-generated content showed higher readability and more diverse vocabulary but lower formality and greater stylistic uniformity.

### Need for Awareness and Skills

Protecting the right to information requires understanding these changes. Faculty, students, and citizens need to recognise how algorithms and automated systems shape audience behaviour. This module will help participants identify these influences and develop practical methods to check facts, verify content, and maintain responsible information practices in a fast-moving digital environment.

### Objectives

By the end of this module participants will be able to

- Describe key technological shifts from earlier communication tools to the present use of artificial intelligence and automated systems in news production and distribution.
- Explain how algorithms, bots, and personalised content influence what audiences see and how they respond to information.

- Identify the risks posed by deepfakes, synthetic media and automated amplification, and outline basic methods for verification and fact-checking.
- Analyse how emerging technologies affect the credibility, speed, and diversity of media content.
- Apply critical thinking skills to evaluate information sources and promote responsible reporting in a rapidly changing media ecosystem.

### **Artificial Intelligence in News Production**

Artificial intelligence is now used in many stages of news production. Automated systems can write short reports, summarise large data sets, edit video and generate synthetic voices. Financial updates, sports results, and weather bulletins are already produced by computer programmes in several newsrooms. These tools save time and reduce costs but also create new risks. Automated content can contain hidden bias or factual errors, and audiences may not know when a story has been produced by a machine. Careful human verification is essential to maintain accuracy and public trust.

### **Algorithms and Personalised Content**

Social media platforms and search engines use complex algorithms to decide which stories appear on each user's screen. These systems track clicks, likes and viewing habits to predict interests and keep people engaged. Personalised feeds help audiences find material that matches their preferences but can also narrow exposure to different viewpoints. When users mostly see information that supports their existing opinions, they may develop a limited understanding of events. Recognising how these algorithms work is important for anyone who wants to access a balanced range of news and avoid becoming trapped in an echo chamber.

### **Deepfakes and Synthetic Media**

Artificial intelligence can create highly realistic images, videos and audio recordings that are difficult to identify as false. These deepfakes may be used for entertainment, satire, or artistic projects, but they can also spread false claims, damage reputations, or influence political debates. Because manipulated content can be shared instantly across digital platforms, it is hard for audiences to detect and correct it in time. Understanding how deepfakes are made and learning basic verification techniques are essential steps for protecting the credibility of news and public discussion.

### **Automated Bots and Network Amplification**

Bots are computer programmes designed to perform tasks automatically on digital platforms. They can post messages, share links, and interact with users at high speed. Some bots provide helpful services, such as spreading emergency alerts or public health information. Others are used to amplify propaganda, spam or coordinated disinformation campaigns, creating a false impression of popularity or widespread support for a particular view. Recognising bot activity and checking the original source of information are important skills for anyone who wants to understand the true scale and credibility of online conversations.

### **Information Ecosystem Effects**

Artificial intelligence, personalised algorithms, and automated distribution now create a dense and fast-moving flow of information. Reliable journalism competes with unverified and deliberately false material. A 2018 study in *Science*, *The Spread of True and False News*\* by Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy and Sinan Aral, found that "falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper and more broadly than the truth." This effect was strongest for political content and continues to shape online discourse. Human behaviour and platform design both play a role. People share novel, emotionally charged posts, while recommendation systems optimise for engagement rather than accuracy. A 2022 audit of Twitter's recommender

system by Ferenc Huszár and colleagues reported “algorithmic amplification” patterns that changed what users saw in political content across seven countries and millions of users. Newsrooms use AI for writing, analytics, transcription, and distribution. Output accelerates, but verification must keep pace. In 2024, the Oxford Internet Institute’s report by Felix M. Simon concluded that AI is “having a significant and increasing impact on journalism,” while deepening dependence on platform infrastructure beyond newsroom control. Editors described higher time pressure and new error risks that require stronger oversight. Automation is also altering how stories are structured. Journalists are moving into hybrid roles: drafting, then checking or rewriting machine output. A 2025 study, *\*Echoes of Automation: The Increasing Use of Large Language Models in Newsmaking\**, observed that “LLMs are often used in the introduction of news, while conclusions \[are] written manually.” It also found higher readability but more uniform style, especially in local media. Algorithmic curation can narrow viewpoint diversity and invisibly set agendas. Feedback loops between user behaviour and ranking systems can sideline local or minority perspectives. International guidance stresses transparency, accountability, and human oversight to protect the right to seek and receive information. UNESCO’s 2021 *\*Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence\** underscores that people should be informed when AI influences decisions affecting their rights.

### **Impact on Consumers of Information**

Artificial intelligence and personalised algorithms are reshaping how people find and consume news. Predictive systems monitor clicks, likes and viewing time, encouraging more frequent checking but from fewer sources. The 2018 *\*Science\** study on the spread of false news showed that rumours often outpace corrections and reach audiences before verified updates. Automated ranking systems privilege content that provokes strong emotions. The 2022 Twitter audit found that emotionally charged political content received greater visibility, keeping users engaged but heightening anxiety and polarisation in daily feeds.

Machine-generated content is increasingly hard for audiences to identify. Interviews with editors in the 2024 Oxford Internet Institute report *\*Artificial Intelligence and the News Industry\** recorded concerns that many users “cannot tell when content is machine-generated,” lowering trust in both platform and publisher outputs. Editors warned that even carefully verified journalism can suffer when audiences cannot distinguish between human and automated content.

Recent investigations demonstrate real-world harms. The *\*Wall Street Journal\** (14 September 2021) revealed internal company research showing that a significant share of teen girls felt worse about body image after using Instagram, with company slides admitting that when girls already felt bad, Instagram “made them feel worse.” *\*The Guardian\** (4 April 2023) reported that under-thirteen users of TikTok were exposed to harmful streams designed to maximise engagement. A follow-on article in the same newspaper (11 September 2025) described parliamentary findings that immersive, highly personalised feeds endangered minors. The *\*Associated Press\** (January 2024) detailed how AI-generated sexual images of a prominent musician spread at scale, forcing emergency platform changes. *\*Reuters\** (30 August 2024) documented widespread deepfake pornography targeting women and the rapid policy responses following public outcry. The *\*Washington Post\** (8 September 2025) reported whistle-blower claims that internal studies of risks to children in virtual-reality environments were discouraged or narrowed even as cases of grooming and harassment were flagged.

Behavioural feedback loops reinforce these patterns. Every click, share and comment feeds back into recommendation models, strengthening the visibility of content that provokes engagement. The 2025 *\*Echoes of Automation\** study found that AI-generated introductions in news drew higher initial engagement, which then drove further algorithmic promotion.

Over time, this creates a cycle where machine-written items gain outsized visibility while nuanced or contrarian pieces are crowded out.

### **Reporting Styles in an Evolving Information Ecosystem**

The way journalists choose, and present news strongly shapes how people understand events. Different reporting styles offer distinct approaches to gathering facts and telling stories, and each carries its own strengths and risks.

### **Objective Reporting in the Digital Age**

Objective reporting presents verified facts without personal opinion. It separates news from commentary so that audiences can form their own judgement. In a fast online environment this clarity helps readers and viewers evaluate information based on evidence rather than emotion.

### **Investigative Reporting and Technology**

Investigative reporting digs deep to uncover hidden facts and expose wrongdoing. Journalists use careful research and multiple sources to reveal corruption, abuse of power or social injustice. Digital tools allow them to analyse large data sets and track online evidence but also create new challenges such as encrypted communication or false digital trails.

### **Advocacy Reporting and Online Mobilisation**

Advocacy reporting openly supports a cause or policy and uses facts to push for change. It can highlight human rights issues or social reforms and mobilise support quickly through digital platforms. This style can raise awareness but may also present information in a selective way and overlook opposing views.

### **Sensational Reporting in a Viral Environment**

Sensational reporting focuses on drama, conflict, or shock value to capture attention. It may use strong language, striking images or emotional headlines. Online systems that reward clicks and shares can magnify sensational content and weaken public trust when accuracy is sacrificed for excitement.

### **Citizen Journalism and AI Tools**

Citizen journalism allows ordinary people to share news through mobile devices and social media. It gives communities a voice and provides immediate coverage of breaking events. Because it often lacks professional editing and verification, it can also spread unverified claims or manipulated images at great speed.

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reporting can strengthen democratic discussion. Advocacy reporting can draw attention to neglected issues but may promote a single viewpoint. Sensational reporting can distort facts and reduce trust. Citizen journalism can expand participation but also increase the risk of misinformation.

## Module 3-Media, Nationalism and Conflict

### Background

The relationship between media, nationalism, and conflict is central to understanding how information shapes societies. Media outlets in print, broadcast, and digital forms do more than transmit facts; they construct narratives of belonging, identity, and difference.

In Pakistan and across South Asia, these narratives have often been mobilised to support nationalist agendas, reinforce ethnic or religious divisions, and intensify political conflicts. At the same time, media can also serve as a platform for dialogue and reconciliation when journalists adopt inclusive framing and peace-oriented practices. Recognising this dual potential is critical for anyone working to protect the right to information, strengthen democratic discourse, and reduce the risk of violence.

### Objectives

Participants completing this module will be able to:

1. Explain how media narratives shape ideas of nationalism and influence conflict dynamics.
2. Identify the ways in which media content can escalate or reduce tensions within diverse societies.
3. Recognise and analyse bias, hate speech, and misinformation in print, broadcast, and digital media.

### Key Concepts and Definitions

#### Key Concepts

##### Media

Media includes print, broadcast, and digital platforms that shape public understanding of events and identities. UNESCO's 1978 Declaration on Fundamental Principles of the Mass Media highlights the role of media in promoting peace, justice, and international understanding.

##### Nationalism

Nationalism is the belief that a people united by culture, history, or territory should have a political state of their own. Benedict Anderson describes nations as "imagined communities" built through shared narratives, while Ernest Gellner emphasises the drive to align political and national boundaries.

##### Conflict

Conflict arises when individuals or groups perceive their goals or values to be incompatible. Johan Galtung distinguishes between direct violence, structural violence embedded in institutions, and cultural violence expressed through norms and symbols.

##### Narrative

A narrative is the organising story that gives meaning to events and identities. Robert Entman explains how framing highlights certain facts, defines problems, and suggests solutions, shaping how audiences interpret conflicts.

##### Peace Journalism

Peace journalism is an approach to reporting that highlights solutions, gives voice to all sides, and avoids language that inflames hostility. Research by Jake Lynch and Johan Galtung shows how careful editorial choices can open space for dialogue and non-violent responses.

## Historical Context

### Colonial Era and the Rise of Print Media

During the late colonial period, newspapers became a powerful platform for nationalist mobilisation in South Asia. Publications such as *The Comrade* and *Zamindar* provided forums for debate, linked regional struggles for independence with wider anti-colonial movements, and challenged British authority despite strict press laws. The Press Act of 1910 imposed heavy securities and censorship on publications critical of colonial rule, demonstrating early attempts to control nationalist narratives.

### Early Pakistan and State Broadcasting

After the creation of Pakistan in 1947, state-controlled broadcasting was used to promote a unifying national identity. Radio Pakistan and later Pakistan Television became central tools for reinforcing narratives of religious nationalism and countering separatist movements. During the 1971 conflict that led to the independence of Bangladesh, government broadcasters framed events in ways that supported state positions and suppressed reports of violence against civilians.

### Liberalisation and the Growth of Private Media

The early 2000s marked a turning point with the expansion of private television channels and later digital platforms. This diversification of information sources reduced state monopoly but also introduced competitive pressures that encouraged sensationalism and political polarisation.

### Digital Era and Social Media

Social media platforms now allow rapid dissemination of nationalist messages and conflict-related disinformation. Online networks have amplified both constructive dialogue and harmful propaganda, creating new challenges for responsible journalism and conflict-sensitive reporting.

## Media and Identity Formation

### Constructing National Identity

Media plays a central role in shaping how people imagine the nation. Through news reports, entertainment programming, and digital content, media outlets create shared symbols, stories, and rituals that define who belongs to the national community. Benedict Anderson describes this process as the creation of “imagined communities,” where individuals who will never meet still feel part of a common whole.

In Pakistan, narratives around language, religion, and history have been repeatedly reinforced through school textbooks, state television, and national celebrations.

### Framing “Us” and “Them”

Media framing highlights certain facts and downplays others, influencing how audiences perceive allies and adversaries. Robert Entman explains that framing selects aspects of reality to define problems, attribute responsibility, and suggest solutions. This process can promote inclusive civic identity or deepen divisions by portraying particular ethnic, religious, or political groups as threats.

### Role of Social Identity

Social identity theory shows that people define themselves partly through group memberships. Media messages that emphasise in-groups and out-groups can strengthen loyalty to a nation but also fuel prejudice and conflict. In Pakistan and neighbouring

countries, coverage of cross-border tensions and internal sectarian disputes often activates these group identities.

### **Impact of Digital Platforms**

Social media algorithms reward content that generates strong emotional reactions. Posts that emphasise national pride or hostility toward perceived outsiders spread quickly, making identity-based narratives more visible and more difficult to challenge.

### **Media as a Conflict Driver**

Media across South Asia demonstrates how sensational framing, hate speech and unchecked online content can inflame tensions and escalate violence. When news coverage frames disputes as a clash of identities—majority versus minority or nation versus nation—it strengthens “us versus them” thinking and narrows space for dialogue.

### **India**

Independent investigations and academic studies show how false rumours and inflammatory television debates have fuelled mob violence. In 2018 a wave of lynchings followed WhatsApp messages warning of child abductors. Rapid forwarding of unverified videos overwhelmed police warnings and local fact-checking, allowing panic and vigilantism to spread.

Media nationalism has repeatedly shaped coverage of cross-border conflict. During the Kargil conflict of 1999 and the 2019 India–Pakistan military standoff after the Pulwama attack and Balakot airstrikes, prime-time television in both countries adopted overtly patriotic frames. Major Indian channels used militaristic language, countdown graphics, and war-room studio sets, celebrating air-force actions while sidelining diplomatic efforts or civilian casualties. Pakistani broadcasters responded with equally nationalistic framing, highlighting Indian aggression and minimising internal security failures. Research concludes that competitive jingoism in both countries amplified public pressure on political leaders, limited space for de-escalation and increased online harassment of dissenting voices. This pattern reached an extreme in September 2020 when several prominent Indian television channels aired fabricated claims that Indian forces had captured Karachi and Lahore, that Shehbaz Sharif had been sworn in as Pakistan’s prime minister and that the Chief of Army Staff had been arrested. Pakistani newspapers documented these broadcasts and published fact-checks showing that the stories were entirely false but widely shared on social media before being debunked.

### **Sri Lanka**

In March 2018 anti-Muslim riots erupted in Kandy after hate speech and inflammatory videos circulated on Facebook. Political actors exploited weak platform moderation, enabling violent calls to spread unchecked. Facebook later issued a public apology for failing to remove incitement in time.

### **Bangladesh**

Bangladesh has faced repeated incidents where fabricated online content triggered communal attacks. In September 2012, a fake Facebook post attributed to a Buddhist youth in Ramu led to the destruction of temples and homes in Cox’s Bazar. In October 2021 social-media claims of blasphemy during the Durga Puja festival sparked deadly clashes and widespread property damage before authorities restored order.

### **Pakistan**

In August 2023 large-scale attacks on churches and Christian homes took place in Jaranwala after blasphemy allegations spread rapidly through mosque announcements,

local networks, and social media. Human-rights investigations describe how police warnings lagged behind the information wave, allowing mobs to assemble and attack despite appeals for restraint.

### **Media as a Conflict Mitigator – South Asia**

Across South Asia, media initiatives show that balanced reporting and timely fact-checking can help reduce tensions and open channels for peaceful dialogue, even in politically polarised or conflict-affected settings.

In Nepal, community radio stations became trusted platforms during the 2006 peace process. Stations such as Radio Sagarmatha broadcast neutral updates on negotiations between the government and Maoist rebels, provided information on ceasefire arrangements, and created interactive programmes where citizens could question officials. These efforts gave communities reliable information and reduced the influence of rumour during a fragile political transition. In Sri Lanka, independent online platforms such as Groundviews have consistently provided verified reporting and citizen perspectives since the end of the civil war in 2009. By publishing multilingual content, highlighting stories of inter-ethnic cooperation, and countering hate speech, these outlets have promoted dialogue and reconciliation after decades of conflict.

In India, fact-checking organisations like Alt News and Boom Live actively debunk false claims about communal violence and electoral manipulation. During the 2019 general election and subsequent outbreaks of communal tension, their rapid verification of viral messages helped contain misinformation that could have sparked further clashes.

In Pakistan, independent FM radio stations in conflict-affected areas such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the former tribal regions have broadcast practical safety information and counter-narratives to militant propaganda, while digital initiatives such as Soch Fact-Check have corrected dangerous rumours during humanitarian crises and elections.

### **Legal and Ethical Frameworks**

Freedom of expression in Pakistan is guaranteed under Article 19 of the Constitution, which protects the right to free speech subject to specific grounds such as the glory of Islam, national security, public order, decency, and morality. Article 19-A provides the right of access to information held by public bodies. These provisions require that any limitation be lawful, necessary, and proportionate. When introducing these topics in class, faculty can help students see that the starting point is open debate, with limits that must be clearly defined and justified. Several key statutes govern how information flows through traditional and digital platforms. The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority applies the Electronic Media Code of Conduct 2015 to television and radio. The Pakistan Telecommunication (Re-organisation) Act 1996 and related rules regulate internet services, while the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 addresses online offences such as hate speech and incitement. Understanding these laws helps students evaluate claims of “national security” or “public order” and recognise how regulation can both protect and restrict free expression.

International standards reinforce these domestic guarantees. Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights protects the right to seek, receive, and share information. General Comment No. 34 clarifies that any restriction must be lawful, necessary, and proportionate. Article 20 requires states to prohibit advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence. The Rabat Plan of Action sets out a six-part test—context, speaker, intent, content, extent of dissemination, and likelihood of harm—for assessing when speech crosses the line into incitement.

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## Part 2:

# Legal and Constitutional Guarantees of Digital Rights

## Module 4- Media, Democracy and Human Rights

### Background and Rationale

This module explains why a free, independent, and diverse media is essential for democratic governance and the protection of human rights.

### Objectives

By the end of this module participants will be able to

- Explain why a free, independent, and diverse media is essential for democracy and the protection of human rights.
- Analyse the relationship between media freedom and democratic accountability, including the role of media in enabling public debate and monitoring those in power.
- Identify international human rights commitments and constitutional guarantees in Pakistan that protect freedom of expression, access to information, privacy, and digital rights.
- Describe the main federal and provincial laws that give practical effect to these rights, including right to information laws, cybercrime provisions, and content regulation.
- Recognise key challenges to media freedom in Pakistan such as restrictive legislation, economic pressures, threats to journalists, disinformation, and internal weaknesses within media organisations.

### Media as a Cornerstone of Democracy

A free press allows citizens to receive information, form opinions and make informed choices. Open debate and access to reliable news help voters evaluate government policies, hold leaders accountable and influence public decisions. Without independent media, democratic processes weaken, and citizens lose the ability to check abuses of power.

Research from different settings shows how strong media protect democracy. One influential cross-country study, *Handcuffs for the Grabbing Hand? Media Capture and Government Accountability* (2006), explains that when governments succeed in controlling or intimidating the press, corruption rises and public oversight declines. A second investigation, *A Free Press Is Bad News for Corruption* (2003), finds that countries with higher levels of press freedom consistently record lower levels of corruption, confirming the press as a key barrier against misuse of authority. Evidence from India gives another perspective. In *The Political Economy of Government Responsiveness* (2002), researchers discovered that districts with higher newspaper circulation received faster relief during natural disasters, showing that an active press can pressure governments to respond to public needs.

Recent global reports underline that these relationships remain urgent today. The *World Press Freedom Index* (2025) warns that economic pressure and political interference are steadily reducing independent journalism in many regions. The *Global State of Democracy Report* (2025) similarly highlights that declines in press freedom often occur alongside wider democratic backsliding.

### Human Rights Commitments Supporting Media Freedom and Digital Rights

Media freedom is inseparable from the enjoyment of fundamental human rights. International treaties to which Pakistan is a party require the state to protect freedom of expression, guarantee access to information, and ensure privacy and dignity. These commitments provide the legal basis for press freedom, public debate, and citizens' ability to

hold power to account, forming the bridge between global human rights standards and Pakistan's constitutional guarantees.

Pakistan has ratified a range of instruments that set these standards. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms the right to seek, receive, and impart information through any media and across frontiers and protects privacy against arbitrary interference.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides legally binding protection for freedom of expression and the right to information, subject to lawful and proportionate restrictions, and protects privacy, reputation, and participation in public affairs.

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights calls for access to accurate information on health and education.

The United Nations Convention against Corruption requires public reporting and civil society participation to prevent corruption.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child protects the child's right to freedom of expression and access to appropriate information. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women guarantees women's right to participate in public life and access information needed for equal participation. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires accessibility of information and communication technologies and protects freedom of expression and the right to information in accessible formats such as Braille, sign language, and screen reader compatible files.

The Aarhus Convention and the Escazú Agreement ensure public access to environmental information and participation in environmental decision making.

UN Human Rights Committee General Comment No. 34 clarifies that states should proactively disclose public interest information and ensure easy, prompt, and effective access.

Pakistan has also endorsed the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, whose Goal 16.10 calls for ensuring public access to information and protecting fundamental freedoms, and participates in UNESCO's standard setting work, including the Recommendation on Access to Information and the Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence.

### **Constitutional Guarantees in Pakistan**

Pakistan's Constitution incorporates these principles and provides the domestic legal basis for digital rights.

Article 19 protects freedom of expression subject to reasonable restrictions such as national security, public order, and the rights of others.

Article 19-A guarantees the right of access to information held by public bodies, establishing a constitutional obligation for transparency.

Article 14 protects the dignity of the person and the privacy of the home, forming the constitutional basis for privacy and data protection in the digital sphere.

### **National Legislative Framework**

Building on Pakistan's international human rights commitments, the domestic legal framework translates these global standards into enforceable rights and obligations. A comprehensive set of federal and provincial laws gives practical effect to guarantees of freedom of expression, access to information, privacy, and digital inclusion. Together these statutes provide the mechanisms through which citizens, journalists, and civil society can exercise their rights, seek accountability, and protect digital freedoms in Pakistan.

### **Right to Information Laws**

Pakistan has enacted a comprehensive set of federal and provincial right to information laws that require proactive publication of key categories of information and provide procedures for citizen access.

Right of Access to Information Act 2017 (federal)

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Right to Information Act 2013

Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act 2013

Sindh Transparency and Right to Information Act 2017

Balochistan Right to Information Act 2020

### **Cybercrime, Online Safety and Platform Governance**

Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016 (as amended in 2025) defines offences such as unauthorised access, cyberstalking, hate speech online and related procedural powers, and establishes obligations for service providers.

Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules 2021, issued under Section 37 of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, remain in force and continue to guide the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority in ordering the removal or blocking of online content. The Rules empower the Authority to act on complaints or on its own initiative where material is deemed unlawful on grounds such as the glory of Islam, security or integrity of Pakistan, public order, decency, or morality. Non-compliance can lead to fines or blocking of services. Service providers and social media companies must comply within forty-eight hours or within twelve hours in urgent cases and are required to register with the Authority, appoint a Pakistan based compliance officer and grievance officer, and respond to user complaints within seven days.

Pakistan Telecommunication (Re-organisation) Act 1996 establishes the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority with powers for licensing, consumer protection and enforcement in the telecom and internet sectors.

### **Digital Evidence and Judicial Procedures**

Electronic Transactions Ordinance 2002 recognises electronic records and electronic signatures, enabling lawful digital transactions and evidentiary recognition.

Qanun-e-Shahadat Order 1984 contains provisions governing the admissibility and integrity of electronic and digital evidence, including requirements for authenticity and proof.

### **Media and Content Standards**

Electronic Media (Programs and Advertisements) Code of Conduct 2015 sets content standards for broadcast media that also apply to online distribution by licensed broadcasters and hybrid digital channels, including rules on hate speech, incitement, and accuracy.

### **Inclusion and Accessibility for Persons with Disabilities**

Pakistan has enacted federal and provincial disability laws that guarantee accessible information and communication technologies and promote equal participation in digital services.

ICT Rights of Persons with Disability Act 2020 (federal/ICT)

Sindh Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act 2018

Balochistan Persons with Disabilities Act 2017

Punjab Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities Act 2022

**Note:** Khyber Pakhtunkhwa remains the only province operating under the federal Disabled Persons (Employment and Rehabilitation) Ordinance 1981, adapted through the 2012 amendment, and has not replaced it with a modern disability law.

## **Challenges to Media Freedom**

Despite constitutional protections and international commitments, media freedom in Pakistan faces persistent challenges. The 2025 World Press Freedom Index ranked Pakistan 158 out of 180 countries, down from 152 in 2024. This decline reflects a combination of legal restrictions, economic fragility, violence, and technological threats that limit the ability of journalists to report freely and reduce the diversity of information available to the public.

### **Legal and Regulatory Restrictions**

Laws with vague clauses on national security, public order and morality continue to chill expression. Recent human rights reports have documented bans on television coverage of court cases and directives restricting satire of public officials. In January 2025, journalists protested proposed social-media legislation that would create a digital authority with powers to impose prison terms and heavy fines for “false information.” Other reports describe new surveillance measures, including a Lawful Intercept Management System and an upgraded national firewall, which enable large-scale phone tapping and content filtering.

### **Economic Pressures**

Advertising remains the primary revenue source for most media outlets, allowing both government and large private advertisers to influence editorial decisions. Global press-freedom assessments highlight Pakistan’s dependence on state advertising and the unequal distribution of public advertising budgets as key factors that undermine editorial independence.

### **Safety of Journalists**

Threats, harassment, and physical attacks remain widespread. Pakistan continues to appear on the Global Impunity Index for journalist murders, with at least thirty-nine journalists killed since 1992. Local monitoring groups recorded more than 160 attacks on journalists and media outlets in 2024 alone, including abductions, physical assaults, and raids on media offices.

### **Disinformation and Digital Harassment**

Social media has intensified the spread of false information and targeted harassment. Civil society monitoring shows persistent cyber-harassment, with women journalists disproportionately affected. Algorithms that reward engagement amplify sensational content, while periodic connectivity throttling makes it harder for audiences to access reliable news.

### **Internal Challenges within Media Organisations**

Low wages, insecure contracts and limited professional training weaken editorial independence. Global democracy reports link press-freedom decline to shrinking media markets and precarious employment, trends mirrored in Pakistan. Ownership concentration and falling revenues further encourage sensationalism or politically aligned coverage, reducing the space for independent journalism.

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## Part 3:

# Digital Domain – Rights, Representation, and Participation

## Module 5: Responsible Use of the Rights to Information, Privacy, and Freedom of Expression in the Digital Sphere

### Background and Rationale

As we learnt in the earlier module, Pakistan has put in place legislative framework so that citizens can exercise right to information, freedom of expression and right to privacy. However, when these rights are exercised in digital domain without due sense of responsibility, not only is the exercise of these rights hampered, but it also creates societal discord and chaos, weakening democratic processes.

In this module, we will learn limitations on these rights and develop our skills to exercise these rights in a responsible manner.

### Responsible Use of the Right to Information in the Digital Sphere

#### Right to Information

Pakistan formally recognised the constitutional right of access to information in April 2010 through the 18th Constitutional Amendment, which inserted Article 19A into the Constitution.

Following this constitutional guarantee, federal and provincial governments enacted laws to give effect to the right.

Legally speaking, the term “information” refers, in this context, to data held by the government. Such information belongs to the people, while the government and its officials act as custodians. It is the sum of facts about the people and the country, and citizens have the right to access it. The Right to Information (RTI) means that citizens are entitled to obtain information held by public bodies.

Under all right to information laws enacted in Pakistan, public bodies are legally bound to provide information to citizens when requested through information requests as well as proactively publish on their web sites certain categories of information.

#### How to Exercise the Right to Information in a Responsible Manner

It is important that citizens exercise this right of access to information in a responsible manner so that they are able to achieve their objectives of holding elected representatives’ and public official accountable.

We will learn how to exercise this right in a responsible manner and how to use information received through the right to information laws in a responsible manner.

It is important that citizens should be able to write clear, respectful, and relevant question in their information requests that help uncover facts without creating unnecessary workload for public officials.

Right to information laws are designed to give people access to facts, not to serve as a platform for venting frustration or making accusations. Except under the Sindh RTI law, there is no requirement to state personal reasons for making a request.

Citizens represent themselves through their information requests. The language and tone of information request should be polite and courteous. The tone and language should be polite because rude language, even in legal limits is not helpful.

Public Information Officers handle many requests in addition to their regular duties. Therefore, citizens should ensure that request for information is specific, seeking clearly mentioned records, without burdening officers by seeking large records.

### **Ethical Use of Received Information**

Receiving information is only the first step. How it is used determines whether it supports transparency and fairness. Information should never be taken out of context, altered, or used to target individuals or promote personal bias. Ethical use means sharing it responsibly to promote accountability and informed public debate.

### **Responsible Use of the Right to Freedom of Expression in the Digital Sphere**

The Constitution of Pakistan recognizes freedom of expression as a fundamental right. However, it is not an absolute right. For example, freedom of expression does not mean that any content which is obscene or any content which is against the glory of Islam can be published.

### **Why Responsible Exercise of Freedom of Expression in Digital Spaces Matters?**

In digital domain, content spreads at a very fast pace and there are many instances where a single post created hatred across borders. Furthermore, there are legal implications for posting content damages reputation or raise safety concerns.

In short, responsible use of freedom of expression means thinking before posting, checking facts, avoiding language that unfairly targets individuals or communities, and remembering that online speech is subject to the same legal limits as speech in any public space.

### **Tips for Responsible Digital Expression**

- Verify facts before sharing or commenting.
- Use respectful, non-inflammatory language.
- Avoid personal attacks and generalizations.
- Do not confuse opinion with incitement.
- Respect others' privacy.
- Be mindful of the message's legal and emotional impact.

### **Responsible Use of the Right to Privacy and Dignity in the Digital Sphere**

In Pakistan, privacy and dignity are constitutional guarantees. While the right to dignity is absolute, the right to privacy is not an absolute right. It can be restricted but only through a court order or other lawful process. In the digital era, both rights are frequently challenged by the careless sharing of personal information, the spread of private images without consent, and the use of online platforms to humiliate or harass others.

### **What Is Protected Under Article 14**

These protections apply directly to everyday online activity:

- Human dignity is absolute and must be respected at all times, online and offline.
- The privacy of a person's home and personal life is protected unless limited by lawful authority.
- Sharing or leaking personal information without permission is a breach of this right.
- Using humiliating language, doctored images, or mocking memes undermines dignity.
- Conducting surveillance without legal justification violates both privacy and dignity.

### Implications of Violations of Privacy in Digital Spaces

- Posting addresses, phone numbers, or other personal details without consent can cause harassment or danger.
- Leaking private chats, photographs, or videos is a direct violation of constitutional protections.
- Circulating memes or commentary targeting women, persons with disabilities, transgender persons, or other groups promotes discrimination.
- Even satire and criticism must stay within lawful and respectful limits.

### Tips for Responsible Digital Conduct

- Never share private photos, addresses, or messages without explicit consent.
- Think before tagging someone in sensitive or controversial content.
- Avoid making fun of people based on appearance, disability, gender, or beliefs.
- Refrain from forwarding private videos or voice notes.
- Maintain courtesy and restraint in heated discussions.
- If in doubt about whether content could cause harm or offence, do not share it.

### Responsible Citizenship in the Digital Sphere Means:

- Using official and platform-based reporting tools for harmful content.
- Refusing to repost private or leaked material.
- Critiquing actions or ideas without attacking individuals.
- Sharing only verified and reliable information.
- Protecting the dignity and privacy of others, even in disagreement.
- Taking breaks from digital platforms when constant exposure begins to affect emotional well-being.

### Group Activity

Divide the participants in four groups.

**Group 1** goes through '7'cs of Effective Communications and gives presentation on how to draft information requests in a responsible manner and how to ensure ethical use of information.

**Group 2** dwells on limitations imposed on freedom of expression Group 2 dwells on limitations imposed on freedom of expression and shares implications of the violation of these limitations.

**Group 3** brainstorms why right to dignity is absolute and why right to privacy can be restricted on certain grounds.

**Group 4** brainstorms how digital rights can be exercised in responsible manner.

## Module 6: Digital Rights and Access to Information

### Background and Rationale

Citizens find it challenging in exercising their constitutional right of access to information in matters of public importance in digital domain owing to variety of factors. This is despite the fact that both federal and provincial right to information laws have specific provision to ensure proactive disclosure of information as well as receiving information requests in electronic form. All these provisions have only been partially operationalized. As result, citizens face multiple barriers in exercising their right to information in digital domain.

In this module, the participants will learn about right to information and its limitation, the timeline of the enactment of right to information laws, categories of information that need to

be proactively disclosed as a legal obligation by public bodies under their respective laws and how to digitally file information requests to ensure greater availability of public information in digital domain.

### **Timeline of the Enactment of RTI Laws of Pakistan**

The constitutional right of access to information in Pakistan was formally recognised in April 2010 through the 18th Constitutional Amendment, which inserted Article 19A into the Constitution. This article states that every citizen has the right to access information in all matters of public importance, subject to regulation and reasonable restrictions imposed by law.

Following this constitutional guarantee, governments at both federal and provincial levels began passing laws to implement this right. The first was the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Right to Information Act, enacted by the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly in August 2013. In November 2013, the Punjab Assembly passed the Punjab Transparency and Right to Information Act. Sindh replaced its 2006 Freedom of Information law with the Sindh Transparency and Right to Information Act in March 2017. At the federal level, the Senate Standing Committee on Information and Broadcasting approved the Right of Access to Information Bill in February 2017, and it became law in October 2017. The most recent change came in February 2021, when Balochistan enacted its Right to Information Act, replacing the 2005 Freedom of Information Act.

These laws are intended to make public bodies more transparent and accountable, ensuring that citizens can obtain information without facing unnecessary barriers.

### **Distinct Features of Access to Information under Right to Information Laws**

Under right to information laws, there are two distinct features about the way information is made available to citizens.

#### **Reactive Disclosure of Information**

The term 'reactive disclosure' means when citizens file information request to a public body to get access to specific records/information. For example, when a citizen files information request for getting access to certified copies of finalised enquiry reports.

#### **Proactive Disclosure of Information**

The term 'proactive disclosure' means the disclosure of certain categories of information spelled out in a specific right to information law in a proactive manner. This is to ensure that citizens do not have to file information requests all the time and maximum information is made available to them through web sites and notice boards.

#### **Is Right to Information Absolute?**

The right to information is not absolute right and can be restricted on reasonable grounds. However, these restrictions can only be imposed through law and officers do not have the discretion to decide which information to disclose and which to be kept secret.

Other than the federal right to information law, all provincial laws contain one list of exempted information, and all the rest is to be made available. Even the exempted information is to be made available if public interests outweighs harm. However, the federal law contains categories of information which can be disclosed, categories of information which cannot be disclosed and then yet another list which pertains to exceptions.

## **Understanding Process for Submitting Information Requests and Complaints under Federal and Provincial Right to Information Laws of Pakistan**

It is important to understand the process of filing information requests and complaints under each law of the country as there are some similarities and some key differences as well. For example, under all RTI laws of Pakistan, you can file an information request to access information in both digital and printed forms.

However, under the Balochistan law, it is mandatory to provide copy of CNIC, while filing information request to a public body, Sindh RTI law requires citizens to first file internal review with the public body and then lodge complaint with the information commission whereas it is optional in the case of Punjab Information Commission. The Pakistan Information Commission entertains appeals only when a citizen provides a certificate stating that the appellant has not already initiated legal proceedings at another legal forum.

### **Group Activity 1**

- The participants will be divided into four groups.
- Each group will be given proactive disclosure section of one provincial right to information law and that of federal right to information law.
- Each group will go through a provincial and federal government web site, identify which particular information is not disclosed through web site and draft a request for information and a complaint.

### **Group Activity 2**

- The participants will be divided into four groups.
- Each group will be given exemption clauses from each of the provincial laws.
- The group will brainstorm why each category of information is exempted from disclosure.

## **Module 7: Portrayal of Women, Transgender Persons, and Persons with Disabilities in the Media**

### **Background and Rationale**

Media, whether it appears on television, in newspapers, or across digital platforms, plays a powerful role in shaping public perceptions of different communities. It can challenge stereotypes and promote inclusion, but it can also reinforce prejudice and exclusion.

The report Media Literacy in Pakistan: Needs Assessment for Strengthening Democratic Engagement and Countering Digital Threats (CPDI, July 2025) found that women, transgender persons, and persons with disabilities are often portrayed in ways that undermine their dignity. Sometimes they are absent from coverage altogether. At other times, they appear only in roles that reinforce harmful stereotypes.

Such portrayals have consequences that extend beyond the screen or page. They influence how members of the public treat people from these communities and affect how these individuals see themselves.

When marginalised communities are portrayed unfairly, the harm is not limited to media spaces. It affects how these communities are treated in daily life. For example, repeated portrayals of transgender persons as beggars or of persons with disabilities as helpless can shape public attitudes, influence policy priorities, and even impact access to opportunities.

Media professionals, educators, and audiences all have a role to play in changing this pattern. This involves recognising stereotypes when they appear, questioning the use of harmful language, and promoting respectful and accurate portrayals.

This module looks at how these portrayals occur, why they matter, and what can be done to promote fair and respectful representation.

### **Vulnerable Groups and Language: Offensive Social Attitudes**

Across the world, every language contains words, phrases, jokes, and proverbs that reflect negative and offensive attitudes towards women, persons with disabilities, transgender groups, and religious minorities. Just like other languages, our national and regional languages also have such expressions. These are often used not only to mock or ridicule these groups but also to describe ignorance, lack of knowledge, or foolishness in everyday conversations, TV talk shows, newspaper columns, and dramas—often by drawing comparisons to with their conditions.

These words and expressions, when used casually, normalize prejudice and create an environment where the dignity of these groups is overlooked. Recognizing and avoiding such language is a critical step toward promoting respectful and inclusive communication.

### **Media Portrayal of Persons with Disabilities**

The way media presents persons with disabilities still leaves much to be desired. At times, it exaggerates the achievements of those who succeed, turning them into almost mythical figures. At other times, it paints them in such a negative light that they appear to be good for nothing.

One example comes from a Pakistan Television drama written by renowned writer Ashfaq Ahmad. In the story, an Air Force pilot loses his sight. Instead of showing his continued contribution or resilience, the character simply disappears from the plot. He reappears only in the final scene, selling bangles to his beloved as a blind man.

Once Geo, a Pakistani news channel, aired a public service message about elections and voting that was deeply damaging to the cause of persons with disabilities. The message included the line: “Taleem ke beghair insaan andha, goonga aur behra hota heh” (Without education, a person is blind, mute, and deaf).<sup>8</sup>

Not only does this use outdated and offensive terms such as andha (blind), goonga (mute), and behra (deaf), but it also equates a lack of education with having a disability.

### **Persons with Disabilities: Objectification and Rethinking Inspiration**

In an article<sup>9</sup> published in The News International on November 11, 2018, the portrayal of persons with disabilities as mere sources of inspiration was critically examined. This perspective challenges the widespread but misguided practice of using images or stories of persons with disabilities performing routine tasks to evoke admiration or pity. Such portrayals, often called “inspiration porn,” shift attention away from removing physical and attitudinal barriers that restrict equal participation in society.

Drawing on the work of disability rights activist Stella Young, the article explained that inspiration porn objectifies and dehumanizes persons with disabilities in three ways. It sets

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<sup>8</sup> Zahid Abdullah, *Disabled by Society* (Karachi: Ushba Publishing International, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Zahid Abdullah, “Rethinking inspiration,” *The News on Sunday* (The News International), November 11, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/tns/detail/566649-rethinking-inspiration>. (The News International)

them apart from society, distracts from the urgent need to remove access barriers, and reduces them to objects of emotional gratification for others.

### **Transgender Persons: Harmful Stereotypes in Media**

Transgender persons in Pakistan are frequently portrayed through narrow and damaging stereotypes. In television dramas, they are often shown as beggars, comedic relief, or morally suspect characters. These portrayals not only dehumanise but also erase the diversity of transgender lives and achievements.

Harmful language further reinforces prejudice. Terms like hijra and khusra are still used in everyday speech not only to describe transgender persons but also as insults aimed at shaming individuals for being different or non-masculine. These words carry a history of stigma and marginalization, perpetuating social exclusion.

The impact of these portrayals is profound. They shape public attitudes, influence policy debates, and affect how transgender persons are treated in daily life. Positive representation requires intentional storytelling that shows transgender persons in varied roles as professionals, leaders, artists, and citizens rather than as caricatures or objects of ridicule.

### **Women: Persistent Objectification and Narrow Representation**

Media representation of women in Pakistan continues to be shaped by entrenched gender roles and commercial priorities. In television dramas, advertising, and film, women are often presented in ways that emphasize appearance over ability. Objectification can be subtle, such as camera angles focusing unnecessarily on physical features, or overt, with women shown primarily as symbols of beauty, domesticity, or moral virtue.

In advertisements, women are overrepresented in promotions for household cleaning products, cooking oils, and beauty items, reinforcing the stereotype that their place is in the home. When women are shown in professional roles, these are often limited to teaching, nursing, or other “acceptable” occupations, with rare depictions in leadership, law enforcement, or technical fields.

Social media has brought both visibility and vulnerability. While it has provided women with platforms to share their voices, it has also amplified harassment and body shaming. Female journalists, activists, and content creators face targeted abuse, often aimed at silencing them.

### **Religious Minorities: Media Portrayal and Social Attitudes**

Our religious minorities are not adequately represented in the media. We all are too familiar with negative social attitudes towards religious minorities which are reflected in their portrayal in our language and at times in media. The intent of negative language and social attitudes is to render them as sub-humans.

### **Group Activity**

Give guidelines pertaining to media portrayal of persons with disabilities, transgender persons, and women to three groups.

Each group will go through these guidelines.

Each group will go through negative and degrading language used for these groups and brainstorm other words, proverbs, and expressions which they have come across but not included in these guidelines.

Each group will give presentation how to portray these groups in media and how these groups should be depicted in our daily conversation.

Group 4 will brainstorm on ‘tokenism’ employed to depict these groups. This group will also give presentation on ‘inspiration porn’ in depiction of persons with disabilities.

## **Module 8: Digital Inclusion and Accessibility Standards and: Web Accessibility, Disability Rights**

### **Background and Rationale**

In Pakistan, persons with disabilities continue to face significant obstacles in accessing information and participating fully in public life. These challenges stem not only from a person’s impairment but also from the way society, systems, and services are designed.

Today, access to information is closely linked to access to technology. For persons with disabilities, participation depends on whether websites, documents, videos, and public communication are designed with accessibility in mind. Many barriers persist. Scanned image files cannot be read by screen readers. Videos often lack captions. Official content is rarely provided in plain language. Websites may require mouse navigation, excluding those who use only a keyboard. These issues mean that even when information is made public, it is not always accessible in practice.

This module addresses the gap between legal promises and real inclusion. It examines how disability is understood and how these views influence policy and design. It explains the rights provided under both disability and information laws, introduces the principles of universal design, and offers practical tools, including a checklist based on the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. The aim is to give participants the knowledge and skills to make information systems, services, and communication usable for everyone, regardless of disability.

### **Objectives**

By the end of this module, participants will be able to:

1. Explain the moral, medical, and social models of disability and how each shapes attitudes, laws, and access to information.
2. Identify the main categories of disabilities and the barriers that each group faces in accessing information.
3. Describe the rights of persons with disabilities under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, especially Articles 2, 9, and 21, and the obligations under the Islamabad Capital Territory Rights of Persons with Disability Act 2020.
4. Understand the principles of universal design and how they can be applied to physical spaces and digital environments.
5. Improved understanding about the principles of the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines to assess and improve websites, documents, and public communication.
6. Improved understanding about Web Content Accessibility Guidelines developed by World Wide Web Consortium to evaluate and redesign digital content so that it can be accessed and used by all people, including those with disabilities.

### **Models of Disability**

The way disability is understood directly shapes public attitudes, laws, infrastructure, and communication practices.

The moral model, still common in many communities, views disability as a form of divine punishment or fate. This perception fuels stigma, isolation, and exclusion from everyday life.

The medical model treats disability as an individual defect that needs to be cured, often overlooking the fact that inaccessible environments and exclusionary systems create more barriers than the impairment itself.

The social model offers a different perspective. It recognizes that people are disabled by barriers created through physical design, communication practices, and institutional attitudes. It places the responsibility for change on laws, policies, and institutions, promoting a society where everyone can participate equally.

### **Categories of Disabilities**

Disability affects how individuals' access and understands information. Each category presents specific barriers that must be addressed to ensure inclusion. The categories below are grouped as Sensory, Intellectual and Developmental, and Physical and Other.

#### **Sensory Disabilities**

➤ **Visual Disability**

Includes blindness or low vision.

Barrier: Print-based or image-only content without alt text or screen reader compatibility prevents access.

➤ **Hearing Disability**

Includes difficulty or inability to hear.

Barrier: Audio or video content without captions or sign language excludes deaf users.

➤ **Deaf blindness**

Combined loss of both sight and hearing.

Barrier: Standard formats such as print, audio, or video must be adapted to tactile or customized communication methods.

#### **Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities**

➤ **Intellectual Disability**

Involves limitations in reasoning and adaptive functioning.

Barrier: Complex language, legal terms, or dense text reduce comprehension of information.

➤ **Developmental Disability**

Includes conditions such as autism that affect social interaction and information processing.

Barrier: Disorganized layouts, unclear instructions, or overstimulating content discourage engagement.

➤ **Psychosocial or Emotional Disability**

Related to mental health conditions such as depression, bipolar disorder, or schizophrenia.

Barrier: Stigmatizing environments or high-stress procedures discourage information seeking or follow-up.

➤ **Neurological Disability**

Affects memory, focus, or motor coordination.

Barrier: Inconsistent navigation, time-limited content, or lack of focus aids reduces usability.

#### **Physical and Other Disabilities**

➤ **Mobility or Physical Disability**

Involves difficulty in using hands, arms, or body movement.

Barrier: Platforms requiring fine motor skills, mouse control, or in-person presence limit independent access.

➤ **Speech Disability**

Affects the ability to speak clearly or at all.

Barrier: Voice-only systems such as telephone helplines exclude individuals who rely on non-verbal communication.

➤ **Multiple Disabilities**

Involves more than one type of disability.

Barrier: Single-format accessibility options are not sufficient to meet the combined needs of users with multiple impairments.

### **Barriers to Information Access in Practice**

Persons with disabilities are often excluded from public information not because the information is deliberately withheld, but because it is presented in ways they cannot use. Making information public on paper or online has little value if it cannot be read, heard, understood, or navigated by everyone.

#### **Printed and Scanned Documents**

A major barrier is the reliance on printed papers or scanned image files. Public bodies frequently release reports, notices, and application forms in these formats, which cannot be read by screen readers. Blind and low vision users cannot access the content unless an accessible text layer is included. Without it, such documents remain effectively out of reach, even though they are technically “public.”

#### **Websites and Online Services**

Many government websites and online services fail to meet accessibility standards. Navigation may depend entirely on a mouse, excluding people who rely on keyboards. Online forms are often not structured in a way that screen readers can interpret, and PDF uploads may lack proper tagging or logical structure, making them difficult or impossible to navigate.

#### **Audio and Video Content**

Public announcements and videos, while effective tools for sharing information, are frequently produced without captions or sign language interpretation. Audio-only content excludes deaf users, and transcripts are rarely provided for those who need a text alternative. This leaves entire groups excluded from important updates.

#### **Language and Content Complexity**

Dense legal or bureaucratic language creates another barrier. Without plain language summaries, official communication is difficult to understand for people with intellectual disabilities or limited literacy. Even when the information is available, its complexity can make it inaccessible.

#### **Physical Access to Information**

The location and format of physical information can also be exclusionary. Notice boards may be mounted too high for wheelchair users. Forms may only be available in hard copy, excluding those who need digital formats. Helplines that operate only through voice calls leave out people who cannot speak or who use alternative communication methods.

#### **Technology Design Gaps**

Digital platforms are not always designed with accessibility in mind. Many are incompatible with assistive technologies like screen readers. Forms may have strict time limits that disadvantage people who require more time. Basic options such as font size adjustment or

display customization are often missing, making access harder for those with low vision or reading challenges.

### **Attitudinal Barriers**

Attitudes also limit accessibility. Some officials see requests for Braille, audio, or large print as unnecessary extras rather than standard requirements. Awareness of the legal duty to provide accessible formats is limited, and accessibility is often treated as optional. This mindset leaves many without equal access.

These barriers show that even when information is legally disclosed, it can remain practically inaccessible to large segments of the population. Without deliberate and consistent action, the right to information will not be enjoyed equally by all citizens.

### **Legal and Policy Frameworks for Accessible Information**

Access to information in accessible formats is not an act of charity or a technical favour. It is a recognized legal right under international human rights law, and states are obligated to fulfil it through clear policies and effective implementation.

### **United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)**

The UNCRPD is the most important international legal instrument protecting the rights of persons with disabilities. It places clear obligations on governments to make public information accessible to all citizens, regardless of disability.

### **National Disability Laws: Right to Information and Web Accessibility**

In Pakistan, all disability laws, including the Islamabad Capital Territory Rights of Persons with Disability Act 2020, protect and promote the right of persons with disabilities to access information on an equal basis with others. The Act contains provisions to ensure that public information is available through suitable technologies and accessible formats.

### **Universal Design and Digital Accessibility**

Universal design means creating systems, services, and environments usable by everyone without needing later adaptations. Inclusion is built in from the start. For example, ramps benefit wheelchair users, parents with strollers, and workers moving heavy items. Similarly, a website compatible with screen readers also helps people using voice search or low-bandwidth connections.

The main principles of universal design are equitable use, flexibility in use, simple and intuitive operation, multiple ways of perceiving information, tolerance for errors, low physical effort, and adequate space for use.

Digital accessibility ensures that websites, documents, videos, and online services are usable by persons with disabilities independently.

### **The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG)**

These guidelines developed by World Wide Web Consortium set global standards based on four principles: content must be perceivable, operable, understandable, and robust.

### **Group Activity**

All four groups will give presentations on disability models and how do they resolve barriers in exercising digital rights and how Web Content Accessibility Guidelines developed by World Wide Web consortiums remove these barriers based on material provided by the trainer.

## Part 4:

# Digital Threats, Misinformation, and Safety in the Online Space

## Module 9: Misinformation, Disinformation, and Deepfakes: Threats to Democracy

### Background and Rationale

In Pakistan, as in many other countries, the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and deepfakes has become a persistent threat to democratic life. This is not an abstract concern but a daily reality in newsfeeds, WhatsApp groups, and television broadcasts.

Manipulated videos, fabricated statements, and false reports have influenced voting behaviour, shaped perceptions of political leaders, and distorted interpretations of national events. Some falsehoods have been aimed at discrediting individuals, while others have deepened ethnic or sectarian divides. During national crises, such content has sown confusion, weakened trust in institutions, and undermined informed decision-making.

Examples from recent years illustrate the scale of the problem. In the 2018 general elections, false reports claimed that certain polling stations had run out of ballot papers, causing unnecessary panic. A fabricated video allegedly showing a senior political leader making derogatory remarks about the armed forces triggered outrage before being exposed as doctored. In 2022, a widely shared deepfake audio recording suggested that two prominent politicians were discussing election rigging. Although later proven false, it had already shaped public perceptions and inflamed political tensions.

Such incidents do more than mislead; they corrode democratic norms by replacing evidence-based debate with manufactured outrage. Political discourse shifts away from policy discussions toward reactions to perceived insults or scandals. Repeated exposure to contradictory or manipulated narratives erodes trust in electoral institutions, the judiciary, and the media. Many citizens retreat into echo chambers, engaging only with voices that reinforce their existing views and dismissing alternative perspectives.

The danger intensifies when false narratives exploit social divides. Misleading reports about incidents in sensitive regions, such as Swat or Balochistan, have fuelled mistrust between communities and worsened regional grievances. False claims targeting religious minorities have, at times, justified discrimination or violence. When such narratives spread unchecked, they damage not only individuals and groups but also the foundations of national unity and social cohesion.

Democracy depends on citizens making informed choices, engaging in constructive dialogue, and holding leaders accountable. Misinformation, disinformation, and deepfakes work against all three by distorting reality, narrowing the space for genuine debate, and making citizens more vulnerable to manipulation. Protecting democratic life in Pakistan requires recognizing the scale of the threat and committing to strengthening media literacy, building resilience, and promoting verification habits so that truth can compete with falsehood.

### Objectives of the Module

By the end of this module, participants will be able to:

1. Understand the nature of harmful and manipulated content, including misinformation, disinformation, satire, and deepfakes, and how each affects democratic life, public trust, and informed decision-making.
2. Recognize common warning signs of false or misleading information, such as emotionally charged headlines, images used out of context, anonymous or biased sources, and visual or audio inconsistencies in manipulated media.

3. Use practical verification techniques, including source checking, reverse image or video searches, and credible fact-checking platforms relevant to Pakistan and the region.
4. Apply responsible response strategies, such as reporting harmful content, sharing corrections, and engaging in constructive conversations to counter false narratives.
5. Promote long-term resilience against misinformation by developing habits of critical thinking, encouraging responsible information sharing, and supporting transparent, accountable communication practices.
6. Identify the risks of deepfakes and AI-generated media and understand the tools and methods available to detect and neutralize their harmful effects.

### **How to Detect and Respond to Harmful and Manipulated Content**

In today's fast-moving digital world, false or manipulated content often spreads faster than the truth. This can take many forms:

- Misinformation: False information shared without the intent to cause harm, such as a wrongly attributed quote or outdated photo forwarded in good faith.
- Disinformation: False information deliberately created to mislead or damage reputations, for example, a fabricated statement claiming a political leader made a controversial remark.
- Misinformation: Genuine information used in a misleading way to harm someone, such as selectively leaking private emails out of context.
- Satire misinterpreted as fact: Humorous or exaggerated content mistaken for genuine reporting, which can still mislead audiences unfamiliar with its intent.
- Deepfakes: Highly realistic but fake videos or audio clips created with artificial intelligence, making people appear to say or do things they never did.

### **Recognizing the Warning Signs**

- Harmful content often leaves a trail of clues. Some are subtle, while others are easier to spot once you know what to look for:
- Headlines designed to provoke strong emotions but that do not match the actual content.
- Photos or videos taken out of their original context, sometimes from different countries or years earlier.
- Missing, unnamed, or unreliable sources, or outlets known for bias and inaccuracy.
- In deepfakes, unnatural facial expressions, poorly synchronized lip movements, inconsistent lighting, or mismatched backgrounds.
- In text posts, heavy use of capital letters, extreme language, and sweeping claims without evidence.

### **Verification in Practice**

Detecting harmful content requires both human judgment and simple tools:

1. Check the Source – Identify the creator or publisher. Are they credible? Do they have a track record of accuracy?
2. Look Beyond the Headline – Read, watch, or listen to the full content before reacting or sharing.
3. Reverse Image and Video Search – Use Google Reverse Image Search, TinEye, or InVID to trace the original source.

4. Fact-Checking Platforms – For Pakistan, use Soch Fact-Check<sup>10</sup> and GEO Fact Check<sup>11</sup>. For regional issues, use BOOM Live<sup>12</sup>.
5. Cross-Reference with Multiple Outlets – Seek confirmation from multiple reputable sources, especially during fast-moving events.
6. Scrutinize Forwarded Messages – On WhatsApp or similar apps, ask for the source before forwarding. If no source is given, stop the chain.
7. Deepfake Detection – Slow the video, watch for glitches, and compare with verified genuine footage. Tools like Deepware Scanner or Reality Defender can help.

### **Responding Responsibly**

Finding harmful content is only step one; what you do next matters:

- Report it on the platform where it appears.
- Share corrections from credible fact-checkers with the same audience that may have seen the false content.
- Explain calmly to those who shared it why it is false, without turning it into a personal attack.
- Journalists, activists, and researchers should archive the material for possible legal or advocacy use.

### **Strengthening Long-Term Resilience**

The goal is not just to react, but to prevent harm in the first place:

- Make critical thinking a daily habit — pause before believing or sharing.
- Encourage verification among friends, family, and colleagues.
- Support newsrooms in implementing strict verification before publishing.
- Advocate for online platforms to remove harmful manipulated content quickly while respecting freedom of expression.
- Promote public awareness campaigns teaching people how to recognize and avoid harmful content.

### **Group activity with real deepfake videos cases from Pakistan.**

Set up

Form four to five groups.

The trainer will provide case studies. Each group works on one case. Each group prepares a short corrective for public sharing and presents the exact steps they used to verify the claim.

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<sup>10</sup> Soch Fact-Check. *Independent Pakistan-based fact-checking outlet*. Available at: <https://www.sochfactcheck.com>

<sup>11</sup> GEO Fact Check. *Geo News fact-checking unit*. Available at: <https://www.geo.tv/fact-check>

<sup>12</sup> BOOM Live. *Indian fact-checking and verification initiative*. Available at: <https://www.boomlive.in>

## Module 10: Navigating Digital Threats – Online Safety

### Background and Rationale

The internet has become the space where news is consumed, opinions are shaped, and relationships are formed, yet it is equally a space where privacy can be breached in seconds, rumours spread faster than facts, and personal dignity can be attacked through targeted harassment or manipulated content. However, even those aware of the risks often neglect basic precautions, such as reading privacy policies or checking how and where their personal data might be shared.

The problem is not only technical; it is structural. Social media platforms are perceived as unaccountable, with user complaints often ignored unless backed by public pressure. Algorithms shape what users see and, during sensitive periods such as elections, amplify certain messages while filtering out opposing views, creating echo chambers. Manipulated videos, harmful memes, and misleading posts are common, and as the assessment findings show, they can influence public opinion, entrench bias, and discourage individuals, particularly journalists, activists, women, and members of marginalized groups, from expressing themselves freely online. The research also reveals how these threats intersect with rights and democratic participation.

In this context, online safety is not simply about avoiding scams or malware; it is about safeguarding the constitutional rights to privacy, freedom of expression, and access to information, while ensuring that people can participate fully and securely in digital spaces. This module draws on the findings of the Needs Assessment for Strengthening Democratic Engagement and Countering Digital Threats to equip participants with the understanding and practical tools needed to navigate these challenges without compromising their voice, rights, or security.

### Practical Safety Measures

Staying safe online is about building daily habits that work together to protect you from different risks. Think of these as the locks, alarms, and safety nets of your digital life, each covering a separate threat so there is no single weak point an attacker can exploit.

#### Ensuring Safety of Accounts at the entry point:

- Create strong, unique passwords for every account and store them in password managers such as Bitwarden or 1Password.
- Turn on two-factor authentication through apps like Google Authenticator or Authy to make it harder for anyone to get in even if they have your password.
- Sign out from accounts on shared devices and check your login history to spot suspicious activity.

#### Ensuring Safety of Digital Devices-Treat Them as your Homes:

To ensure digital safety, we need to treat our digital devices as homes and ensure that each device is properly locked, ensure it is properly maintained and that each device is clean.

- Keep your operating system and apps updated so that known security gaps are closed quickly.
- Install trusted antivirus tools such as Avast or Malwarebytes.
- Use encryption and secure screen locks to keep data safe if your device is lost or stolen.

### **Limiting Digital Trail:**

- Adjust privacy settings on all your social media accounts so only trusted people can see your information.
- Turn off location sharing unless it is essential for a specific service.
- Use a Virtual Private Network such as ProtonVPN or Windscribe on public Wi-Fi to protect your browsing from being tracked.
- Review old posts and delete anything sensitive you no longer want available.

### **Avoiding Haste in Posting on Social Media To avoid being misled by false or manipulated content**

- Verify images using Google Reverse Image Search or TinEye.
- Check videos with InVID to see if they have been altered.
- Use fact-checking sites like AFP <sup>13</sup>Fact Check or Snopes <sup>14</sup> before passing on news.

### **Using Secure Tools of Communication:**

- Use encrypted messaging apps such as Signal or WhatsApp for sensitive discussions.
- Verify who you are talking to before sharing personal details.
- Save screenshots of harassment or threats before blocking and reporting the sender.

### **Ensuring Digital Financial Security:**

When handling money online, act as if every payment request could be a scam until proven otherwise:

- Use secure payment services like Easypaisa, JazzCash, or PayPal rather than direct bank transfers to strangers.
- Only shop on websites with HTTPS in the address bar.
- Set up alerts on your bank account to catch suspicious activity early.

### **Immediate Steps in Case of Emergency**

When something goes wrong, do the following so you can limit the damage quickly:

- Change passwords immediately if you suspect a breach.
- Let your contacts know if your account has been hacked so they can ignore fake messages.
- Report incidents to the National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency and if needed, call the DRF Cyber Harassment Helpline at 0800-39393 maintained by Digital Rights Foundation.

### **Special Considerations for Vulnerable Groups**

Digital threats do not affect everyone in the same way. The Needs Assessment for Strengthening Democratic Engagement and Countering Digital Threats makes it clear that certain groups — including persons with disabilities, women, transgender persons, journalists, and activists, and young or first-time internet users — face specific risks that require targeted

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<sup>13</sup> AFP Fact Check. *AFP Fact Check – Global fact-checking service of Agence France-Presse*. Available at: <https://factcheck.afp.com>

<sup>14</sup> Snopes. *Snopes – The definitive fact-checking site and reference source for urban legends, folklore, myths, rumours, and misinformation*. Available at: <https://www.snopes.com>

safety steps. These are not just extra precautions; they are measures shaped by the real experiences and vulnerabilities identified in the research.

For persons with disabilities, the threats often come from two directions, unsafe or unverified assistive technology, and online environments where harmful stereotypes and derogatory language are still common:

- Only install assistive technology from official stores or trusted developers.
- Check app permissions and remove those that are not essential for the tool to function.
- Keep assistive software updated to patch security holes.
- Use trusted, closed groups for advocacy work to reduce exposure to trolling.
- Block and report accounts using insulting language and keep a record in case formal action is needed.

For women, online spaces often mirror the harassment and intimidation they may face offline, but with the added challenge of speed and reach.:

- Review tags, posts, and comments regularly to ensure nothing harmful is linked to your profile.
- Limit visibility of personal details such as family connections, workplace, and routines.
- Avoid posting live location; share travel updates only after leaving the place.
- Create a trusted contact list for sensitive discussions.
- Save evidence of harassment before blocking or reporting an account.

For transgender persons, privacy breaches can cause deep emotional and social harm, as Bindiya Rana highlighted with the example of leaked WhatsApp content in CPDI assessment report:

- Avoid storing intimate or sensitive content on devices connected to the internet.
- Use disappearing message features in Signal or WhatsApp for private conversations.
- Restrict profile photos and personal information to trusted contacts.
- Disable automatic media downloads in messaging apps to prevent unwanted files.
- Seek immediate help from trusted networks and digital rights groups if private content is leaked.

For journalists and activists, trolling, surveillance, and legal threats under vague laws like PECA are common tools used to silence critical voices:

- Keep personal and professional accounts separate to reduce crossover risks.
- Use encrypted communication for sensitive exchanges, such as Signal.
- Store important files in encrypted cloud services or password-protected folders.
- Verify unknown links or messages from supposed sources before opening them.
- Stay informed about your rights under PECA and seek legal guidance when needed.

For youth and first-time internet users, the biggest risks often come from oversharing and not fully understanding how permanent online content can be.

- Learn and apply privacy settings before starting active social media use.
- Double-check content before sharing to avoid spreading false information.
- Avoid posting personal details like school names, home addresses, or phone numbers.
- Participate in moderated online groups where respectful discussion is encouraged.

For religious minorities, online harassment often mirrors offline discrimination, with additional risks of targeted hate campaigns, fake allegations, and doxxing.

- Limit public sharing of religious affiliation or related activities unless necessary.

- Use closed, moderated groups for community discussions to reduce exposure to hostile actors.
- Report hate speech and threats directly to platform moderators and keep evidence for formal complaints.
- Enable comment moderation on public posts to filter abusive language.
- Be cautious when engaging in religious debates online, especially with unknown accounts.

### Group Activity

Role play activity online safety

All groups will be provided real case studies from Pakistan for these role plays.

**Group 1: Financial Scams and Online Fraud (Cases 1–5)**

**Scenario: ZipTech Online Scam (Case 1)**

- Roles: Fake e-commerce sellers, ordinary online buyers (students/professionals), and consumer rights advocates.

**Group 2: Misinformation, Deepfakes, and Elections (Cases 6–8)**

**Scenario: Deepfake Video Targeting Political Candidate (Case 8)**

- Roles: Candidate and their campaign team, political rivals spreading the deepfake, voters reacting to the video, and fact-checking organizations.

**Group 3: Online Harassment and Gender-Based Digital Harm (Case 10)**

**Scenario: Non-Consensual Sharing of Intimate Content (Case 10)**

- Roles: Student victim, friends/classmates, university administration, and NCCIA officials.

**Group 4: Biometric Identity Theft – Visually Impaired Person (Case 12)**

**Scenario: Biometric Misuse Targeting a Blind Citizen (Case 12)**

- Roles: Blind victim, telecom franchise staff misusing biometrics, PTA/NCCIA officials, and media or civil society activists.

## Module 11: How to Take Action: Complaint Mechanisms and Engaging Regulatory Bodies

### Background and Rationale

For most people, the idea of reporting a violation of their digital rights feels distant, confusing, and often pointless. The Media Literacy in Pakistan: Needs Assessment for Strengthening Democratic Engagement and Countering Digital Threats found that a majority of citizens do not know where to turn when their privacy is breached, when they are harassed online, or when their personal data is stolen. Even those who have heard of institutions like the National Cyber Crime Investigation Authority (NCCIA) or the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority often have no idea about the exact procedures for lodging a complaint.

This module will guide readers through the steps of filing complaints about digital rights violations, explain clearly what bodies like NCCIA, PTA, PEMRA, and various Ombudsmen are

legally responsible for, and highlight where their functioning or accessibility falls short. It will also show how to use tools like the Right to Information (RTI) laws to demand transparency and accountability. The aim is not only to equip citizens with practical knowledge but also to encourage a culture of informed engagement in which people know their rights, understand the systems meant to protect them, and feel confident enough to use them.

### **Knowing Complaint Channels**

#### **The National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA)**

The National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA) is now the main government body for investigating and acting on serious online offences, having replaced FIA' Cyber Crime Wing. If you have been harassed, defrauded, had your identity stolen, or found your private information being shared without consent, this is the place to start. Complaints can be filed with NCCIA in multiple ways, both online and offline.

#### **Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA)**

The PTA regulates internet and telecom services in Pakistan. It addresses complaints related to mobile networks, internet service providers, and the blocking of unlawful online content. Complaints can be filed with PTA in multiple ways, both online and offline.

#### **Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA)**

PEMRA regulates TV and radio broadcasters in Pakistan. It deals with violations of its code of conduct, including hate speech, false information, and obscene or offensive content in broadcast media. Complaints can be filed with PEMRA in multiple ways, both online and offline.

#### **Banking Mohtasib Pakistan**

The Banking Mohtasib Pakistan is a specialized office for resolving banking-related complaints when your bank fails to address the issue. This can include cases of unauthorized deductions, ATM failures, delays in handling complaints, or other service-related problems.

Before approaching the Banking Mohtasib, you must first lodge a written complaint with your bank and allow them 45 days to respond. If your bank does not resolve the matter within that time or their response is unsatisfactory, you can then contact the Banking Mohtasib. Complaints can be filed with Banking Mohtasib Pakistan in multiple ways, both online and offline.

#### **Ombudsman Offices (Mohtasib)**

Ombudsman offices, also called Mohtasib, are independent bodies set up to address complaints about poor service, discrimination, or inaction by public sector departments. Before approaching an Ombudsman, you must first file a complaint directly with the department concerned and give them an opportunity to resolve it. Complaints can be filed with Ombudsman offices Pakistan in multiple ways, both online and offline.

If the issue is not resolved or you do not receive a response within a reasonable time, you can take it to the relevant Ombudsman for further action.

Federal Ombudsman (Wafaqi Mohtasib) – Complaints against federal government institutions such as NADRA, EOBI, SNGPL, and PIA.

Provincial Ombudsman – Complaints related to provincial departments including police, health, education, and local government bodies.

### **Engaging Oversight Bodies and Understanding Limitations**

Oversight bodies such as the NCCIA, PTA and PEMRA are intended to safeguard citizens' rights and maintain fair standards. In reality, many people see them as slow to act, overly political, or more focused on controlling narratives than protecting the public from harm.

### **Using Right to Information Laws to Seek Information About Complaints**

Right to Information (RTI) laws give you the legal power to follow up on your own complaints and to see how public bodies are handling complaints more broadly. By filing an RTI request, you can obtain official updates and data that show whether institutions are meeting their responsibilities.

You can request information from the following bodies if your case or interest falls within their mandate:

- Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA)
- The National Cyber Crime Investigation Agency (NCCIA)
- National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR)
- National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW)
- National Commission on the Rights of Child (NCRC)
- Federal Ombudsman (Wafaqi Mohtasib)
- Provincial Ombudsman Offices in Punjab, Sindh, KP, and Balochistan
- Federal and Provincial Information Commissions

You can receive such information/data as status of your own complaint, total number of complaints received during a given period, categories of complaints, such as harassment cases or data breaches, number of resolved and pending cases, average time taken to resolve cases, disciplinary actions taken for delays or mishandling and copies of audits or internal reports on complaint handling.

When you use right to information laws for complaint-related data, it can help you track progress on your own case, promote transparency in public service delivery, identify patterns of delay or negligence, support advocacy and legal work and monitor whether public bodies are protecting citizen rights.

### **Group Activity**

Participants will be divided into four groups.

**Group 1** will identify issues such as harassment, fraud, stealing of identity and sharing of private information without consent and lodge complaints with the NCCIA.

**Group 2** will identify issues pertaining to banking services such as unauthorized deductions, ATM failures, delays in handling complaints and lodge complaints with Banking Mohtasib.

**Group 3** will identify issues pertaining to hate speech, false information, and obscene or offensive content in broadcast media, mobile networks, internet service providers, and the blocking of unlawful online content and lodge complaints with PEMRA and PTA.

**Group 4** will identify issues pertaining to unresolved personal complaints or general statistics about complaints lodged with PEMRA, PTA, Banking Mohtasib and NCCIA.

Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI) is an independent, non-partisan and a not-for-profit civil society organization working on issues of peace and development in Pakistan. It is registered under section 42 of the Companies Ordinance, 1984 (XLVII of 1984) later substituted by Companies Act 2017. It was established in September 2003 by a group of concerned citizens who realized that there was a need to approach the issues of peace and development in an integrated manner. CPDI is a first initiative of its kind in Pakistan. It seeks to inform and influence public policies and civil society initiatives through research-based advocacy and capacity building in order to promote citizenship, build peace and achieve inclusive and sustainable development. Areas of special sectoral focus include promotion of peace and tolerance, rule of law, transparency and access to information, budget watch, media watch, local government, climate change, election watch and legislative watch and development.



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