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Silent Voices: Social Media's Influence on Journalists' Self-Censorship

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ABSTRACT

Social media serves as a powerful tool for journalists, particularly in Pakistan's volatile border regions, for disseminating information related to militancy, military operations, and insurgency. However, its dual nature presents both opportunities and challenges for journalists. On one hand, social media can be exploited to pressure or suppress effective voices, while on the other hand, it enables media personnel to establish a reputation by filing exclusive stories from the area. This paper examines how social media influences journalists' self-censorship and decision-making regarding which stories to publish. It finds that although social media provides a platform for marginalized voices, it also subjects journalists to increasing pressure from a range of actors—including the public, political parties, state authorities, and militants. Using the Hierarchy of Influences Model, the study concludes that these pressures have a significant impact on journalists' choices. The findings suggest that fear of public backlash and online harassment leads many journalists to self-censor, thereby restricting the free flow of information. The paper emphasizes the urgent need for strategies to protect journalists and promote the safe and effective use of social media in conflict-affected areas.

Introduction

The rise of social media has profoundly reshaped journalism worldwide. News production, dissemination, and consumption have undergone significant transformations globally. Platforms such as Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), YouTube and WhatsApp have enabled journalists to reach audiences instantly and interactively. This digital transformation has blurred the boundaries

between journalists and the public, fostering real-time engagement and feedback. However, it has also exposed media practitioners to unfiltered criticism, surveillance and online hostility. While social media is often celebrated as a democratizing force that amplifies marginalized voices. It has simultaneously evolved into a contested space where journalists face complex forms of manipulation, intimidation and reputational risk (Pew Research Center, 2022; Shah et al., 2023).

In Pakistan, the expansion of social media coincided with a volatile socio-political landscape marked by terrorism, ideological polarization and weak institutional safeguards. Journalists, particularly working in conflict-prone regions such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and the former Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), have increasingly relied on digital platforms to bypass censorship, source news and engage audiences. Yet these same platforms have become arenas of intimidation, where journalists encounter trolling, reputational attacks, and threats from political actors, militant groups and state institutions (Jamil, 2019, 2020). The immediacy and anonymity of social media intensify these pressures, making digital spaces psychologically perilous for those seeking to fulfill their professional duties.

Numerous scholars have examined the transformation of journalism in digital environments (Hermida, 2010; Singer, 2021). While these studies acknowledge the empowering potential of social media, emerging research highlights its darker consequences, particularly in fragile democracies. Online harassment, disinformation and targeted digital campaigns have increasingly constrained journalistic freedom and independence (Lewis, Zamith, & Coddington, 2020; Posetti et al., 2020). In Pakistan, the intersection of patriarchal norms, political patronage, and digital visibility further complicates the experiences of journalists, especially women (Ibrahim, 2023; Zeib, 2021). In such contexts, self-censorship emerges as a survival strategy, allowing journalists to navigate the precarious balance between professional ethics and personal safety.

Despite growing attention to censorship and media repression, the internalized and psychological dimensions of self-censorship remain underexplored. Journalists in Pakistan's tribal and settled districts often face pressures rooted in audience backlash, family honor and fear of militant retribution, each amplified through social media visibility. These pressures not only limit the diversity of perspectives in public discourse but also undermine journalism's democratic function as a watchdog of power.

This study applies the Hierarchy of Influences Model (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996, 2011) to examine how social media intersects with individual, organizational, and societal factors to shape journalistic behavior in Pakistan's conflict-affected regions. Using a qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews with journalists across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the research explores how digital platforms amplify existing vulnerabilities and contribute to self-censorship. By foregrounding underrepresented local contexts, this study aims to extend the global discourse on press freedom and propose practical recommendations for protecting journalists in digital spaces.

This study asks, how does social media influence self-censorship among journalists operating in conflict-affected regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa? To address this, the research aims to explore how digital platforms amplify pressures on journalists, examine the role of individual, routine, and societal influences in shaping self-censorship, understand the coping strategies employed by journalists in response to online harassment and reputational threats, and propose context-sensitive recommendations to safeguard press freedom in volatile environments. Situated within the socio-political complexities of Pakistan's tribal and settled districts, this study contributes to the broader discourse on media freedom by foregrounding localized experiences of journalistic vulnerability. The paper proceeds with a review of the relevant literature, followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework and methodology. It then presents findings from qualitative interviews,

discusses emerging themes, and concludes with practical recommendations for protecting journalists in digital spaces.

Literature Review

The advent of social media has revolutionized journalism by offering platforms for real-time news dissemination and two-way communication between journalists and audiences. Scholars have emphasized its potential to democratize information access, increase audience engagement, and bypass traditional media gatekeeping mechanisms (Hermida, 2010). However, research has highlighted that the unregulated nature of social media platforms exposes journalists to public scrutiny, abuse, and harassment (Hlavka, 2014). The immediacy and virality of social media content also pressure journalists to prioritize speed over accuracy, exacerbating professional vulnerabilities (Singer, 2021).

Political entities often mobilize their supporters to attack journalists through orchestrated campaigns, as highlighted in studies on media freedom (Hanitzsch et al., 2019). These campaigns use tools like fake accounts, manipulated content, and hashtags to discredit journalists and silence dissenting voices (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Such practices create a culture of fear, where journalists increasingly resort to self-censorship to avoid backlash (Carlsson & Pöyhtäri, 2017). Studies suggest that persistent harassment fosters a culture of fear, leading to self-censorship and the erosion of investigative journalism (Posetti et al., 2020). The psychological toll of harassment, including anxiety, burnout, and isolation, has been well-documented, particularly among female journalists (Schiffrin, Koc-Michalska, & Ferrier, 2021).

Social media serves a dual role, it provides journalists with alternative avenues to counter act media blackouts and censorship, but it also becomes a conduit for targeted harassment. Journalists, particularly in politically and security sensitive regions, face heightened risks due to the accessibility and anonymity of social media platforms (Lewis et al., 2020). This phenomenon reflects broader global patterns of "weaponized" social media, where political actors exploit digital platforms to intimidate and delegitimize journalists (Phillips, 2018). Furthermore, the absence of robust legal protections exacerbates journalists' vulnerability, forcing them to navigate hostile environments with limited recourse.

Journalist adopting coping mechanisms such as closing comment sections, avoiding sensitive topics, and even withdrawing from social media altogether. These strategies, while ensuring safety, limit journalistic expression and public accountability. Similar patterns have been observed in other conflict zones, where threats to journalists undermine the democratic function of the media (Howard & Hussain, 2013). The literature emphasizes the need for systemic interventions to mitigate the risks posed by social media and political harassment. Recommendations include robust cyber laws, journalist safety training, and collaborative efforts between media organizations and digital platforms (UNESCO, 2021). In regions like Pakistan, contextualized strategies that address socio-political and cultural nuances are crucial to safeguarding journalistic freedom and resilience.

Journalism in conflict areas is significantly impacted by militancy and conflict-related news items, which compromise the safety of journalists covering civic and community issues. In conflict zones, the role of journalism is severely constrained by the challenges of self-censorship. This research focuses on the phenomenon of self-censorship among journalists operating in the conflict-ridden tribal and adjacent areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Journalists in these areas face multifaceted pressures that often compel them to omit, alter, or avoid reporting on sensitive issues, particularly those involving powerful actors or divisive topics. The absence of comprehensive reporting on local civic issues, such as governance failures, human rights violations, or

development challenges, creates a vacuum in public discourse. Communities are left uninformed about matters that directly affect their lives, further marginalizing them and exacerbating societal inequities. Through this study, I am not only to highlight the struggles of journalists but also to propose actionable recommendations that foster a safer and more enabling environment for independent journalism in conflict areas.

Social media has emerged as a transformative platform for journalists, amplifying the voices of those who are marginalized, especially in conflict-affected areas. The pervasive influence of social media has subjected journalists to heightened pressures from multiple sources, including the public, political parties, state authorities, militants, and insurgents. These pressures frequently manifest as online harassment, public backlash, and threats, compelling journalists to exercise self-censorship. While social media provides an avenue for journalists to navigate traditional media constraints, it simultaneously complicates their decision-making processes. This gap is particularly pronounced in the tribal regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where journalists operate under constant duress; as a result, they are unable to perform their duties with professional liberty and fearlessly. The study aims to find out how it affects the spirit of journalism.

While existing scholarship offers valuable insights into the challenges journalists face in digital environments, several gaps remain. Most studies emphasize external threats and generalized patterns of harassment, yet they often overlook the internalized, psychological dimensions of self-censorship, particularly in culturally complex and conflict-prone regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Moreover, few works apply multi-layered theoretical models such as the Hierarchy of Influences to analyze how individual, routine, and societal pressures intersect in shaping journalistic behavior. Methodologically, prior research tends to rely on quantitative surveys or broad content analysis, which may fail to capture the nuanced, lived experiences of journalists navigating tribal norms, familial expectations, and gendered vulnerabilities. This study addresses these gaps by employing a qualitative, context-sensitive approach that foregrounds voices from underrepresented regions and applies a layered theoretical lens to understand the dynamics of self-censorship in digital spaces.

The Hierarchy of Influences Model (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) offers a comprehensive framework for examining the multi-layered forces that shape media content. This model posits that media output is influenced by a range of factors operating at five interconnected levels: individual, routine, organizational, extra-media, and societal. For this study, the model serves as a lens to explore the complexities of journalistic practices in tribal and settled areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, a region characterized by unique socio-political dynamics. This study employs the Hierarchy of Influences Model to understand how various influences shape the work of journalists in the region. Each level of the hierarchy provides a distinct perspective on the factors impacting journalistic content; in this study, the individual, routine, and societal level factors are examined. The individual level examines personal attributes, including demographics, education, values, and professional experiences of journalists, while the routine level focuses on the standardized practices and norms within the journalistic field, and well as the socio-cultural traditions of the local area. Impact of external entities, such as political actors, organizations, security forces, social and cultural environment.

The study employs thematic analysis to systematically examine data derived from in-depth interviews with over 30 journalists working in both tribal and settled areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This method allows for the identification, analysis, and interpretation of patterns within qualitative data, providing insights into the interplay of influences across the hierarchy. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with journalists to capture their lived experiences and perspectives. The interview protocol was designed to probe each level of the hierarchy, ensuring a

holistic understanding of the factors shaping journalistic practices. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's tribal and settled areas present a distinctive media landscape shaped by political volatility, cultural diversity, and security concerns. Journalists in this region operate under challenging conditions, often facing threats, limited resources, and censorship. By applying the Hierarchy of Influences Model, this study aims to elucidate how these contextual factors intersect with individual, organizational, and societal influences to shape journalistic practices and media content.

Methodology

This paper employs a qualitative research design to investigate the impact of social media on self-censorship among journalists operating in conflict-affected regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the need to capture lived experiences, a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable for uncovering the nuanced pressures that journalists face in digital environments. The study is exploratory and interpretive, aiming to understand the subjective experiences of journalists within their socio-political and cultural contexts. It is grounded in the Hierarchy of Influences Model, which provides a multi-level framework for analyzing how individual, routine, and societal factors shape media content.

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit journalists with direct experience reporting from tribal and settled districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The sample included over 30 participants, selected to ensure diversity in terms of gender, professional background, and geographic location. Snowball sampling was also employed to recruit journalists who were initially hesitant to participate due to security concerns. Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted in person and via secure digital platforms. Interviews were guided by a protocol designed to probe each level of the Hierarchy of Influences, with particular attention to social media pressures, familial dynamics, political harassment, and gendered vulnerabilities. Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the process, including obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and ensuring the right to withdraw at any stage.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: familiarization with data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This method allowed for the identification of recurring patterns and the construction of themes that reflect the complex realities of journalistic self-censorship in conflict zones. To ensure credibility and rigor, the study incorporated strategies such as member checking, peer debriefing, and reflexive journaling. Transferability was enhanced by providing thick descriptions of the study context, while dependability and confirmability were addressed through transparent documentation of the research process and analytical decisions.

Results

The double impact of social networks on journalists in Pakistan, tribal networks serve as a powerful tool to expand scope and facilitate feedback, and they also curtail the journalistic practice in the specific area or district. As journalists continue to adapt to this evolutionary landscape, it is enforced to commit self-censorship in order to stay safe; they prioritize security and mental health.

The following five themes were identified during the analysis of the available data

1. Family and Tribal Pressure
2. Political Parties triggered Harassment

3. Gendered Harassment
4. Psychological and Emotional Harassment
5. Isolation and loneliness

The details representation of each theme is as follows

Family and Tribal Pressure

This theme explores how the social media pressure added to the family and tribal pressure, joint family system, and tribal influences act as additional and most powerful layers of pressure on journalists, and they don't have any other option than being forced to self-censor the content.

> *"My family was approached by doctors after I reported a story about the lack of medicine in a local hospital. My nephew, a doctor, was pressured, and that pressure extended to my entire family. Eventually, I had to delete the story." Respondent*

This reveals how family members become conduits for external pressures, making it nearly impossible to resist. Social media is at the fingertips of everyone, and when a journalist becomes a target of a troll, campaign, or online threat, their family members, who also use social media, eventually become aware of the situation. These family members are not just a family, but a real support system in a region like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; however, the fear within the family is not easy to handle.

> *"Family pressure is the most influential when it comes to censorship. In tribal areas, the joint family system enlarges the size of the family, which increases the size of the pressure as well." Respondent*

This underscores how deeply entrenched cultural and social systems amplify the challenges journalists face. These insights highlight the complex challenges journalists face due to gender-based pressures and familial or tribal dynamics. Social media, while a powerful tool, amplifies these pressures, often leading to self-censorship and a compromise on journalistic freedom.

> *"When pressures are from outside the family, then you have the support of your family. But when the family itself becomes the source of pressure, it's impossible to handle."*

> *"I feel I am no longer a real journalist because these social, tribal, and family pressures have put me in a position where I had to pick one: journalism or them. So, I picked them."*

The security of the family is also not easy to maintain, and according to the respondents, most often they compromise because of their family's security, because the online groups start targeting their family, and also threaten to damage them physically as well.

> *"They gather personal information regarding address, children, and family data to threaten journalists."*

Political Parties triggered Harassment

Another layer of harassment that Respondents discuss involves being targeted due to their journalistic stance, especially when stories are unfavorable to certain political parties. This is coupled with coordinated attacks where groups of people (supporters or haters of a political party) band together to harass and discredit the journalist.

> *"They also find the phone or WhatsApp number of a journalist and then gather the personal information regarding address, children, and family data... political parties take screenshots of your story and share it within their party WhatsApp group, they all plan it and attack you on social media simultaneously." Respondent*

The harassment becomes more organized and intense when political factions get involved. The ability to rally a group to attack a journalist online through coordinated campaigns, such as sharing posts in WhatsApp groups, shows how social media can be weaponized for political reasons.

Respondents discuss how social media harassment often takes the form of people creating fake profiles to engage in abusive behavior. They also mention that these attacks are exacerbated in regions like Pakistan, where laws and institutions often fail to offer protection.

> *"It's very easy to make a fake ID and start abusing the journalists... in a country where we only have laws and institutions just for the sake of existence, it's not easy for the journalists to save themselves."*

Political parties in this region of the world are now establishing dedicated social media teams that not only craft the narrative for their party but also counter stories that are not in their favor. In Pakistan, there are many incidents of targeting journalists online by political party workers and maligning them not only for their work but also targeting their personal lives. Constant social media campaigns are not only targeting the journalist's mindset but also affecting their work quality.

> *"It's a challenging and difficult situation... it increases, which not only affects the quality of work but also affects my mindset too."*

Gendered Harassment

Journalism is not an easy job, but it becomes much difficult when a journalist is vulnerable. Women journalists in a patriarchal society are the most vulnerable when it comes to work in the field. Women journalists are disproportionately targeted, facing campaigns that involve misogynistic remarks and gender-specific attacks.

Respondents noted how women are particularly easy targets, with harassment often escalating from online abuse to physical threats. Women journalists are particularly vulnerable to targeted campaigns.

> *"Women journalists are very easy targets, with trends and hashtags launched to demoralize them." Respondent*

> *"Women journalists are very easy targets. I have also been affected by specific campaigns in which trends and hashtags were launched to demoralize women journalists." Respondent*

This highlights how women are disproportionately targeted in organized campaigns, making their work more challenging. The threat is not limited to the women journalist but it also exerted on the family and community as well in order to pressure her and make her silent. Respondent shares a scary account of how gendered threats extend beyond social media; movement in public spaces is also not safe for journalists, particularly female journalists.

> *"Once I went to a local park with my children, an unknown person approached me and said, 'Are you the burqa journalist?' I thought he liked my work, but his reaction was opposite. He looked at my children and threatened me to be careful next time I report anything regarding women or social issues." Respondent*

This demonstrates how social media threats can spill over into real life, endangering women journalists and their families. These journalists have now accepted that, in order to survive, they must self-censor a significant number of stories, and it is very concerning that they are okay with it.

> *"I apply self-censorship, and I am happy to do so because it ensures that I am working and alive." Respondent*

> *"As a female, it's very easy to threaten you and pressure you directly and indirectly through family. The area where I live nullifies all the basic rights we have as citizens, let alone as journalists." Respondent*

This illustrates how gendered harassment leads women to compromise on their professional goals to ensure their safety. The intersection of gender and family creates a doubly oppressive environment, making professional independence nearly unattainable.

Psychological and Emotional Harassment

All the respondents agreed on the negative impact of psychological and emotional harassment, which forced them to rethink the consequences before filing any story. Respondents shared their experience of online abuse, threats, and harassment, often through comments or direct messages, and they accepted that fear of being targeted personally or professionally influences their reporting choices. According to the respondents, the rapid rise of online platforms has not only expanded the audience but also amplified opportunities for individuals or groups to directly target them. Respondents highlighted how constant exposure to harassment profoundly affects their mental health, work quality, and even their personal lives.

Respondents describe how the ongoing bullying, harassment, and threats have a persistent psychological impact, even after the immediate interactions have ended. The mental strain doesn't vanish quickly and instead lingers, affecting their mindset and work.

> *"The bullying, harassment, threats... it holds a place somewhere in the mind and heart which keeps triggering me whenever I report the same type of news story." Respondent*

> *"When we don't have any way out or any mechanism to protect, then self-censorship is the safest and easiest way to minimize the harm." Respondent*

The cumulative pressure from harassment causes journalists to second-guess their decisions, especially when handling sensitive or controversial stories. According to the respondents, the harassment takes various forms, including abusive comments, direct messages, doctored images, and organized campaigns. Respondents described being falsely accused of affiliations with political parties or engaging in corrupt practices, which caused intense stress and undermined their professional credibility.

> *"The bullying, harassment, threats, and every sort of negative response are not temporary. It holds a place somewhere in the mind and heart, which keeps triggering me whenever I report the same type of news story."*

This ongoing mental burden fosters a sense of isolation, as journalists feel alienated and unsupported in their struggles.

Isolation and loneliness

The respondents also talk about the emotional exhaustion that comes with being constantly harassed online. The phenomenon of "Fear and Loneliness" arises from the multifaceted threats and challenges journalists encounter when their reporting triggers backlash, criticism, or personal attacks. The responses from journalists reveal how these pressures impact their professional and personal lives.

The mental strain leads them to disengage from certain activities, such as closing their comment sections or direct messaging, to avoid further negativity. They express a desire to be "unseen" or "unrecognized" in order to escape the emotional weight of their public persona.

> *"I often want to be unseen, unrecognized, and want to be an unknown person." Respondent*

Respondents discuss how the fear of backlash forces them to distance themselves from engagement, which in turn affects their professional work and social life. Journalists are trying to find a way they be secure or not be targeted.

> *"I used to close my comment section, close the direct message section, and often I don't see the responses when I feel the reaction will be harsh."*
>
> *"If I report anything that can trigger online and physical action against me, then I will stand nowhere. Similarly, if I face the consequence, there will be no one to speak."*

This demonstrates how avoiding negative feedback can isolate journalists from their audience and limit their interaction, a key aspect of their profession. This reflects the profound loneliness felt when there is no support system to rely on, either online or offline. The fear of being ostracized or labeled by social groups is a recurring theme. Respondents explained that audiences on social media often associate journalists with specific political parties, groups, ethnicities, and regions based on their reporting, which can lead to abuse and criticism. Such labeling can escalate into collective attacks.

> *"They use Hashtags, trending names, photos, and also Photoshop, AI-generated insulting images, videos, and audios."*

This targeted harassment discourages journalists from pursuing stories that might provoke such reactions, resulting in selective reporting.

The fear of isolation manifests in various forms, including social alienation, professional backlash, family pressures, and gender-based targeting. This pervasive fear forces journalists to adopt self-censorship as a coping mechanism to minimize harm and maintain personal safety. However, the broader implications of this trend compromise journalistic integrity and the public's right to access unbiased and comprehensive information. Addressing this issue requires systemic reforms, including the establishment of legal protections, support networks, and training programs to empower journalists to resist these pressures while ensuring their safety.

Across these themes, journalists described a range of coping mechanisms to manage social media pressures and minimize harm. These included closing comment sections, avoiding controversial topics, withdrawing from online platforms, and applying selective self-censorship. While these strategies ensured personal safety, they also constrained journalistic freedom and public accountability.

Discussion

The study was conducted to understand the decision-making of journalists while covering different types of stories. There are multiple factors, internal and external, but the study focuses only on the factors that are addressed at the journalist's level. Those factors that are internal and affect the decision-making at the organizational level are not addressed in this study, while those external factors that cause the decision-making at the very beginning are identified, and their effects are also discussed. The journalists from various areas of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were interviewed, and their personal experiences are reflected in this study.

The study was designed to test the Hierarchy of Influences model proposed of Shoemaker and Reese (2011). The model's factors were also examined, while searching of new factors was another aim of this study. Journalists operating in the tribal region face unique pressures, particularly from family and tribal dynamics, which significantly influence their work during decision-making. The responses reveal that familial pressure often stems from external threats that extend beyond the journalist to their immediate and extended family. In tribal societies, where collective identity and family honor are deeply entrenched, this pressure is magnified. The joint family system, while offering support, also increases the scale of such pressures, making resistance more challenging. Tribal norms further complicate matters, as they prioritize communal harmony over individual expression, creating an environment where investigative journalism is seen as a threat to societal equilibrium. The interplay of these pressures often forces journalists to practice self-censorship, avoiding topics that could provoke backlash or harm their families.

Political parties and their supporters systematically target journalists whose stories are perceived as unfavorable. Political party-triggered harassment campaigns often involve abusive comments, hashtag trends, and manipulated content aimed at discrediting the journalist. This harassment goes beyond online spaces, as party loyalists may access personal information to intimidate journalists and their families directly. These tactics not only silence dissenting voices but also erode public trust in independent journalism. Female journalists are disproportionately targeted on social media, where anonymity and accessibility enable harassment campaigns to flourish. Women are subjected to coordinated online abuse, including derogatory comments, fabricated images, and hostile hashtags designed to intimidate and silence them. Female journalists also face unique pressures within their family and cultural contexts, as societal norms often restrict their freedom to report controversial issues. These compounded challenges force many to adopt self-censorship as a survival mechanism, curbing their professional aspirations to ensure personal safety. Social media, while providing a platform for engagement and reach, also becomes a source of alienation when journalists face targeted harassment and abuse. Harsh public criticism and coordinated social media attacks forced journalists to withdraw from their professional networks and social interactions. Journalists focus and aim to get recognition for their work, but simultaneously desire to remain unseen and anonymous to avoid backlash. This fear is particularly pronounced among female journalists, who reported feeling targeted not only online but also in physical spaces, compounding their sense of vulnerability and isolation. The constant need to practice self-censorship to avoid public backlash further exacerbates feelings of loneliness, as journalists are unable to express themselves freely or share their work fully.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The psychological and emotional toll of harassment significantly impacts journalists' well-being, safety, and professional integrity, which often leads to self-censorship as a means of coping. Addressing this issue requires a comprehensive approach that includes personal resilience, institutional and organizational support, as well as societal reforms. This study highlights the

precarious role of social media in conflict-affected regions like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, where it serves both as a platform for recognition and engagement, as well as a source of intensified threats and harassment. These pressures compel journalists to self-censor, undermining journalistic integrity and restricting public access to unbiased information. The findings underscore the pressing need for systemic interventions, including enhanced legal protections, comprehensive safety training, and collaborative measures, to combat harassment and promote independent journalism, thereby fostering a free and fair press.

The recommendations of the study emphasize the need for a holistic and multi-stakeholder approach to protect journalists and ensure a resilient media environment, particularly in conflict-prone regions

- Conduct training programs focused on digital literacy and personal safety for conflict reporting journalists, and equip journalists with skills to recognize and mitigate online threats and harassment effectively.
- Advocate for partnerships between media organizations and social media platforms to identify and counter online abuse, and similarly push law enforcement agencies for quicker responses to harmful content targeting journalists.
- Establish collaborative networks among journalists' unions across the province and country to provide support and resources for journalists facing harassment.
- Develop specific strategies to address the unique challenges faced by female journalists, including support systems to handle gender-based harassment
- Design and provide tools of solution and mechanisms for journalists to report sensitive issues without compromising their safety, considering the socio-political and cultural nuances of conflict-affected areas, such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
- Introduce and enforce robust cyber laws to safeguard journalists against online harassment and threats, and ensure accountability for those who are targeting journalists, particularly on social media.
- Raise awareness about the psychological and professional toll of harassment on journalists to foster empathy and reduce public backlash.

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