PLATFORM POWER AND POLITICAL CONTROL: RETHINKING PRESS FREEDOM IN THE AGE OF ALGORITHMS

***Hudda Javaid Azeemi**
(huddajavaid15@gmail.com)
Lecturer, Department of Mass Communication, The University of Faisalabad
Areeba Khalid
(Areebakhalid0707@gmail.com)
Hafiz Shabir Ahmad
(hafizshabirahmad786@gmail.com)
Lecturer, Department of Statistics, The University of Faisalabad

Abstract

This study explores the political implications of press freedom within the dynamic and rapidly evolving digital landscape. The proliferation of digital technologies and the advent of social media platforms have revolutionized the way information is disseminated, consumed, and shared. This transformation has presented both opportunities and challenges for press freedom worldwide. The research investigates the complex interplay between press freedom, political power, and digital platforms. It analyses how governments, political actors, and authoritarian regimes adapt to the digital era and employ various strategies to control and manipulate information flows. Moreover, it examines the role of social media platforms as gatekeepers and their influence on shaping public opinion and political discourse.

The research employs a multidimensional approach, incorporating theoretical frameworks, and empirical data to assess how press freedom is restricted through online censorship and platform controlled moderation systems. Additionally, it explores the impact of these constraints on democratic participation, human rights, transparency, and public trust in the media The findings deepen understanding that digital platforms enhance information access. However, they intensify censorship, surveillance, and manipulation that results in weakened media trust and challenges to democratic participation. It highlights the urgent need for stronger regulation, accountability, and international cooperation to safeguard press freedom in the digital era.

Keywords

Introduction:

In the era of digitalization, the significance of press freedom cannot be underestimated. The advent of digital platforms has revolutionized the way information is disseminated, making it easier for individuals to access and share news (Jones & Samples, 2023). However, this digital landscape also poses several challenges and political implications for press freedom. This study aims to explore the political implications of press freedom in the age of algorithms and understand the potential ramifications for democratic societies (Fu et al., 2021).

Press Freedom in the Digital Age

It is right to celebrate freedom of expression as a cornerstone of liberty and a vital right. This beloved ideal has long been a source of inspiration for religious liberals and supporters of democratic self-rule. It was enshrined in 1791 in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, defended in 1859 by British philosopher John Stuart Mill in On Liberty, and reaffirmed in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Smith, 2019).

It is commonly considered that the rise of Christianity coincided with freedom of expression. There is some validity to this claim. Some Christians have been among its most ardent supporters. However, claiming that current standards for free expression go back two millennia would be a significant oversimplification. The history of free expression is actually far more complicated and less linear (De Freitas et al., 2024).

Control, Censorship, and Regulation

Different approaches have been taken by governments in response to the increasing impact of digital platforms. To handle false information, national security issues, and internet damage, some have created regulatory frameworks. Others have monitored journalists, stifled opposition, or altered internet narratives using digital techniques. In the meanwhile, platforms themselves impose community rules and moderation procedures that may, whether on purpose or accidentally, restrict or modify media content, giving rise to new types of private censorship. With a lot of discussion, debate, and dialogue now occurring online, society is becoming more and more digital. Platforms who have deliberately positioned themselves as the middlemen between people, typically moderate these connections (Gorwa & Veale, 2024).

Organizations, businesses, governments, politicians, and advertisements, among others. Many of these businesses; often referred to as "social platforms," now play important roles in mediating conversations through private messaging and other channels in addition to public profiles and content feeds. Some are now essential components of the public domain, engaged at all levels of political discourse and politics (Leerssen, 2023). Additionally, these are now some of the main ways that individuals communicate in their personal life. As a result, social media platforms mediate a wide range of interactions, from private, intimate chats between friends, family, and partners to those made publicly with the goal of reaching a big audience. For the purposes of this research, "social platforms" comprise message boards, social media websites, "web 2.0" websites, group messaging services (i.e., one-to-many communications services), private messaging services (i.e., one-to-one communications services), and other comparable platforms (Poudel, 2023).

Evolution of Social Media and Its Influence

As social media has developed, the number of sites catering to various demographics and specializations has increased exponentially. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Twitter have grown to such an extent that they have billions of active users globally.

With 2.91 billion monthly active users as of 2021 (Meta, 2022), Facebook continues to be the biggest social media site. Users may interact with the website in a number of ways including via social networking platforms like Facebook, where they can follow news from companies, organizations, and media sources, connect with friends and family, and exchange updates, images, and videos (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Twitter is a real-time microblogging and public discussion platform where millions of users interact through short messages known as tweets. The platform enables both public and private communication among users (Bashir et al., 2025).

Objectives:

The main objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To examine the political implications of press freedom in the digital landscape.
2. To assess the impact of digital platforms on journalistic practices and freedom of the press.
3. To identify the challenges faced by journalists and media organizations in the digital era.

4. To analyse the relationship between press freedom, democracy, and governance in the digital age.

Research Question:

The central research question guiding this study is: How does the digital landscape impact press freedom and what are the resulting political implications?

Hypothesis:

To examine the political implications of press freedom in the digital landscape.
H0: Digital platforms do not have a significant impact on press freedom, journalistic autonomy, and the political control of information in the age of algorithms.
H1: Digital platforms have a significant impact on press freedom, mediating journalistic content, and reinforcing political control over digital communication.

Review of Literature:

A **literature review** is a brief but organized summary of existing research and academic writings related to a specific topic. It helps the researcher understand what has already been studied, what theories exist, and where gaps remain
Bonner and colleagues explored how these social factors shape technological development, design choices, and the societal impacts of technology (Bonner et al., 2023). Through extensive case studies, Bijker, Hughes, and Pinch illustrate how technology is not determined solely by its technical aspects but is subject to negotiation, controversy, and competing visions.
In addition to Canfield et al., (2020) several other scholars have contributed to the discourse surrounding Khan and colleagues in 2018, who critically evaluates the theoretical framework proposed by Singer, shedding light on its strengths and limitations (Khan et al., 2018). Similarly, Thompson examines the historical context in which Singer's ideas emerged, providing insights into the societal factors that shaped his perspectives (Thompson, 2021). This study expands existing academic work by incorporating theoretical perspectives that explain how digital platforms shape information environments. These frameworks assist in understanding press freedom within a context that is progressively shaped by algorithms and platform level control.

Theoretical Framework:
This research is grounded in Platform Governance Theory which investigates how digital platforms manage online interactions and influence flow of information. Researchers argue that platforms are not impartial environments but wield structural and algorithmic influence that shapes user behaviour, content visibility, and public discussions (Gorwa & Veale, 2024). Through policies for content moderation, algorithmic ranking systems, and curation driven by data, platforms effectively serve as gatekeepers, deciding which information becomes prominent and which is left hidden.
Utilizing this theory, the study examines the impact of platform governance on journalistic content, the dissemination of news, and the boundaries of press freedom. It also addresses the political and ethical ramifications of algorithmic decision-making. Moreover, it focuses on how these non-transparent processes can affect democratic discourse and media independence (Gillespie, 2018).
In short, Platform Governance Theory offers a robust framework for examining the power dynamics inherent in digital platforms and their effects on modern press freedom.

Research Methodology:
Research methodology simply refers to the practical "how" of a research study. More specifically, it's about how a researcher systematically designs a study to ensure valid and reliable results that address the research aims, objectives and research questions (Azuan & Jalil, 2024).

In this chapter, the methodology of selection of sample data from population and collection of data is being discussed and studied. All the steps for selecting and collecting of sample data to carry out a statistical survey is mentioned in this chapter of research methodology. Thus, we discussed our research methodology as:

Target Population:
The target population is defined as the number of individuals in which we have to draw inferences about whole population on the basis of sample data. In this study, the area of interest (target population) is the total number of children under the age of 17 years living in Faisalabad district.

Sample:
The sample is defined as the representative part of the population. The basic requirement during the selection of sample is that it must be representative to whole population under observation. It helps to draw inferences about population. In this study, we collect sample from the different areas of Faisalabad District.

Sample size:
Our sample size n=200 is collected through survey questionnaire using simple random sampling. The questionnaire is filled from the individuals.

Data type:
The primary data collected from handwritten survey questionnaire filled from the individuals from Faisalabad district.

Data Management:
IBM SPSS Statistics 21 is used to analysis of data in this research study.

Methods of data collection:
Data has been collected through a questionnaire. Questionnaires have been widely used by educators to obtain facts about past, present, anticipated events, conclusions, practices and to make investigations regarding attitudes to obtain reliable data. Therefore, a questionnaire must be carefully constructed.

The questionnaire has been prepared to keep in view the objectives of the study. Every possible attempt has been made to include simple but meaningful full questions so that the respondents can answer them without hesitation.

Data Analysis techniques:
Following statistical data analysis techniques will be used in this study:
1.   Descriptive Statistics
   - Mean, Standard deviation
2.   Testing of hypothesis
   - One -Way ANOVA
   - Chi-squared method

Descriptive Statistics:
        The first step has Descriptive statistics. Descriptive statistics describe how the data has been distributed. The mean, mode, and median have examples of measures of central

tendency that offer a summary statistic that describes the distribution of scores in the data. As a result, after determining the distribution's central tendency, it's critical to report the spread of the distribution using standard deviation. The standard deviation, which is a measure of variability, is calculated by taking the square root of the total squared departures from the mean. Descriptive statistics include measurements of central tendency and measures of variability (spread).

Measures of central tendency describe the center point of distribution for data collection. The frequency of each data point in the distribution is explained using the mean, median, or mode, which measures the most prevalent patterns in the studied data set. Descriptive statistics are used to characterize the fundamental features of a study's data. In this study, we use descriptive statistics to explore the characteristics of various variables such as age, education, area, employment, residential status and worked hours. It shows the measure of central tendency and dispersion as well as the coefficient of variation (CV).

Testing of Hypothesis:

Testing of hypothesis is a very important step of statistical inference. A procedure that allows us to decide whether to accept a statement or hypothesis about the value of a population parameter, based on information from sample data... Such a statement or assumption, which may or may not be true, is called "Statistical Hypothesis". We accept the hypothesis as true if it is supported by the sample data. We reject the hypothesis when the sample data does not support it. In this section, the collected data is analyzed and the relationship between different attributes and different variables is evaluated. Associations and conclusions about various attributes and variables are drawn.

Chi-square method:

The chi-squared method is a statistical technique used to determine the degree of association or independence between categorical variables. It is commonly employed in various fields, including social sciences, biology, and market research.

$$\chi^2 = \frac{\Sigma(O - E)^2}{E}$$

The method calculates a chi-squared statistic by comparing the observed frequencies of a categorical variable with the frequencies that would be expected if the variables were independent. In this research thesis, we use chi-squared method to compare the observed frequencies of independent variables.

Results and Discussions:

Results and discussions are integral components of a research study or academic paper. The results section presents the findings obtained through data analysis and provides a clear and concise summary of the study's outcomes. It typically includes tables, figures, or statistical analyses that effectively present the collected data and highlight key findings. The results section aims to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of the research outcomes, allowing them to assess the validity and significance of the study's objectives and hypotheses.

The reliability analysis produced a Cronbach's Alpha value of **0.912** for the 14-item scale, indicating **excellent internal consistency**. This suggests that all items are highly interrelated and consistently measure the constructs related to press freedom, political influence, and the role of digital platforms in the digital era. Therefore, the scale is considered reliable for further statistical analysis.

Table:01 Descriptive Statistics
Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Age	200	1.00	4.00	2.5900	1.02820	1.057
Level_of_education	200	1.00	3.00	1.9450	.58625	.344
Algorithms_rank_sensation	200	1.00	4.00	2.1550	1.02284	1.046
Platforms_as_gatekeepers	200	1.00	4.00	2.4500	.92834	.862
News_use	200	1.00	4.00	2.6000	.97713	.955
Civic_participation	200	1.00	5.00	1.4950	.83273	.693
Trust_in_media	200	1.00	4.00	2.5950	1.11679	1.247
Algorithmic_opacity	200	.00	5.00	1.5950	.90280	.815
Journalistic_independence	200	1.00	4.00	2.9400	1.03526	1.072
Political_influence	200	1.00	4.00	2.5850	1.07169	1.149
Valid N (listwise)	200					

The majority of the variables, including age, education, news consumption, media trust, platforms as gatekeepers, and political impact, cantered on mid-range values, according to the descriptive statistics for 200 respondents. Both algorithmic opacity (M = 1.60) and civic involvement (M = 1.50) are quite low, suggesting low perceived opacity and little engagement. The greater mean (M = 2.94) for journalistic independence indicates comparatively more agreement.

Table 2: Algorithmic Opacity & Journalistic Independence
Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	14.325[a]	15	.501
Likelihood Ratio	18.049	15	.260
Linear-by-Linear Association	.026	1	.871
N of Valid Cases	200		

a. 15 cells (62.5%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .09.

The Pearson Chi-Square value of 14.325 with a p-value of 0.501, which is higher than the 0.05 threshold, indicates that the link between the variables is not statistically significant, according to the Chi-Square test findings. This indicates that the categories under comparison have no significant association. However, 62.5% of the cells had predicted counts below 5, which violates a crucial Chi-Square test assumption and limits the test's reliability. Because of the low predicted frequencies, the results should be regarded cautiously even though the study indicates no significant connection.

Table 3: Trust in Media & Civic Participation
Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	78.078ᵃ	12	.000
Likelihood Ratio	80.488	12	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	15.768	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	200		

a. 12 cells (60.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .65.

With 12 degrees of freedom, the Pearson Chi-Square value is 78.078, and the p-value is less than 0.05 at 0.000. This suggests that there is a strong correlation between the variables under investigation. This finding is further supported by a substantial p-value (0.000) from the Likelihood Ratio test. Furthermore, a substantial linear trend between the variables is shown by the Linear-by-Linear Association value (p = 0.000). Nevertheless, the footnote reveals that 12 cells (60%) had predicted counts less than 5, which goes against a crucial Chi-Square test premise. Because low predicted counts might lower the Chi-Square statistic's reliability, the results should be evaluated cautiously even when they are statistically significant.

ANOVA
Gender on Algorithms Rank Sensationalism

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	17.579	3	5.860	38.573	.000
Within Groups	29.776	196	.152		
Total	47.355	199			

Gender has a substantial impact on the dependent variable, according to the one-way ANOVA findings (F (3, 196) = 38.573, p < 0.001). At least one gender group appears to differ considerably from the others, as evidenced by the variation between the groups (MS = 5.860)

being significantly greater than the variation within the groups (MS = 0.152). This indicates that gender has a statistically significant effect on the result; nevertheless, more post-hoc tests would be required to determine whether particular groups differ.

Figure:01
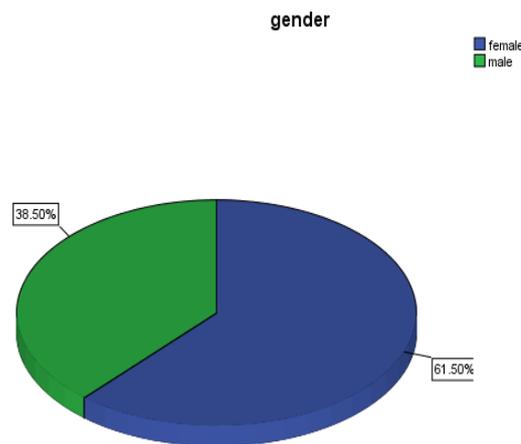
The respondents' gender breakdown is displayed in the pie chart. It shows that 38.5% of people are men, as shown by the green part, while 61.5% of people are women, represented by the bigger blue section. With women accounting for about two-thirds of all responders, this indicates that the sample is dominated by women. Overall, the graph shows a clear disparity, with more women than men participating in this sample.

Summary:

This study looks at how press freedom, political influence, and digital platform power interact in today's algorithm-driven media landscape. The study examines important elements such media trust, civic engagement, journalistic independence, algorithmic opacity, and the function of platforms as gatekeepers using a poll of 200 participants. The measuring scale's strong consistency was validated by reliability analysis (Cronbach's Alpha = 0.901). While civic engagement and views of algorithmic opacity were somewhat low, descriptive statistics showed that the majority of respondents' opinions were within reasonable ranges. Because more women participated in the survey, the sample was predominately female.

Chi-square analysis produced complex results. There was no statistically significant correlation between algorithmic opacity and journalistic independence, but there was a highly significant correlation between media trust and civic involvement. Low predicted numbers in many cells, however, indicate that these results should be regarded cautiously. Additionally, the findings of a one-way ANOVA showed that gender significantly affects the dependent variable, indicating that various gender groups have distinct experiences or views.

Overall, the findings indicate that in the age of algorithms, both platform power and political control shape perceptions of press freedom, media trust, and civic engagement. The results suggest that while algorithms can influence content visibility and access, trust and participation remain critical factors for evaluating the state of press freedom.

References

Azuan, N. M., & Jalil, M. S. (2024). Understanding Faraid knowledge based on literature. *Jurnal'Ulwan*, *9*(1), 23-29.

Bashir, S., Zakir, M. H., Khan, S. H., & Ibrahim, S. (2025). The Impact of Social Media on Freedom of Speech and Privacy Rights. *Journal of Regional Studies Review*, *4*(1), 304-315.

Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of computer-mediated Communication*, *13*(1), 210-230.

Bonner, K. E., Vashist, K., Abad, N. S., Kriss, J. L., Meng, L., Lee, J. T., & Singleton, J. A. (2023). Behavioral and social drivers of COVID-19 vaccination in the United States, August–November 2021. *American journal of preventive medicine*, *64*(6), 865-876.

Canfield, K. N., Menezes, S., Matsuda, S. B., Moore, A., Mosley Austin, A. N., Dewsbury, B. M., & Taylor, C. (2020). Science communication demands a critical approach that centers inclusion, equity, and intersectionality. *Frontiers in Communication*, *5*, 2.

Cobbe, J. (2021). Algorithmic censorship by social platforms: Power and resistance. *Philosophy & Technology*, *34*(4), 739-766.

De Freitas, L. O. R., Lunardi, F. C., & Correia, P. M. A. R. (2024). Freedom of Expression in the Digital Age: New Intermediates and Censorship by Private Actors. *Revista de Investigacoes Constitucionais*, *11*, 1.

Fu, X., Avenyo, E., & Ghauri, P. (2021). Digital platforms and development: a survey of the literature. *Innovation and Development*, *11*(2-3), 303-321.

Gillespie, T. (2018). *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, content moderation, and the hidden decisions that shape social media.* Yale University Press.

Gorwa, R., & Veale, M. (2024). Moderating model marketplaces: Platform governance puzzles for AI intermediaries. *Law, Innovation and Technology*, *16*(2), 341-391.

John, R. R. (2019). Freedom of expression in the digital age: a historian's perspective. *Church, Communication and Culture*, *4*(1), 25-38.

Jones, L. S., & Samples, T. R. (2023). On the systemic importance of digital platforms. *U. Pa. J. Bus. L.*, *25*, 141.

Kanojia, S. (2023). Creative freedom and censorship: A comparative analysis of regulatory framework for OTT contents in the UK, India, and China. *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, *9*(3), 265-280.

Khan, Y., O'Sullivan, T., Brown, A., Tracey, S., Gibson, J., Généreux, M., & Schwartz, B. (2018). Public health emergency preparedness: a framework to promote resilience. *BMC public health*, *18*(1), 1344.

Leerssen, P. (2023). An end to shadow banning? Transparency rights in the Digital Services Act between content moderation and curation. *Computer Law & Security Review*, *48*, 105790.

Meta Platforms, Inc. (2022). *Meta reports fourth quarter and full-year 2021 results*. Investor Relations.

Poudel, S. (2023). *Digital payment transactions and adoption of digital wallets in Nepal* (Doctoral dissertation, Department of Economic).

Smith, R. K. (2019). *Texts and materials on international human rights*. Routledge.