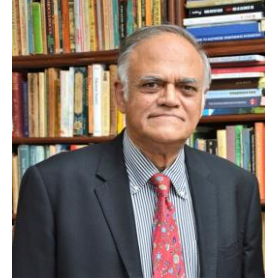


# Instrumentation of Media: New Weapons for Conflicts or Pathway to Peace

*Javed Jabbar* \*



## **Abstract**

*The Indo-Pakistan standoff of May 2025 was as much a war of narratives as it was a war of kinetics. The events highlighted how Indian media, driven by Hindutva narrative and hatred towards Muslims, instantly weaponised public perception against Pakistan. This enabled their state actions that violated international norms. Pakistani media, while comparatively restrained, had to rebut the flow of disinformation through its epistemic vigour. The modern media has structural flaws due to its ownership issues, lack of financial transparency, and the growing dominance of advertising interests that distort editorial independence. The decline of public service journalism in Pakistan calls for alternative ownership models grounded in civic participation. There are shortcomings in state, social, and self-regulation of media today, as well as complex ethical dilemmas emerging from unregulated social media ecosystems and the rise of AI-driven content. For the modern-day media to serve as a constructive social actor, transformation from an instrument of propaganda and conflict into a force for public interest, peacebuilding, and democratic accountability is de rigueur.*

**Keywords:** Ethical Dilemmas, Disinformation, Ownership Issues, Financial Transparency, Advertising Interests, Self-Regulation, Democratic Accountability

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## **Introduction**

**T**he recent conflict between Pakistan and India during April-May 2025, with its undiminished simmering despite a ceasefire, allows a window on the role of media both as the causation and for an emerging form of warfare. This conflagration owed itself to a rather unsubstantiated allegation by Delhi against Islamabad for masterminding the grievous massacre in Pahalgam on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April, 2025.

Within a few hours of the heinous event claiming the lives of twenty-two tourists, though without any tangible evidence of the perpetrators, India's mainstream mass media and social media commenced a visceral, non-stop outpouring of accusations and allegations holding Pakistan as the accused party.<sup>1</sup> Aimed at influencing public opinion within India along with germinating suspicions against Pakistan across the world, the media outpourings became lethal weapons of a diverse nature. Aided by pre-existing populist hatred against Muslims and Pakistan created by the *Hindutva*-driven BJP regime over the past eleven years, news media, visual portrayals, and electronic messages have spewed a limitless barrage of misreporting and disinformation. Initially, a handful of sections manifested exceptional courage to harness truth, even though they subsequently fell victim to this media onslaught sustained by exaggerated falsehoods and poisonous reportage, and a jingoistic form of patriotism. They refused to flag analytical sobriety. Such large-scale falsehoods, amidst an unstinted atmosphere of hatred and dismissal, assumed the role of a mega-narrative refusing to accept counterarguments or even sane opinions. This dramatic transformation took place within the early hours of the conflict and assumed the profile of a discursive triumphalism, which ironically refuses to go away even after the war clouds seem to have somewhat receded from South Asian horizons. This paper explores the causes of this frenzied approach and the likely measures to counter this populist hatred. It attempts to delve into the multiple dimensions of media portrayals so as to assess whether there are

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<sup>1</sup> Zehra Ishaal, "Kashmir: Why Was India so Quick to Blame Pakistan? | Lowy Institute," May 2, 2025, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/kashmir-why-was-india-so-quick-blame-pakistan>.

aspects, regardless of their national affiliation, which may determine media content in a more professional way.

### **Media Hysteria**

Befitting a populist hatred of Narendra Modi's *Hindutva* regime, this panic-driven disinformation strategy has been callously manipulated and used by the Indian government to justify violations of International Law and norms.<sup>2</sup> Followed by the suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960, aimed at threatening the fair and continuous flow of rivers from the Indian-occupied Kashmir, mountainous mainsprings through the Indian Punjab into Pakistan's Punjab, is a radical measure that receives affirmation from a subservient media in the country, both in the public and private echelons. Moreover, expulsion of Pakistani visitors and patients from the country amidst a ban on Pakistani audio and visual channels reverberates on Indian media outlets to justify such excessive measures.

As seen in the short-lived armed exchange, the Indian military's thrust was neutralised by a sagacious and measured counterpoise by the Pakistani side. The downing of six Indian aircraft, including Rafael jets, the pride of the proverbial pack, was seen. Additionally, the brilliant and effective strategy of the Pakistan Air Force, which deployed sophisticated, advanced Chinese technology in multiple areas with exceptional skills, outdid its Indian counterpart. Pakistani soldiers fought heroically at the LoC, as did the country's sailors on the seafront. Collectively, a coordinated campaign successfully neutralised India's multiple assaults, which accompanied an aggressive Indian media onslaught often bordering on fantastic claims.<sup>3</sup>

In Pakistan, notwithstanding the increased coercive pressures on the media in recent years, content and claims have been comparatively far more

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<sup>2</sup> Rana Ayyub, "One Casualty in the Indo-Pakistan Fighting: The Truth," *The Washington Post*, May 13, 2025, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2025/05/13/india-pakistan-truth-censorship/>.

<sup>3</sup> "No Truce in India-Pakistan Disinformation War," May 13, 2025, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250513-no-truce-in-india-pakistan-disinformation-war?>

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restrained and credible. Though following the ceasefire, Pakistani media too have conducted exultation at hurting India at an unduly frantic, feverish pitch. It too often dwelt on exaggerated and unchecked claims, witnessing a patriotic triumphalism. However, it fully highlighted the heart-rending loss of innocent children and unarmed citizens of Pakistan and Azad Jammu & Kashmir (AJK) owing to indiscriminate Indian shelling of civilian homes located near the borders.

As the crisis continues to persist with Indian media unabatedly distorting facts, we in Pakistan must take a step back momentarily to reflect on the prevailing maelstrom. To harness such a thought process, one may formulate certain questions and elements. There is an imperative for a team destined to operate as a professional watchdog -- something with versatile dividends for the region in the larger prism of professional integrity.<sup>4</sup> This writer believes it is a duty to question, but not necessarily to offer the answer as well! Each human being, and each reader of this reflection, also has the opportunity, if not also the responsibility, to search for responses, and for answers to the questions and the elements herein.

### **Conditional Preferences**

Let us begin with asking as to who should own news media like a TV news channel or social media platforms such as YouTube, X, Facebook, et al?<sup>5</sup> The output of such media including news, visuals, comments and news-related opinion unlike any other commodity, are products or services consumed by people. For instance, when a person reads, hears, or sees words and images from a news medium, their perception about Gaza and Srinagar is promptly affected, though conditional upon their preference for any single party involved. Needless to say, consumers' perceptions shape

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\* In a brief essay published in *The Express Tribune* over a decade ago, this writer had first raised this issue.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (NYU Press, 2006). (New York: New York University Press, 2006)

<sup>5</sup> Javed Jabbar, "Who Should Own News Media?," *The Express Tribune*, August 6, 2012, sec. News, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/418266/who-should-own-news-media>.

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attitudes and influence actions, which can have a domino effect on other people.

Therefore, proprietorship of any news medium is unlike the ownership of any other commercial and profit-oriented enterprise. Though formally, owners of news media are required, by law, codes and regulations, to ensure accuracy and balance in content, yet in actual practice, no news medium is free of obvious or subtle biases or slants reflective of the proprietor's prejudice or interests.<sup>6</sup> The latter becomes especially relevant when the owner of a non-media-related enterprise, such as a sugar mill or a cement factory, also happens to own some media organ. The conflict-of-interest aspect inevitably influences the content of the news medium owned by the same person or conglomerate. The state-owned media essentially tends to reflect the views and priorities of those who control the state structure; they may be the ruling political party, the monarchy, or any other such entity with discretionary interests.<sup>7</sup>

The ideal alternative form of ownership of a news medium is widely distributed citizen ownership with transparent and equitable dynamics. One way to obtain is by offering shares through stock and by restricting the volume of shares to only 2 or 3 per cent per individual or holding company. This diffusion of ownership among a multitude of people and units, with a limit of only 2 or 3 per cent, would prevent the concentration of power and control by one or a handful of people or coterie of interests.

To enable civil society to also participate in co-ownership of news outlets, entities such as bar associations, teachers and workers' clusters, and other professional unions could also be eligible to purchase 2 or 3 per cent shares.

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<sup>6</sup> Namonje, L., & Ndhlovu, S. (2025), Examining Media Ownership and its Effects on Journalism Practices: A Study of Electronic Private Media Houses in Lusaka District of Lusaka Province. *Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Science*, 2(2), 31-40. <https://doi.org/10.69739/jahss.v2i2.394>.

<sup>7</sup> Scott Gehlbach and Konstantin Sonin, "Government Control of the Media," *Journal of Public Economics* 118 (October 1, 2014): 163–71, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2014.06.004>.

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To ensure proficient management of such widely-distributed co-ownership, a board of directors elected by shareholders is suggested, whose composition would be reflective of the broad scope of proprietorship, and thus answerable to the public at large. This mechanism may oversee policy and coverage to guarantee impartiality and balance by minimising narrow interests and biases. The purpose is to produce and present news and comments without any particular ideological slant, along with maintaining a higher standard.

The second question, mentioned above, is specific to South Asian media spectrums. The ideal situation will afford reporting and coverage over and above narrow interest and beyond the grasp of ratings and profits; the watchdogs must ensure non-interference from ownership or pressure groups. Looking at the prevailing situation in Pakistan, it only has one media enterprise, i.e., the Hum TV group, which is publicly listed and, therefore, open to scrutiny.

### **Financial Constraints**

Added to biases and narrow interests, one often regretfully learns of painful delays in the staff of many news media receiving their monthly salaries.<sup>8</sup> The situation gets exacerbated by the fact that very little information on earnings is available in the public domain. On the other hand, some, not all, TV news channels reportedly extort money from potential reporters and correspondents, particularly from small towns and rural centers who are keen on becoming TV news reporters. This enables them to gain identification passes as “news correspondents” or “journalists,” ensuring their status as local celebrities.

For their part, proprietors often complain, rightly, of long delays by governments in settling dues owed for publication or broadcast of official advertising. Despite the proliferation of dozens of different news TV

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<sup>8</sup> Ayaz Gul, “Pakistani Journalists Face Security, Unpaid Salary Crisis,” *Voice of America*, April 21, 2020, [https://www.voanews.com/a/press-freedom\\_pakistani-journalists-face-security-unpaid-salary-crisis/6187946.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/press-freedom_pakistani-journalists-face-security-unpaid-salary-crisis/6187946.html).

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channels since 2002, official unilateralism only helps an internecine form of competition. Thus, there remains the need for far greater transparency in the financial aspects of news media, which would also help enhance literacy in the public at large.

When Pervez Musharraf's government introduced privately-owned news channels and general electronic media in Pakistan, a notable similarity in their presentations became obvious to viewers and listeners. As seen regularly, headlines are shouted out at a high pitch, even screamed out along with special news flashes. The focus and pitch are hyper-used on almost every single main shot of each report by zooming in and zooming out in split seconds. Sometimes, snatches of popular songs or music are played on the soundtrack to satirise or humourise the subject being reported. Unacknowledged directives by unnamed sources to omit showing the face or anonymising the name or faces of the opposition leaders are compliantly obeyed.<sup>9</sup> The speed is helter-skelter, as if the newsreader is running hard to catch a speeding bus or train.

Instead of presenting news with calm and sobriety as news coverage is supposed to be, the sanctity of pure news is polluted and degraded by visual and verbal antics not normally seen in other countries, except across the eastern borders. Such a debased presentation of news also devalues the need for consumers to absorb the news with appropriate solemnity and balance.

No wonder then that the average Pakistani viewership of TV news channels is steadily declining in numbers as people turn more and more to social media, with its hazards of fake news.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Hamid Mir, "I Literally Cannot Say Imran Khan's Name on Pakistani TV – This Madness Has to End," *The Guardian*, June 21, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jun/21/imran-khan-pakistan-tv-prime-minister-army>.

<sup>10</sup> "Unveiling the Truth: Why Pakistani TV Channels Are Losing Credibility," *Journalism Pakistan*, June 17, 2024, <https://www.journalismpakistan.com/unveiling-the-truth-why-pakistani-tv-channels-are-losing-credibility>, accessed on June 2, 2025.

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### **Flagrant Advertising**

The next feature of concern in our discussion of the travails of current media is to ask the question whether advertising has, *de facto*, become the actual proprietor and shaper of the content of mainstream media in general and of news media in particular.<sup>11</sup> Just before the news programmes and the headlines, there appear short spots of different brands, like heralds trumpeting the news to come. Then, the inevitable and often abrupt mid-breaks disrupt the continuity of the flow of news and of the narrative during talk shows.

In other parts of the content as well, advertisements are given more space and even deliberate prominence. Commercial messages and brand names appear as backdrops in all kinds of shows, including drama, comedy, music, sports, and the rest. Ratings achieved by programmes determine their continuation, their timed placement for 24 hours, and the days of the week, even their structure and composition, often assuming bizarre proportions. For example, the teleplay, or single-episode drama, has become almost as extinct as the proverbial dinosaurs — because advertisers want drama series, comprising twenty or forty episodes, so that their brands receive frequent, regular, sustained exposure. In sports, televised cricket is the best, or worst example of degradation into total commercialism, as visible in the attire of players, signs on the playing field, names of tournaments, mid-breaks after every over bowled and each dismissal, ad nauseam. A wholesale takeover of media content is all too apparent to the extent that the line separating news — be it sports, or non-sports — from commercials, is extensively blurred.

It is exactly here that one needs to ask whether there are any examples of public service news media in Pakistan today in 2025. Even taking into account the existence of state-owned, government-controlled Pakistan

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<sup>11</sup> “The Politics of Media Economy in Pakistan,” Webinar Proceedings (*Pakistan Institute of Development Economics*, February 24, 2021), <https://gallup.com.pk/wp/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Politics-of-Media-Economy-Webinar-Brief-20-2021.pdf>, accessed on June 29, 2025.



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Broadcasting Corporation (PBC) and Pakistan Television (PTV), which are, in theory, and in principle, meant to serve as non-profit-driven electronic media, are falling into a similar suit. They are owned by the public sector while being subscribed to by viewers through their fee payments.

#### **Ideal Public Service Media**

The definition of ideal public service media, especially news media, is supposed to be neither state nor privately owned, yet the commercial interests often outweigh such prerogatives.<sup>12</sup> Models such as state-owned NHK in Japan, the equivalent channels in Germany, and, among others, NPR in the USA, and BBC in the UK are foremost examples. Operating under long-term charters granted by the legislatures and/or state authority and governed by independent boards of respected individuals of eminence, such public service outlets present content shaped only by the goal of serving the public interest with professional probity.

In the Pakistan of 2025, more than at any other time, there is an urgency for such public service media institutions in their electronic, print, and social incarnations. Only the enlightened legislatures can make this possible, and only the objective citizens and voters can vouchsafe for enlightened legislators!

Given the apparent anarchy of the news media, the challenge remains: whether we have truly developed all three forms of media regulatory regimes in the country featuring self-regulation and transparency. In a way, social regulation obtained through peaceful, non-coercive means and beefed up by monitoring conducted by the civil society forums can help the country towards the attainment of that ideal paradigm. Needless to reiterate, it is through state regulation that is benevolent -- yet firm that may usher freedom of expression without media channels shedding their obligations towards professional acumen.

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<sup>12</sup> "What is PSM?" *Public Media Alliance* (blog), <https://www.publicmediaalliance.org/about-us/what-is-psm/>, accessed June 2, 2025.

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In each of these three forms of media regulation, Pakistan has so far been deficient. In state regulation, commencing with the repressive laws inherited from the British colonial era, followed by the advancement and reforms since the 1980s, one cannot ignore the official unilateralism of varying types that banks on coercion and surrogacy.<sup>13</sup>

In social regulation, the forums of civil society most relevant to the subject are relatively few and under-resourced, compared to the far larger resources of the state and the proprietors of private media. Previously, very dependent on funding support from overseas donors such as German foundations with offices in Pakistan, financial aid for civil society forums active in media policy issues has sharply declined in recent years. The local philanthropy, which is otherwise most generous in supporting charity for health care, education, and food aid, has not yet prioritised the need to support advocacy and media monitoring forums. They are needed for social regulation of the media.

In self-regulation, bodies such as the All Pakistan Newspapers Society, Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors, Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists, Pakistan Broadcasters Association, and other electronic media professional forums hold specific codes for self-enforcement of ethics and norms. They have regularly campaigned for freedom of expression, along with rendering notable sacrifices for those goals. They are, however, more self-protective and self-interested. They need to be more self-critical and open to reappraisals. There is considerable scope to expand this aspect in a positive direction so that all three forms of media regulation can contribute together to reach higher standards.

### **Social Media**

The regulation of social media is an enormous, elusive challenge. Virtually every single country in the world today is attempting to find the right

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<sup>13</sup> “Muzzling Criticism,” *Dawn.Com*, 07:13:56+05:00, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1914865>.

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approach. A sector in which, uniquely, and without any precedence in history, every single user of social media can also be the originator of new content must be aptly accepted. Even multilateral bodies such as the European Union face difficulties in reconciling the demands of freedom of expression with the need to prevent malicious disinformation and hate content, along with the prevention of morphing and memes from misrepresenting reality.<sup>14</sup>

The new icing on the cake is the rapid advent of Artificial Intelligence (AI), Generative AI (GAI), Super AI (SAI), Large Language Models (LLM), and Machine Learning (ML), with the threat of machines developing capacities beyond the control of those who create them.

Even though neither Pakistan nor India is at the cutting edge of the most recent advances in these new communication technologies, despite possessing thousands of individuals with significant capabilities in these fields, both countries face inescapable responsibilities in this context. Never more so than at this time in 2025 when, with the April-May crisis still on the boil, and basic issues like Kashmir and India's hegemonistic tendencies poisoned by *Hindutva* are unresolved, the leadership of governments as well as those political and public elite, and those in media, are obliged to address the new — and the abiding — challenges with utmost sobriety and sustained focus. By tackling internal issues of the kind cited herein, news media can become more empowered to function as balanced, non-aggressive forces in the larger interests of society and international relations.

### **Conclusion**

The pedagogical effect of media as a collective communication outlet has largely succumbed to disinformation, subtle biases, and despoiled

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<sup>14</sup> Bayer Judit et al., "The Fight against Disinformation and the Right to Freedom of Expression," (*Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs Directorate-General for Internal Policies*, July 2021), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/695445/IPOL\\_STU\(2021\)695445\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2021/695445/IPOL_STU(2021)695445_EN.pdf).

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presentation. The news media, whether owned by individuals or state-owned, tend to serve their interests. It damages the appropriate solemnity and balance for ideal public service. Meanwhile, advertising has also, *de facto*, become the actual proprietor and shaper of the content of mainstream media.

The diffusion of transparent and equitable ownership among a multitude of people and units, without any particular ideological slant or narrow interest, will have a harmonious impact. An ideal paradigm with the watchdogs ensuring non-interference from ownership or pressure groups must operate under long-term charters granted by the legislatures and/or state authority. They are suggested to be governed by independent boards of respected individuals of eminence, with professional probity, benevolence, and freedom. Professional resolve and acumen will offer a practical cure. Currently, self-enforcement of ethics and norms, campaigning for freedom of expression, is more self-protective and self-interest-oriented. They need to be more self-critical and open to reappraisals.

Similarly, the regulation of social media is an enormous and elusive challenge. The long-drawn-out acrimony between India and Pakistan over the May 2025 standoff experienced an extreme xenophobic flare-up due to unbridled social media. The chances of peace between the two nuclear neighbours are narrowed down even further. An efficient consensus amongst all the stakeholders is required to reconcile with the demands of freedom of expression. Malicious disinformation, hate content, morphing, and memes from misrepresented reality must be prevented. Rapid advancements in AI and technology has added to the complexities.■

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