



Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF)
Report on
Online harassment of the media in Pakistan
2021

Introduction

The media in Pakistan works within an increasingly repressive environment with the attacks on press freedom coming from all fronts. While physical attacks including abductions, manhandling, arrests and in some instances killings of journalists for their work continue, as online spheres such as social media platforms are of growing importance to the work of media professionals, journalists become the subject of attacks online.

In the online sphere, journalists are often on the receiving end of hate, threats and abuse from a range of individuals — which in Pakistan can include members of the sitting government.

During 2021, Pakistan Press Foundation (PPF) documented the continuation of these attacks against the media with women journalists in particular being subjected to online campaigns for their work.

PPF has observed a trend in the current year to attack journalists online as a way of intimidating and silencing them. Certain journalists have suffered the repercussions of their active presence online with abductions and registration of cases.

The ruling Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI) party has also participated and in some instances initiated Twitter hashtags that resulted in a slew of hate against media professionals.

While online harassment continues, the push for legislation to control social media and the criminalization of content online, has also become a tool to harass the media by creating red lines of content that is acceptable to share online.

Online harassment

According to the Dart Center for Journalists and Trauma, online harassment can be [defined](#) as “any unwanted verbal or non-verbal behavior that occurs online” which “violates the dignity of a

person” and “creates a hostile, degrading or offensive environment”. Online harassment can take the form of impersonation, doxing, exclusion, threat, technical attack or trolling.

Women journalists

In August 2020, women journalists issued a [joint statement](#) on the “vicious attacks through social media” that they were receiving. They said that they were being targeted for their viewpoints particularly regarding the government’s handling of COVID-19.

During the past year, in 2021, women journalists in particular have continued to experience online harassment as a result of their work or opinions shared on social media platforms. They have been subjected to sexist attacks that target the character and credibility of these journalists via the use of hashtags on Twitter and sharing of images.

In addition to the slew of online attacks, the resharing of content against these journalists by official accounts of the ruling party, have opened the doors to their harassment and enabled both the government and trolls to harass them while claiming to be using their right to free expression.

In September, senior journalist and *NewsOne* anchorperson Gharidah Farooqi became the [target](#) of an online smear campaign.

According to the Coalition for Women in Journalism (CFWIJ), after a video of opposition party Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N) leader Mohammad Zubair was circulated online, Farooqi had called “for a fair investigation into the matter and she was targeted for her principled stance”.

Tweets against Farooqi were shared with a hashtag of her name [‘#GharidahFarooqi’](#).

Farooqi [responded](#) to the attacks on her by saying: “Make as many dirty trends; Attack as much as you like. Will never deter me from my ideology, what I believe is right & from exposing minions & stooges of you-know-who.”

In another instance, on July 21, Farooqi had posted a tweet regarding animal sacrifice on Eid-ul-Azha in which she [wrote](#): “Spare an animal’s life if you can. Embrace the philosophy behind the incident and the divine message, in your life. This day is not to mark meat eating. Love animals. Let them live. Eid Mubarak.”

Following her tweet, the hashtag [‘#ShameonGharidahFarooqi’](#) started trending on Twitter.

Government led harassment

In September, another woman journalist, Benazir Shah, became the target of an online campaign. However, this campaign was led by a member of the ruling party.

According to the [CFWIJ](#), Shah was “targeted by an organized troll campaign” that had been started by Punjab Chief Minister’s Focal Person for Digital Media Azhar Mashwani. Shah reported on the Single National Curriculum for *BBC Urdu*.

The focal person started the trend ‘[#TweetlikeBenazir](#)’ as a result of which “Shah was inundated with tweets that ranged from ridiculing her to actively threatening her”.

The CFWIJ also shared screenshots of tweets by Mashwani himself tweeting with the hashtag with comments such as “Why Human? Why not HuWoman? [#TweetlikeBenazir](#)”. He has since deleted these tweets.

When a member of the government starts a trend against a journalist, it gives it a wide reach and encourages others to participate in such trends. If a public office holder has reservations about an article they can engage in debate or refute a report but to start a trend against a journalist opens the doors to abuse, threats and trolling.

Trending hashtags

This strategy of members of the government starting trends that target journalists continues to take place in Pakistan.

In October, after journalist Asma Shirazi wrote a column for *BBC Urdu*, PTI supporters and ministers started to criticise her for doing so. This included [tweets](#) being shared by the party’s official Twitter account.

A video of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on the phone with Shirazi was circulated on Twitter with the PTI’s official account [sharing it](#) and asking: “Dear Asma Shirazi, how do you explain this much obedience to a Certified Chor and Absconder?”

In response, *Aaj News* Group Chief Shahab Zuberi [clarified](#) that Shirazi was on official assignment to cover the tour on behalf of *Aaj TV*.

According to [Dawn](#), Special Assistant to the Prime Minister on Political Communication Dr Shahbaz Gill also held a press conference where he criticized the journalist.

The ruling party also took this occasion to initiate an online campaign with the hashtag ‘[#QuestioningIsNotHarassment](#)’.

This is a deflection strategy used by the government that shifts the focus away from the government’s own participation in aggressive feedback that acts as harassment of journalists. By spreading such a hashtag, they downplay the reaction and make it seem like it is just questioning.

From official party accounts, the party shared [tweets](#) such as: “To respect everyone and sharing balanced, accurate and reliable information is right of every journalist, but to defame anyone without any justification can never been(sic) journalism”.

The party also [said](#) that they had received feedback from people who had been blocked “unfairly by journalists for asking questions (no abuse or harsh language at all”. They asked people to share on the Twitter thread if they had been blocked, adding that they would request journalists to unblock them.

Attacking media organisations

The year began with an online campaign against journalists belonging to *BBC Urdu* and *The Independent's* Urdu-language website.

According to [Reporters Without Borders \(RSF\)](#), in January, a video was shared by *Siasat.pk* that accused the *BBC* of “pursuing an editorial policy that is against the army and the government.”

As per the report, the personal information including surnames, first names, jobs and Twitter details of 10 *BBC Urdu* journalists were also circulated online.

A trend '[#BoycottIndyUrdu](#)' was also shared on Twitter.

Policing of online content

A trend that has been observed in Pakistan in recent years is the registration of cases against journalists for content they shared on their social media platforms.

While this isn't directly an act of harassment online, it emerges from the online sphere. Such policing of content online presents repercussions — social and legal — for media professionals sharing their opinions or reporting online. It creates an environment of red lines of content that is acceptable to be shared via social media and develops an environment of fear and censorship.

In 2020, cases were registered against at least three media professionals — [Asad Ali Toor](#), Absar Alam and [Bilal Farooqi](#) — for content they shared on social media.

In June 2021, in one instance journalists were [arrested](#) by the Federal Investigative Agency (FIA) for content they shared online on their YouTube channels.

On August 7, Ali Mir and Imran Shafqat were arrested by the FIA in Lahore. According to reports, Mir was picked up by the FIA cyber crime cell when he left for office. Mir runs a web channel called *Googly News TV*, a YouTube channel for which has 389,000 subscribers. Shafqat is associated with *Tellings with Imran Shafqat*, which has a following of 134,000 YouTube subscribers.

According to a press release issued by the FIA, the two were arrested on the basis of a First Information Report (FIR), registered against them for ridiculing judiciary judges, Pakistan Army and women. The press release stated that their programs and messages on YouTube channels Googly and Tellings were weakening the basis of national security institutions and the judiciary and by doing so were attempting to weaken people's trust in these institutions. The FIA added that they had also ridiculed women.

The press release concluded that the two had been released on bail; however, investigations were ongoing. They added that further evidence would be collected against the two and a case would be submitted in the court.

In another instance, senior journalist and columnist for daily *Express* Waris Raza was [detained](#) for hours by "law enforcement agencies" on September 22.

Raza said that during the time that he was detained, he was asked about his Facebook posts and columns for *Express*.

Conclusion

The past year has seen the continuation of trends to threaten and intimidate journalists online.

While both private individuals online and members of the government continue to participate and initiate trends against certain media professionals and organisations, there is also an increased focus on setting up rules for social media platforms.

These rules and attempts to increase government control of the media such as the proposed Pakistan Media Development Authority (PMDA) increase censorship and restrictions on the media both in person and online.

PPF has observed an active effort by the sitting government to try and control content online by encouraging and initiating trolling of journalists while they continue to work towards adding more legal restrictions to free speech online. This makes the already dangerous media landscape even more challenging for journalists, as the online sphere, considered to be a relatively free space, becomes even more controlled.