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## SELF-RESTRICTIONS AMONG MEDIA RESEARCHERS IN GLOBAL SOUTH AND REGIONAL PRIORITIES: CHALLENGES FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ETHICAL RESEARCH

### *Abstract*

Freedom of speech is considered as one of the basic human rights. But it can't be practiced in different regions of the globe. There are cultural, religious, political and traditional barriers and sometimes violent factors too. When it comes to the Global South, many of the regions are considered unsafe for journalists and media professionals. In such regions, most of the media platforms, journalists and other media professionals opt for self-censorship on sensitive issues. Some dare to discuss, question, report, follow fearlessly and also face consequences. That gives rise to self restrictions among media researchers to refrain from investigating sensitive issues, events and subjects. This study aims to explore what makes media researchers avoid a particular topic despite having an interest in it and a need to enquire because of internet policies by the government. What kind of risk factors are generally expected in the Global South for media research? How do self restrictions among media researchers affect research ethics? If there are any alternative ways to overcome the risk factors for digital media enquiries? This research is focused on the Global South and specifically Pakistan as it's considered one of the unsafe countries for journalists and media people. For that, existing practices and literature is reviewed. The paper presents a qualitative study. For data collection, 25 media researchers were interviewed as per their availability and willingness. They were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings help to not only identify the nature of self-restrictions because of regional legal policies but background reasons, effect and possible solutions too. It fills the pertinent gap in research related to self-restriction in the Global South. Unless self restrictions among media researchers are addressed, research ethics are arguable in the Global South. As in such circumstances, the basic right to "freedom of expression" of media practitioners as well as media researchers and their safety is under threat.

### *Keywords*

Self-restrictions; safety; freedom of expression; media practitioners; self-censorship; research ethics; Global South; media research.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Global South refers to a group of countries that are considered to be less economically and technologically developed than those in the rest of the globe<sup>1</sup>. This particular group of countries is located in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, which includes 78 countries. It's considered a meta category to explore and study international politics and world affairs that's not just restricted to a particular geography, rather 'socio-economically marginalized' nations, though that also varies from country to country<sup>2</sup>. The term itself is used to refer to the socioeconomic and political disparities between these countries and those in the Global North<sup>3</sup>. Other than that, contemporary activism highlights the social issues related to race, radicalism and transnational solidarity in the Global South<sup>4</sup>.

Being in the mediated age, the Global South also has a powerful but complex media structure that faces a continuous struggle to define, practice and promote freedom of expression. It is often characterized by a lack of diversity and more governmental control, as well as other factors too. Many countries in the Global South have state-controlled media that are used to promote the state's agenda and restrict critical reporting<sup>5</sup>. Additionally, there is often a lack of independent media outlets, which can make it difficult for citizens to access diverse perspectives and hold the government accountable. Still, there is rapid digital growth<sup>6</sup>. Many choose self-censorship, which affects the free flow of information and critical reporting. Other than state influence, limited resources and the digital divide limits media in the Global South to maintain high quality journalism. So, to bridge that gap, sensationalism is used. In short, the media landscape in the Global South often makes it difficult for journalists to be neutral and citizens to access accurate and diverse information<sup>7</sup>.

Regional media laws in the Global South are different from country to country, but many countries have laws and policies that restrict or limit freedom of the press and the ability of journalists to report critically on the government and other powerful actors<sup>8</sup>. For instance, libel and defamation laws, censorship, licensing and accreditation, harassment and intimidation when they report on sensitive issues or criticize the government or related institutions. This can include physical violence, arrest, and imprisonment. In general, media laws in the Global South often reflect the broader political and

<sup>1</sup> I. Kaul, "The Rise of the Global South", *Human Development Report, United Nations Development Programme*, 2013. Accessed December 19, 2022. <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/hdro-1308kaulpdf.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> S. Haug, "What or Where Is the 'Global South'? A Social Science Perspective", *Impact of Social Sciences*, 2021. Accessed December 20, 2022. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2021/09/28/what-or-where-is-the-global-south-a-social-science-perspective/>.

<sup>3</sup> R. Dainotto, "South by Chance: Southern Questions on the Global South", *The Global South*, 11, 2 (2017): 39. <https://doi.org/10.2979/globalsouth.11.2.03>.

<sup>4</sup> A.G. Mahler, *From the Tricontinental to the Global South: Race, Radicalism, and Transnational Solidarity*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> J. Nimis, "Introduction: New Media Methodologies in the Global South", *The Global South*, 8, 1 (2014): 1. <https://doi.org/10.2979/globalsouth.8.1.1>.

<sup>6</sup> B. Beaumont, "Digital Inclusion in the Global South", *Accessible Technology and the Developing World*, 2021: 152-173. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198846413.003.0008>.

<sup>7</sup> M. Iqani, F. Resende, "Theorizing Media in and across the Global South", *Media and the Global South*, 2019: 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429030109-1>.

<sup>8</sup> H. Wasserman, "Global Media Ethics: Perspectives from the Global South" *Handbook of Global Media Ethics*, Cham Switzerland: Springer, 2021, 619-633. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32103-5\\_31](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32103-5_31).

social context of the country and can be used to restrict freedom of the press and silence critical reporting.

Many countries in the Global South, which include China, Bangladesh, Pakistan and others, censor both mainstream media and online media, including websites and online content, news sites, satire, political blogs<sup>9</sup>, and social media platforms<sup>10</sup>. They apply a variety of methods to do so, such as blocking websites, throttling internet speeds, and requiring internet service providers to monitor and filter content. Surveillance is also common practice in the Global South through laws and policies that allow the government to monitor citizens' online activities. So, internet laws in the Global South can be used to restrict freedom of expression and silence political dissent<sup>11</sup>. Additionally, there may be social and cultural pressures that discourage people from speaking out against the government, or powerful groups<sup>12</sup>. However, it's important to note that the situation is not the same for different regions, and there are some countries in the Global South that have comparatively more freedom of speech, which refers to Costa Rica, Uruguay, and South Africa.

A fair number of countries in the Global South have a history of authoritarianism, political repression, and limited civil liberties, which can make it difficult for citizens to freely express themselves. Other than that, several countries in this region lack strong democratic institutions and independent judiciaries, which make it hard for citizens to hold their government accountable for violating their rights<sup>13</sup>. In some of the Global South's countries, academicians and researchers have a relatively high level of freedom to conduct research, explore and publish their findings<sup>14</sup>. Lack of freedom of speech affects basic research ethics as that refers to the principles and guidelines that govern the conduct of research in order to ensure that it is conducted in a fair, responsible, and humane manner. These principles are designed to ensure rights and welfare of research participants as well as integrity and responsibility in the whole process<sup>15,16</sup>. In some countries, researchers face challenges like limited funding, improper infrastructure, and lack of access to technology that can make it hard to conduct research. Apart from that, researchers may also face social and cultural pressures that discourage them from pursuing certain lines of research or publishing findings.

When it comes to Pakistan, it is generally considered to be a part of the Global South. It is located in South Asia and has a developing economy with a *per capita* GDP that is lower than many countries in the Global North. Pakistan also has a relatively low Human

<sup>9</sup> M. Zafar, "Policing Literature, Disciplining Taslima: State Censorship in Postcolonial Bangladesh", *Southern Postcolonialisms*, 2020: 155-183. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367817749-14>.

<sup>10</sup> L.R. Luqiu, "The Cost of Humour: Political Satire on Social Media and Censorship in China", *Global Media and Communication*, 13, 2 (2017): 123-138. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766517704471>.

<sup>11</sup> D. Slater, "New Media, Development and Globalization: Making Connections in the Global South", *Choice Reviews Online*, 52, 01 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.52-0337>.

<sup>12</sup> A. Bhuiyan, "Global South and Supranational Internet Policymaking", *Internet Governance and the Global South*, 2014: 1-19. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137344342\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137344342_1).

<sup>13</sup> M. Schwartz, H. Harris, "Ethics in the Global South", *Research in Ethical Issues in Organizations*, 2017: 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.1108/s1529-209620170000018011>.

<sup>14</sup> P. Essah, B. Nyagah, T. Blowers, J. Owango, "Scholarships: Challenges and Opportunities for Researchers in the Global South", webinar, *AfricArXiv*, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.21428/3b2160cd.d93b2345>.

<sup>15</sup> D. Grimm, "Freedom of Media", in *The Oxford Handbook of Freedom of Speech*, edited by A. Stone and F.F. Schauer, Oxford United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2021, 541-555. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198827580.013.30>.

<sup>16</sup> M. Israel, "Ethical Imperialism? Exporting Research Ethics to the Global South", in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research Ethics* edited by R. Iphofen and M. Tolich, London: Sage 2018, 89-100. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526435446.n6>.

Development Index (HDI) and high poverty rates. Additionally, Pakistan has a history of political instability and struggles with issues such as corruption, terrorism, and poor infrastructure<sup>17</sup>. However, Pakistan is a nuclear-armed country with a rapidly growing population, large reserves of natural resources, and a diverse and resilient society.

While referring to the media in Pakistan, one can see that it's highly vibrant and has grown significantly in recent years, with a wide range of television channels, newspapers, and websites available to the public<sup>18</sup>. However, the media landscape in Pakistan is still characterized by a high degree of government control and pressure on power groups by state and non-state actors too. Freedom of speech is protected by the constitution of Pakistan. Practically, it is limited and restricted by various laws and government policies. The government has been known to use laws such as the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act and the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act- 2016 to silence political dissent and restrict freedom of speech online<sup>19</sup>. Additionally, other laws such as the blasphemy laws and the anti-terrorism laws have been used to restrict freedom of speech and punish dissent. It is also a common practice for media outlets to practice self-censorship to avoid government retaliation. In general, freedom of speech in Pakistan is not fully protected, and there are concerns about the government's use of laws and policies to restrict it.

Academicians and researchers in Pakistan face a mixed level of freedom to conduct research and publish their work. There are laws that protect the rights of academicians and researchers, such as the Higher Education Commission (HEC) Act, which ensures that academic freedom is protected and that universities are autonomous. Nevertheless, there are also significant challenges and restrictions that academicians and researchers face in Pakistan<sup>20</sup>. These include political pressure, harassment and intimidation, self-censorship, limited or no funding, digital divide etc. While there are laws and institutions that protect freedom of expression and support researchers and media practitioners, there are also significant challenges and restrictions that they face, particularly when it comes to political pressure and harassment<sup>21</sup>.

When it comes to media academicians and researchers in Pakistan, their contributions and role cannot be overlooked as they provide a basic fabric to identify, understand, analyse, assess existing opportunities and challenges of the media and its scope. That enables the media industry, policy makers and the state to take any steps in favour of the public interest. But, there are several limitations and concerns of media researchers themselves in the overall Global South and specifically in Pakistan. This paper is focused on identifying how much freedom the media researchers of the Global South in general and Pakistan in specific enjoy that too, in the age of a mediated world where networked society has connected the globe, but self-censorship is pretty common. There is not any significant work in this domain, particularly when it comes to Pakistan. This study aims to bridge the research gap and highlight the ethical dilemmas faced by media researchers, its impact, limitations and prospective solution.

<sup>17</sup> T.E. Miller, A. Shahriari, "South Asia: India, Pakistan", *World Music*, 2020: 81-116. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367823498-5>.

<sup>18</sup> A. Rauf, A.W. Khan, "Media Landscape: Public Perspective on Media in the Post-Merger Fata", *Pakistan Journal of Social Research*, 04, 02 (2022): 1239-1254.

<sup>19</sup> S. Khan, P.M. Tehrani, M. Iftikhar, "Impact of Peca-2016 Provisions on Freedom of Speech: A Case of Pakistan", *Journal of Management Info*, 6, 2 (2019): 7-11. <https://doi.org/10.31580/jmi.v6i2.566>.

<sup>20</sup> P. Hinduja, "Thinking Strategically about Educational Reforms in Pakistan", *Academia Letters*, 2021. <https://doi.org/10.20935/al882>.

<sup>21</sup> S. Yasin, S.S. Batool, M.A. Ajmal, "Leadership in Academia of Pakistan: Perception of Crisis Situation and Solutions", *Pakistan Journal of Psychological Research*, 34, 4 (2020): 671-692. <https://doi.org/10.33824/pjpr.2019.34.4.37>.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Media is considered to be the main arena for self-expression in modern societies nowadays. Researchers across various disciplines, including media studies, cultural studies and other branches of sociology are actively using the media, especially internet-based sources, for data collection and dissemination. This indicates that there is a great need for awareness and knowledge regarding legal and ethical implications for researchers that the new media brings. However, conducting research over the internet proves to be more challenging for the researchers because the research subjects could be present in any part of the world and the researcher must consider the research's legal and ethical implications other than his own jurisdiction<sup>22</sup>.

Although there are no universal ways to determine the ethicality of online research, internet researchers have provided us with various guidelines, ways and case studies that help researchers in carrying out their studies in an ethical manner<sup>23</sup>. In the past years, there has been a clear increase in internet-based research (IBR) which has further led to researchers' interest in internet-based research ethics. It has included online surveys, interviews, emails, textual or contextual analysis of blog content and other e-conversations as online-based research methods. Östman and Turtiaine define internet ethics as a balance between risk and opportunities which protects both the researchers and participants. They also emphasized on research participants' anonymity and informed consent while conducting Internet-based research because most of the ethical concerns regarding IBR are related to participants' privacy, safety, and informed consent<sup>24</sup>. Researchers need to stand by the choices they make while conducting research online and should also provide reasons for them. It is further added that every researcher should consider the nature of the disciplinary research that they are going to conduct, the research setting and their use of data while entering this online arena of internet research<sup>25</sup>.

However, it is important to remember that the online research environment is not static, it is constantly changing. So, research ethics should be considered in a particular context depending on the case in hand. Östman and Turtiaine added that it is important to respect the subjects of research and see the content from the subject's perspective<sup>26</sup>.

Media laws in most parts of the world put restrictions on researchers regarding information collection over the internet. This puts researchers in a challenging position, since it is the responsibility of researchers to protect sensitive personal data of subjects even though they put that information voluntarily on the internet public forums<sup>27</sup>. Media scrutiny, bans, pressure, manipulation, restrictions are not a new phenomenon and have been practiced in both democratic and authoritarian states for a long time. Freedom of expression has been more often restricted in the hands of politics and economic power.

<sup>22</sup> R. Eynon, J. Fry, R. Schroeder, "The Ethics of Online Research", in *The Sage Handbook of Online Research Method Second Edition*, edited by N.R. Fielding, M. Lee, G. Blank, Los Angeles: London: Sage, 2017: 19-37.

<sup>23</sup> H. Snee, "Making Ethical Decisions in an Online Context: Reflections on Using Blogs to Explore Narratives of Experience", *Methodological Innovations Online*, 8, 2 (2013): 52-67.

<sup>24</sup> S. Östman, R. Turtiainen, "From Research Ethics to Researching Ethics in an Online Specific Context", *Media and Communication*, 4, 4 (2016): 66-74.

<sup>25</sup> N. Whiteman, *Undoing Ethics*, New York: Springer US, 2012, 135-149.

<sup>26</sup> S. Östman, R. Turtiainen, "From Research Ethics to Researching Ethics in an Online Specific Context", *Media and Communication*, 4, 4 (2016): 66-74.

<sup>27</sup> K.U. Segadal, Possibilities and Limitations of Internet Research: A Legal Framework, *Internet Research Ethics*, Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2015, 35-46.

Considering critical perspective of news presentation, Parenti found that the media systematically distorts news coverage depending on economic and political aspects<sup>28</sup>. Politics and economics are not the only factors that limit freedom of expression, but there are other factors too<sup>29</sup>. Shoemaker and Reese provide a framework for evaluating and reviewing the factors that influence media content, or media sociology. According to them, the audience, media organizations, advertisers and the government influence the media content in their own interests. However, the role of politics in constraining the media remains the predominant among other factors. The United States, for example, heavily relied on propaganda tactics during the Cold War despite being a democratic state<sup>30</sup>. According to Chomsky, propaganda is used by democratic states to manipulate and control the public. He emphasizes that, “propaganda is to democracy as bludgeon is to a totalitarian state”. The media is for sure one of the most reliable sources for controlling public opinion efficiently.

However, on one hand, where the influence of the media has grown and its reach penetrates nearly every corner of the world and every aspect of life, it also confronts a new version of challenges, i.e. class politics and capitalist monopoly. In contemporary times, the media is manipulated to further the interests of the privileged classes<sup>31</sup>. Looking at the current practices of the media today, we see that it defends the economic, social, and political agendas of the privileged groups that dominate domestic society, the state, and the global order<sup>32</sup>. The *New York Times*'s greatest journalists' failures were so devastating that they changed the course of history. Rindberg and Miller examine the role of ideology, ego, power and politics that compete with transparency in the media. This connection is one significant challenge to freedom of expression today<sup>33</sup>.

Restrictions and challenges confronted by the media continue to remain the focus of researchers around the globe and that is why we see a lot of literature in the form of research articles published by renowned academicians<sup>34</sup>. The significance of self-regulation in the media is critically evaluated. The current way of leaving the regulation to the media itself might lead to misuse of regulatory goals for its own business goals<sup>35</sup>. Self-regulation would be workable only if due measures are adopted by media outlets and they remain committed to the processes that are evolved. Though the liberal states also put constraints on freedom of expression, the illiberal regimes and others have actively seized upon the media environment to spread disinformation and fuel polarization. In this context, authoritarian governments have deployed considerable resources to manipulate, censor and shape information space<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> M. Parenti, *Inventing Reality: The Politics of News Media*, Wadsworth Publishing, 1992 (2nd ed.)

<sup>29</sup> P.J. Shoemaker, S.D. Reese, *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influence on Mass Media Content* (subsequent ed.), Longman Trade/Caroline House, 1995.

<sup>30</sup> N. Chomsky, *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*, Seven Stories Press, 1997 (1st ed.).

<sup>31</sup> R.W. McChesney, *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*, Monthly Review Press, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> E.S. Herman, N. Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, Pantheon, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> A. Rindberg, M.C. Miller, *The Gray Lady Winked: How the New York Times's Misreporting Distortions and Fabrications Radically Alter History*, Midnight Oil Publishers, 2021.

<sup>34</sup> E. Siapera, C. Sigheie, Challenges to Media Freedom: A View from Europe, *Infoamérica: Iberoamerican Communication Review*, 11 (2017): 129-146.

<sup>35</sup> M. Mathew, *Media Self-Regulation in India: A Critical Analysis*, 2016.

<sup>36</sup> S. Kalathil, *New Challenges for Media Freedom and Democracy* (n.d.).

A given democratic society is built on the principles of media freedom and independence. Since the media serves as a bridge between political power and popular opinion, democracy cannot survive without such independence.

Among the available studies, a report revealed that the media and politics in Ethiopia are highly intertwined<sup>37</sup>. The political history of the state has overwhelmingly dictated the development of the Ethiopian media, thus serving the wishes and whims of those in power<sup>38</sup>. Digitalization and the overall financial health of local media businesses indicate that journalism is coming under increased pressure. In such a scenario, the ethical standards seem to have slipped and that editorial independence is being undermined consistently by business and political interests among the majority of Namibian media houses<sup>39</sup>. The mega-leak culture has put freedom of expression at stake. Intruding into the private lives of media practitioners and their families is not only a violation of human rights, but it also works as a blackmailing tool for those having stakes in the business. Indonesia has been a victim of such digital attacks too.

Although Indonesia has gone towards a democratic system after the authoritarian fall of 1998, the country still struggles with corrupt governments, discrimination, extremism, and violence against some groups. According to statistics, internet freedom has drastically declined due to a pro-government agenda and unlawful attacks like criminal charges and harassment on activists and journalists due to their online activities and reporting on controversial political issues. However, these risks increase ten folds when talking specifically to researchers in the Global South. These countries are defined as third world countries with higher rates of unemployment, low-income economies, and a lack of valuable resources. As internet usage increases in Southeast Asia, practitioners, media researchers and journalists are under serious digital attack as authoritative governments are putting restrictions on free speech and freedom of expression<sup>40</sup>. The government uses unlawful means to put restrictions on journalists and research practitioners while reporting online when they deem journalists as a threat to national security, religious institutions, government officials and other powerful third parties<sup>41, 42</sup>.

While mass media scholarship continues to grow in the context of freedom of expression, it is evident from the study that the focus has been over the “West” primarily. The issues confronted by the media in the rest of the world, specifically the Global South, have been ignored by academia. Though a few case studies have attempted to address the notion of freedom of expression in relevance to a certain developing country, the findings cannot be generalized to the Global South. Likewise, the existing literature does not consider the growing sense of self-restriction among media researchers for various reasons, as a limiting factor for media freedom. Such culture is increasingly detrimental to ethical research in the media and the Global South has already confronted

<sup>37</sup> D.M. Öztunç, Analysis of the Obstacles to the Freedom and Independence of the Media in the World and Turkey. *The Turkish Online Journal of Educational Technology*, 20, 1 (2021).

<sup>38</sup> A. Alemu, *Media and Politics in Ethiopia*, Retrieved December 24, 2022, from [https://www.academia.edu/26632310/MEDIA\\_AND\\_POLITICS\\_IN\\_ETHIOPIA](https://www.academia.edu/26632310/MEDIA_AND_POLITICS_IN_ETHIOPIA) (n.d.).

<sup>39</sup> Remmert - *Facing the Digital Challenge.pdf* (n.d.). Retrieved November 21, 2022, from [https://ippr.org.na/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Media\\_Report-small.pdf](https://ippr.org.na/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Media_Report-small.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> T. McGonagle, Y. Donders (eds.), *The United Nations and Freedom of Expression and Information: Critical Perspectives*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> G. Venkiteswaran, “Four Ways Southeast Asian Journalists Are under Digital Attack”, *Eco-Business*, May 06, 2022, <https://www.eco-business.com/opinion/four-ways-southeast-asian-journalists-are-under-digital-attack/>.

<sup>42</sup> C.L. Mears, “In-Depth Interviews”, *Research Methods and Methodologies in Education*, 19 (2012): 170-176.

it. In this context, more research is needed since a few media scholars have discussed the freedom of media situation in many countries, such as the ones of Global South.

This study seeks to fill in the gap by addressing the challenges confronted by the media in the developing zone of the world, i.e., Global South, while putting emphasis on Pakistan's case in this regard. For this purpose, the study examines the region-specific internet laws and self-restrictions among media researchers that constrain freedom of expression and ethical research.

### *Research questions*

- What makes media researchers avoid a particular topic despite having an interest in it and the need to enquire because of internet policies by the government?
- What kind of risk factors are generally expected in the Global South for media research?
- How do self-restrictions among media researchers affect research ethics?
- If there are any alternative ways to overcome the risk factors for digital media enquiries?

### 3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed qualitative methodology with primary data collection. Since the scope of this study is focused on understanding and interpreting experiences, behaviours, and perspectives of the media researchers that could add depth and could possibly reveal unexpected insights, the qualitative method of research seemed more appropriate for this particular research.

For data collection, in depth interviews were conducted in November-December 2022. The purpose of the interviews was to get in depth insights from the interviewee's experiences.

In order to collect data, around 40 prospective interviewees were contacted and 25 media researchers from 3-5 universities of Pakistan were interviewed. The participants were of different age groups, with expertise and experience, but mainly academicians of communication and media serving in public sector universities of Pakistan.

Due to sensitivity of the topic and lack of accessibility, the researchers found it hard to approach media researchers in person from all of the universities in Pakistan. Therefore, universities from three of the metropolitan cities of Pakistan are chosen, having media studies department for this purpose based on convenience and non-probability sampling techniques. During the study, respondents' willingness, flexibility and convenience were preferred.

Although this type of sampling is easier and cheap to access, at the same time it is susceptible to sampling bias. However, this type of sampling is preferred in exploratory research where data collection from the entire population is not easily possible due to various factors. This type of sampling method is also justified because the aim was not to test a hypothesis but to explore and build deeper level understanding of an under-researched population, which in this particular case was media researchers' experiences in researching sensitive topics.

An interview protocol was designed and open-ended questions were developed to gather data. Initially, general and then specific questions were asked. The duration and mode of interview was selected on the convenience and preference of the interviewee (some interviews were done in person while others were conducted online



either due to privacy issues of respondents or the inability of researchers to physically interview the respondents. Most of the interviewees preferred to respond bilingually in English and Urdu).

The responses were recorded, translated into English and then transcribed. The transcribed data has been analysed through thematic analysis<sup>43</sup>, so that organic themes emerged. The analysis had gone through six stages, which includes developing familiarity with the data, observing repeated patterns among the responses to develop codes using certain keywords. The developed codes were then collected, arranged and reviewed properly, which helped in identifying major themes among the data and finally, the reports have been done. The findings give deep insights into self-restrictions among media researchers and the factors behind such practices.

The demographic and other relevant details are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 - Demographic and relevant details of respondents

<i>Particulars</i>	<i>Numbers</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
<i>Age</i>		
Millennial (18-34)	10	40
Gen X (35-50)	8	32
Boomers (51-69)	7	28
<i>Gender</i>		
Men	9	36
Women	16	64
<i>Education</i>		
MS	11	44
PhD	14	56
<i>Occupation</i>		
Teaching	3	12
Research	0	0
Both teaching and research	22	88
<i>Field</i>		
Radio and TV	5	20
Digital Media	6	24
Cinema	4	16
Print Media	4	16
Public Relations	6	24
<i>Experience</i>		
0-2	4	16
2-5	7	28
5-10	8	32
10+	6	24
<i>Privacy preferences</i>		
• No issues	5	20
• Minor privacy concerns	9	36
• More privacy concerns	11	44

<sup>43</sup> V. Braun, V. Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology", *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 2 (2006): 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>.

<i>Location</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Mode</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remote/Online</li> <li>• Rawalpindi, Islamabad, Lahore</li> </ul>	50- 140 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-person</li> <li>• Online zoom/Google meet</li> </ul>

*Source:* Author's own creation for a quick demographical overview of the participants.

## 4. FINDINGS

The data collected by interviews show unexpected aspects of research ethics in the Global South, particularly Pakistan.

A summary of the results and its analysis is presented below, giving a detailed overview of the researchers' choices and the dilemmas that affect research ethics while risking media researchers' personal and professional lives too.

### 4.1. *Hindrances due to State Laws*

Almost all the participants showed concern about state laws and the way laws protect positions and institutions that hinder researchers from inquiring about power, positions and institutions themselves. One of the interviewees said, "Laws protect people in power and then, if there is something related to institutions, you cannot question it, else you could be labelled as a rebel and may face trial".

The power structure in Pakistan is quite complex. It has been proved that whenever a journalist or media researcher tries to question the *status quo* in Pakistan, they are made quiet as a recent incident shared by one of the respondents during an interview proves this, "It's complex. Arshad Shareef, a senior and well known Pakistani journalist, had to escape from Pakistan to avoid false cases and to take refuge in Kenya but, even then, was killed in an apparently planned encounter (2022). Both the Kenyan and Pakistani governments failed to take a justified stance". This treatment of journalists is the same in various other countries in the Global South as the well-known case of 'Jamal Khashoggi' who was a Saudi journalist and critic of the Saudi Government, who was assassinated in the Saudi Consulate in Turkey in 2018. There are plenty of cases specifically in the Global South, but not many voices. Academicians and researchers intentionally don't study and investigate such topics which challenge the status quo due to fear of being unsafe. Both the press and media researchers face similar hindrances whenever they report something which challenges the status quo, specially in Pakistan. It's a significant factor where states themselves fail to take a justified stand and leave unsolved cases that inculcate a fear factor to any and every one interested in studying, investigating or inquiring further.

### 4.2. *Restrictions on discourse due to sensitivity of certain topics*

Despite the positive role of social media in accessibility, outreach and audience engagement, even a single post, whether fake or real, can go out of context. There are multiple incidents in Pakistan where people were even killed without verification. Coverage of sensitive issues related to blasphemy, especially in Pakistan, can provoke various reli-

gious and political segments of society, as happened in the case of Mashal Khan' who was a media studies student of the University of Peshawar. He was killed by his university fellow inside the university premises on the accusation of blasphemous posting on Facebook<sup>44</sup>. Media researchers and journalists in Pakistan are very careful while covering or reporting issues related to blasphemy. Blasphemy law is susceptible to misinterpretations and reporting of such matters is highly sensitive to media researchers. The findings prove that media researchers avoid working on sensitive topics, including blasphemy, because such matters can easily be talked out of context. A respondent said, "I prefer not to work on highly sensitive topics despite my interest. It is very difficult to investigate certain areas. People can get offended easily and you have to be super careful, things can go out of context." Respondents said that a few topics cannot be studied thoroughly and so, it could be a challenging choice.

#### 4.3. *Challenges regarding data collection from sources*

The findings suggest that many media researchers in Pakistan avoid certain areas to research if data collection is hard, especially if the topics being researched are controversial. The issues related to religious matters are considered somewhat controversial in Pakistan. Even highly educated people don't agree on sharing their views on sensitive and controversial topics openly and researchers can't proceed further despite having profound interest in the subject. One of the respondents said, "It's hard to reach and get information. Then, if someone misinterprets researchers' work, that can also create a lot of trouble. Pakistan's renowned politician and governor of its biggest province, Punjab, was killed by his own guard who didn't like his opposition to Pakistan's blasphemy law and in favour of an accused non-Muslim woman, Asia Bibi (2011). In such a scenario, people do not prefer to talk and share experiences and views. Moreover, they may find you suspicious if the topic is sensitive or controversial." If main stake holders do not cooperate, a researcher may need to go out of the way to get data that requires energy, time and resources and still no assurance.

The data shows that there are no problems with working on soft topics, but hard, sensitive and controversial issues are difficult to study. That's another reason that there is a huge research gap and these issues can not be resolved yet.

#### 4.4. *Personal experiences and self-censorship*

Some academicians avoid certain domains because of their own previous experiences and advise the same for students working under their supervision. The findings suggest that these academicians tried working on controversial and taboo topics but couldn't get their work approved by higher authorities. For instance, a respondent shared, "Pakistani cinema has faced a huge downfall during the military regime in the 80's and since then it hasn't gotten back to its own. During my doctoral studies, I wanted to explore it further but my research advisor told me not to step anything political or controversial. Later on, I realized the potential consequences and I chose to work on a different idea".

<sup>44</sup> N. Aleem, N. Ansari, F. Habib, "Portrayal of Blasphemy Incidents in Pakistani Print Media: A Comparative Mix Method Analysis of Urdu and English Newspapers", *Ma 'arif Research Journal*, 19 (2020): 14-14.

Another respondent highlighted the career, credits and institutional interests also matter and said, “Sometimes your institutions do not support you, even if you do not use institutional affiliation. No matter how much interest you have, you would not prefer to work on something that would not be counted as your credit. Rather, you could be judged on the same work”.

#### *4.5. Avoiding certain topics on account of security issues*

Most of the interviewees responded that they prefer working on soft and non-controversial topics because, unlike people in power or popularity, academicians in Pakistan don't have any backup support regarding their job security or even life security. So they prefer not to take any risks and avoid discussing such controversial topics. A respondent said, “It happens to politicians and media people all the time when their statements are misquoted or taken out of context but people know them, they have critics and then die-heart fans to defend them. Both politicians and the media are known and can raise their voices and use their influence too. Many of the academicians were under fire in Turkey after a failed coup attempt (2015). The media, academicians and researchers do not have much visibility”.

According to another respondent, “In a networked society, it's very difficult to completely blackout some news but there is a difference, which is if it is shared by known sources or some unknown sources. As known sources may have to face consequences”. Unknown or less known sources may be ignored, but known media practitioners and academicians are easy to access because of their online presence and networked society, so they could be easily reached out and more vulnerable to face after effects if anything goes wrong or offend people.

#### *4.6. Digital divide*

Some participants shared concerns about the digital divide too, as that restricts researchers to working on feasible dimensions only. A participant said, “Lack of funding opportunities does not allow us to do anything and everything. If we choose a dissent topic to study, it gets harder to get funding, support and facilitation”.

Another interviewee said, “There are off and on bans on certain sites. As YouTube had been banned for three years because of blasphemous content by the Government of Pakistan. It's still banned in Mainland, China, North Korea, Eritrea, South Sudan. Recently, Pakistan has banned Wikipedia. Sometimes, VPNs work, sometimes not. That also restricts us. There must be alternative ways to handle conflict of interests”. So, both the governments and big tech companies need to justify their stance on freedom of expression. The blasphemous content surely hurts the sentiments of the masses, but banning the overall platforms affects the free flow of information.

#### *4.7. Avoiding certain topics due to conflict of interest*

Some researchers agree not to step into controversies, but if not the social scientists, who would do that? An academician said, “Being neutral and researching some sensitive issues since your neutrality may offend one party and you could be in trouble.

I think not working on sensitive issues could be a better option than being biased in your work for safety”.

Some other academicians believe that self restrictions violate research ethics where one intentionally avoids a particular topic because of external pressure, insecurities and threats.

#### 4.8. *Potential consequences of self restrictions and quality of media research*

The data shows that self restrictions among media researchers affect the quality of research in Pakistan. Since the research reflects society and discovers problems, it explains the issues and their complexities, suggests potential solutions and is used for planning, policies and initiatives. But, when a few areas and issues are deliberately ignored because of external pressure or insecurities, it can only escalate the issues and will make them more complex. Many of the respondents refer to the viral cases where basic rights have been violated by both governments, non-state actors, religious and cultural groups. But no one is out. That also adds more pressure on media researchers to play safe, since there are plenty of examples where people faced intense consequences and no justice at all. Such a situation restricts researchers, supervisors and research bodies to being more careful, but to completely restrict themselves would leave a huge gap in nothing else.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study finds out that researchers are pressurized not just because of internet laws in the region, rather by the overall legal system where someone's faith, loyalty, and nationalism are questioned if they choose to work on some sensitive issues, especially religious matters related to blasphemy. It's not appreciated to research on dissenting topics that includes questioning state and institutions as protected by law. But even religion and culture play an important role. Some regional laws vary from country to country but force and suppress independent choices of researchers in a similar way. The media, especially the internet, has revolutionized the accessibility, participation, creation, and recreation of a variety of content including research data. So, any and everything could go out of context and affect researchers' personal and professional lives. It sounds ethically wrong to impose self-need, to ignore current concerns and the problems that really need to be studied and solved, but researchers aren't to be blamed. Rather, the laws and regulations that fail to protect freedom of expression but become a risk to critical thinking.

Since the beginning, media laws have been used to restrict freedom of expression, media trials and to suppress critics and now, regional internet laws adopt the same path in the Global South, specifically Pakistan, despite all the debates about fair and free media around the world. Self-censorship is also preferred both by the media and media researchers because of the fact that it does not trigger cultural and religious sensitivities as well as to avoid political pressure. It has been seen that even non-state actors' affect the researchers' choice. The participants shared multiple cases where media professionals and even students faced ironic consequences due to their focus on dissenting content, whether through news reports, talk shows or just a social media post. In such a scenario, not just journalists themselves but media academicians and students are also sceptical about making choices.

Overall, data reveals more than initial objectives as research ethics are compromised to some extent because of self-censorship among media researchers, but the factors behind self-censorship are also revealed and the actual dilemma is to handle, to find solutions, to work on the root cause that's not in the researchers' control. This study suggests a pertinent research gap related to self restrictions in Global South and identifies the risk factors that go beyond the internet laws in Global South. These risk factors do not let researchers work freely, without stress and any pressure, and assure safety and security. Unless the factors behind self restrictions among media researchers are addressed, the research ethics are arguable and freedom of expression cannot be practiced.