Review Journal of Social Psychology & Social Works

http://socialworksreview.com

ISSN-E: 3006-4724 Volume: 3
ISSN-P: 3006-4716 Issue: 4 (October - December, 2025)

Disinformation on Social Media and The Role of Cybersecurity Laws in Pakistan: Challenges and Policy Responses

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DOI: **https://doi.org/10.71145/rjsp.v3i4.450**

Abstract

This paper examines the regulation of disinformation in Pakistan, focusing on the legal frameworks, challenges, and ethical considerations involved in countering the spread of false and misleading information. The central issue addressed is the conflict between safeguarding freedom of speech and protecting society from the harmful effects of disinformation, especially in the digital age. The key objectives of this paper are to analyze the effectiveness of existing laws such as the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016, the Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996, and the Electronic Transactions Ordinance (ETO), 2002, in combating disinformation, and to examine the role of technology and social media platforms in managing online content. The paper finds that while these laws provide a foundation for tackling disinformation, they often face challenges due to vague definitions, inadequate enforcement, and a lack of sufficient resources for law enforcement agencies. Additionally, the digital landscape in Pakistan poses unique challenges, such as the rapid spread of disinformation through social media, limited public awareness of digital literacy, and the difficulty in monitoring online content at scale. The paper also highlights the tension between the need for regulation and concerns over freedom of expression. In conclusion, this paper suggests that a more effective approach to combating disinformation in Pakistan requires clearer legal definitions, improved collaboration between government and tech companies, and public education on the importance of responsible online behavior.

Keywords: Challenges, Disinformation, Frameworks, Regulation, Pakistan

Introduction

In the age of digital communication, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for information dissemination, influencing public opinion and shaping societal trends. While these platforms have democratized information access and empowered marginalized voices, they have also given rise to significant challenges, chief among them the proliferation of disinformation. Disinformation, defined as deliberately misleading or false information spread with the intent to deceive, poses threats not only to individual users but to the stability of societies as a whole. The global reach and speed of social media amplify these threats, creating fertile ground for widespread misinformation campaigns that can have political, economic, and social repercussions (Friggeri, Adamic, & Eckles, 2014). In Pakistan, the impact of disinformation on social media is particularly pronounced. The country's diverse socio-political landscape, coupled with an increasing reliance on digital communication, has made it a breeding ground for the spread of misleading narratives. Disinformation in Pakistan often fuels religious tensions, incites violence, and undermines trust in democratic institutions (Jamil & Pasha, 2020). For instance, false reports and fabricated stories circulating on social media have, at times, led to public unrest and escalated conflicts (Zia, 2021). This underscores the need for effective regulatory measures to curb the spread of disinformation while safeguarding the principles of freedom of speech. To address these concerns, Pakistan has implemented several cybersecurity and digital regulation laws. The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016 is a significant legislative step aimed at combating cybercrimes, including disinformation. Enacted on August 18, 2016, PECA provides a legal framework for addressing various online offenses, including cyberstalking, harassment, and hate speech, as outlined in its Sections 20 and 24 (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority [PTA], 2016). However, despite the intentions behind PECA and other regulatory measures, enforcement challenges persist. Issues such as inconsistent application of laws, technological barriers, and the tension between regulation and individual freedoms complicate the effectiveness of these frameworks (Shah & Qureshi, 2019). Additionally, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) plays a pivotal role in monitoring and regulating online content, but has faced criticism for perceived overreach and infringing on free expression under the guise of national security (Ali & Khan, 2021). The importance of cybersecurity laws in mitigating the harm caused by disinformation cannot be overstated. Robust legal frameworks are essential for holding perpetrators accountable, deterring potential offenders, and fostering a digital space that supports informed public discourse (Tufail, 2022). However, regulation must strike a balance to avoid undue restrictions on freedom of speech, a fundamental right protected under Article 19 of the Constitution of Pakistan (1973). This article allows for freedom of expression but permits reasonable restrictions in the interests of national security, public order, and decency (Shah & Qureshi, 2019). This paper aims to explore the dual challenge of curbing disinformation and upholding free speech in Pakistan. The primary research questions include: How effective are Pakistan's current cybersecurity laws in addressing disinformation? What are the main challenges to enforcing these laws? And what measures can be taken to improve their impact without compromising fundamental freedoms? Through an analysis of existing legislation, enforcement practices, and case studies, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of Pakistan's approach to regulating disinformation and the implications for policy and society.

The Nature and Impact of Disinformation in Pakistan

Disinformation in Pakistan manifests in various forms, targeting different aspects of the socio-political landscape. This section delves into the primary types of disinformation, examines case studies that illustrate its prevalence, and explores its broader impact on public trust and social cohesion. The discussion will reference relevant laws to demonstrate the legislative response to disinformation.

Types of Disinformation Prevalent in Pakistan

Disinformation in Pakistan can be categorized into three main types: political, religious, and social. Each type plays a significant role in shaping public perception and can have serious implications for societal stability and governance.

Political Disinformation

Political disinformation is widespread in Pakistan, often employed to manipulate public perception during elections, discredit political opponents, or influence governmental policies. These campaigns can involve doctored videos, false statements attributed to public figures, and fabricated news articles. The dissemination of political disinformation is facilitated by social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, which provide fertile ground for the rapid spread of misleading content. A notable example includes the use of social media during the 2018 general elections. Misinformation campaigns were deployed to sway voters by propagating false claims regarding the legitimacy of certain political parties and their leaders. These strategies can erode trust in the democratic process and fuel partisan divisions, thereby weakening national cohesion (Ahmed & Sadiq, 2020).

Religious Disinformation

Religious disinformation holds significant influence in Pakistan, where religion is deeply woven into the fabric of society. This type of disinformation is particularly dangerous as it often incites violence and stirs communal tensions. False accusations of blasphemy, a criminal offense punishable under Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), 1860, have led to mob violence and extrajudicial killings. For instance, in 2020, false blasphemy allegations spread via social media led to protests and violence in several regions. The misuse of Section 153-A of the PPC, which addresses the promotion of enmity between groups, highlights the severe consequences of religious disinformation. To combat this, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016, includes provisions against hate speech and the dissemination of false information. Section 20 of PECA criminalizes the transmission of false information that can harm the reputation of an individual, while Section 11 penalizes cyber-terrorism, which can include the use of online platforms to incite violence (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2019; Jamil & Qureshi, 2021).

Social and Cultural Disinformation

Social disinformation often revolves around spreading false narratives to create fear or promote particular agendas. For instance, misinformation related to health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, led to widespread confusion and fear among the public. False reports regarding vaccine safety, circulated via messaging apps and social media, fueled vaccine hesitancy and complicated the government's efforts to implement public health measures (Yusuf, 2021). Social disinformation can also involve fabricated stories that affect cultural attitudes, such as gender stereotypes or discrimination against minority groups. These narratives can exacerbate existing societal biases and hinder social progress (Rizvi & Shah, 2020).

Case Studies of Notable Disinformation Campaigns

Disinformation campaigns have become a growing threat to societies globally, manipulating public opinion and disrupting democratic processes. Notable examples of these campaigns highlight how misinformation can spread rapidly across social media platforms, often with severe consequences. Following cases provide important lessons on the scale of disinformation and the challenges of combating it in the digital age.

The COVID-19 Infodemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a significant amount of disinformation circulated regarding the virus's origin, prevention methods, and vaccine safety. False information spread through platforms like WhatsApp included claims that vaccines contained harmful ingredients or that COVID-19 could be cured with unproven treatments. These rumors often originated from sources claiming legitimacy and were widely shared without verification. One of the most pervasive rumors was that the vaccine contained microchips that could track individuals, or that it was part of a larger international conspiracy to control populations. Such misinformation caused public hesitation, particularly regarding vaccine uptake, which contributed to lower vaccination rates and delayed herd immunity. The government, in response, invoked provisions of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016, to monitor and regulate online content. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA),1996, blocked numerous websites and social media accounts propagating false health information. However, enforcement challenges persisted, particularly regarding private group chats and encrypted communications, which made it difficult to curb the spread of disinformation effectively (Yusuf, 2021; Ahmad & Shah, 2020).

Religious Disinformation Leading to Mob Violence

An incident that underscores the danger of religious disinformation is the 2020 case involving a university lecturer in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The lecturer was falsely accused of blasphemy in a viral social media post, leading to violent protests that resulted in loss of life and property damage. This particular case highlights how quickly disinformation can escalate into widespread unrest, especially when it plays into sensitive religious narratives. Misinformation surrounding religious issues can stir up deep-seated tensions, further exacerbating the fragility of peace and security in communities. Legislative responses to such incidents have involved the application of Section 295-C of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC), 1860, which criminalizes blasphemy, and the provisions of PECA (2016), which criminalize online hate speech and the incitement to violence. However, critics argue that existing laws are sometimes misused or unevenly enforced. In certain cases, accusations of blasphemy can be used as a pretext to target minorities or settle personal vendettas, contributing to a climate of fear and reinforcing societal divisions, rather than addressing the root causes of disinformation (Jamil & Qureshi, 2021; Zafar, 2020).

The Socio-Political Impact of Disinformation

One of the most significant impacts of disinformation is its ability to erode trust in institutions and the media. Political disinformation, for example, can make citizens skeptical of official narratives and lead to disengagement from civic processes. The spread of conspiracy theories, such as those questioning the legitimacy of election results, undermines confidence in the electoral system and democratic governance (Ahmad, 2020). In Pakistan, trust in state institutions can be fragile, making the country particularly vulnerable to disinformation's destabilizing effects. When false narratives proliferate unchecked, they can deepen existing political divisions and lead to societal fragmentation. This lack of trust can create an environment where misinformation thrives, as citizens become more likely to believe alternative, often misleading, sources of information (Khan, 2022). Religious and social disinformation can exacerbate societal tensions, sometimes leading to violence. The viral spread of false accusations has resulted in vigilante actions and mob violence, impacting the safety of individuals and minority communities. A prominent example includes incidents where false blasphemy accusations have led to extrajudicial killings and destruction of property (Ali, 2021). These instances underscore the need for robust mechanisms to counter disinformation and prevent its harmful effects. The Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA), 1997, includes provisions aimed at preventing activities that can incite terrorism or public disorder. While this act can be applied to combat extremist propaganda, its broad scope has led to debates about balancing security measures with the protection of civil liberties (Saeed, 2019).

Challenges in Law Enforcement

Enforcing cybersecurity laws in Pakistan faces several obstacles, including technological limitations and the balancing act between regulation and freedom of speech. The Constitution of Pakistan (1973), under Article 19, guarantees freedom of speech but allows for reasonable restrictions in the interest of national security, public order, and decency. However, the interpretation of these "reasonable restrictions" can vary, leading to controversies regarding the perceived overreach of regulatory bodies like the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) (Raza, 2020). Disinformation thrives in environments where legal and regulatory frameworks are either insufficient or inconsistently applied. While PECA (2016) provides a legal basis for addressing false information and cyber offenses, its enforcement is often challenged by the rapidly evolving nature of digital platforms and the complexities of monitoring encrypted communications (Haque, 2021). These challenges highlight the need for a more cohesive and technologically adaptive approach to enforcement, as well as collaboration between state institutions, tech companies, and civil society to ensure that measures against disinformation do not infringe on fundamental freedoms.

Pakistan's Major Cybersecurity and Information Regulation Laws

Pakistan has developed a comprehensive legal framework aimed at regulating cyberspace and combating cybercrimes, including the spread of disinformation. The main laws in this area include the Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996, the Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997, the Electronic Transactions Ordinance (ETO), 2002, and the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016. Below is an overview of these laws and their provisions, listed chronologically.

1. Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996

The Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996 laid the foundation for telecommunications regulation in the country and established the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA). The PTA is responsible for overseeing telecommunications services, including internet service providers (ISPs) and social media platforms. (Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996).

- **Section 5: Powers of PTA**

This section empowers the PTA to regulate and supervise telecommunication networks, including controlling the flow of information on the internet. The PTA has the authority to block harmful content, including disinformation, in line with national security policies (Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996).

- **Section 23: License for the Provision of Telecommunication Services**

This provision outlines the requirements for issuing licenses to telecommunication service providers in Pakistan. The PTA can issue directives to ISPs to block or restrict access to sites that propagate false or harmful content, including disinformation (Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996).

The PTA's regulatory powers derived from this law are crucial in enforcing other cybersecurity regulations, particularly in tackling online disinformation.

2. Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997

The ATA, 1997 was primarily introduced to address terrorism and related activities in Pakistan. Although focused on terrorism, the Act also governs online activities that may contribute to terrorism or extremism, such as the use of social media to spread disinformation. (Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997)

- **Section 11-W: Offenses Related to Terrorism on the Internet**

This provision criminalizes the use of information technology to promote terrorism, including the spread of extremist content or recruitment online. Disinformation that promotes hatred, extremism, or violence falls under this section, and offenders can be penalized (Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997).

- **Section 21: Forfeiture of Property**

This section allows the government to seize assets used in committing terrorism-related offenses. In the context of disinformation, it could be invoked to seize the assets of individuals or groups using cyber platforms to incite violence or spread harmful propaganda (Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997). While not specifically aimed at disinformation, the Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997 is applicable when disinformation leads to actions threatening public safety or national security, such as inciting violence or terrorism.

3. Electronic Transactions Ordinance (ETO), 2002

The Electronic Transactions Ordinance (ETO), 2002 was introduced to promote e-commerce and ensure the legality of digital transactions and documents. It grants legal recognition to electronic signatures and records, fostering secure digital transactions. (Electronic Transactions Ordinance, 2002)

- **Section 6: Legal Recognition of Electronic Records**

This provision grants legal recognition to electronic records and communications, ensuring that digital documents and contracts are valid in legal proceedings. It creates a secure environment for online transactions, which is essential for combating cyber fraud—a form of disinformation or manipulation in the digital economy (Electronic Transactions Ordinance, 2002).

- **Section 11: Authentication of Electronic Signatures**

ETO recognizes the validity of electronic signatures and provides guidelines for their use in transactions, securing digital communications and preventing unauthorized data alteration, which could be exploited to spread disinformation (Electronic Transactions Ordinance, 2002).

Although primarily aimed at facilitating e-commerce, the ETO, 2002 contributes to a more secure and trusted digital environment, indirectly supporting efforts to combat disinformation.

4. Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016 is Pakistan’s most significant legislation addressing cybercrimes, including issues related to disinformation, privacy violations, and electronic fraud. The Act provides a comprehensive legal framework for prosecuting cybercrimes and protecting individuals and institutions from online harm. (Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016)

- **Section 20: Offenses Against Dignity of a Natural Person**

This section criminalizes the publication or transmission of false, misleading, or defamatory content that harms the reputation of a person. It specifically targets online disinformation aimed at damaging personal reputations (Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016).

- **Section 24: Cyberstalking**

PECA addresses cyberstalking, including online harassment, threats, and intimidation. This provision can be invoked to penalize perpetrators of disinformation campaigns that harass or intimidate individuals or groups (Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016).

- **Section 31: Power to Remove or Block Information**

This provision grants the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) the power to direct internet service providers and social media platforms to remove or block harmful or offensive content. This is particularly relevant to disinformation and fake news, enabling swift action to prevent the spread of harmful content that could cause social unrest (Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016).

- **Section 33: Unauthorized Access to Information Systems**

This section deals with unauthorized access to digital systems, including hacking and data theft. Disinformation can be spread by hacking social media accounts or websites, and this provision enables the prosecution of those engaged in such activities (Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016).

PECA has become a cornerstone of Pakistan's strategy to tackle online disinformation and cybercrime, offering a robust legal framework to protect citizens from harm in the digital world.

Pakistan has enacted a range of laws to regulate cyberspace, address cybersecurity threats, and control the spread of disinformation. Together, these laws form a comprehensive approach to cybersecurity and information regulation in Pakistan.

Comparative Analysis of Pakistan's Cybersecurity and Information Regulation Laws with The Us

1. PECA, 2016 vs. U.S. Computer Fraud and Abuse Act (CFAA), 1986

The PECA, 2016 addresses a wide range of cybercrimes, including unauthorized access, online harassment, and the spread of disinformation. For instance, Section 33 criminalizes unauthorized access, and Section 20 tackles the publication of defamatory content. On the other hand, the CFAA, 1986 focuses primarily on hacking, fraud, and identity theft but has faced criticism for its vague and broad provisions, which may lead to overreach in prosecuting minor offenses (Lawfare, 2020). PECA, while comprehensive, has a more focused scope concerning issues like harassment and disinformation, compared to the broader concerns in the CFAA.

2. Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996 vs. U.S. Communications Decency Act (CDA), 1996

The Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996 empowers the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to regulate telecom services and content, including the authority to block harmful online content such as disinformation (Shams, 2021). In contrast, the U.S. Communications Decency Act (CDA), particularly Section 230, shields platforms from liability for user-generated content (Hills, 2018). While PTA can take a more active role in regulating content, the CDA allows greater freedom for platforms to manage content without being held responsible.

3. Electronic Transactions Ordinance (ETO), 2002 vs. U.S. Electronic Signatures in Global and National Commerce (ESIGN) Act, 2000

Both the ETO, 2002 and the ESIGN Act, 2000 grant legal recognition to electronic signatures and digital transactions. The ETO facilitates secure digital transactions within Pakistan (Javed, 2020), whereas the ESIGN Act ,2000 focuses on ensuring enforceability for digital contracts in the US and provides more flexibility in cross-state and international transactions (Travis, 2019).

4. Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA), 1997 vs. U.S. PATRIOT Act, 2001

Pakistan's Anti-Terrorism Act, 1997, criminalizes the use of technology to promote terrorism, including the spread of extremist content (Shah, 2022). The U.S. PATRIOT Act, 2001, on the other hand, provides far-reaching surveillance powers, enabling the government to monitor communications more broadly, including data from internet service providers (Kerr, 2017). While both laws focus on combating online extremism, the PATRIOT Act,2001 gives the US government more expansive surveillance capabilities than ATA,1997.

Comparative analysis of Pakistan's Cybersecurity and Information Regulation Laws with The UK

1. PECA, 2016 vs. UK Computer Misuse Act, 1990

Both PECA, 2016 and the UK Computer Misuse Act (CMA), 1990 address unauthorized access and hacking. PECA,2016 also includes provisions for online harassment and the spread of false information (Shams, 2021). The CMA,1990, while addressing unauthorized access to systems and hacking, is more focused on the technical aspects of cybercrime, neglecting issues like harassment or disinformation, which are central to PECA ,2016(Stallings, 2019).

2. Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996 vs. UK Investigatory Powers Act, 2016

The PTA under The Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996 can regulate content and block harmful material (Shams, 2021). The UK Investigatory Powers Act (IPA), 2016 grants extensive powers for government surveillance, including the interception of communications (Gowder, 2017). While both laws target the regulation of telecommunications, IPA, 2016 includes greater surveillance provisions, placing more control in the hands of the government compared to PTA,1996.

3. Electronic Transactions Ordinance (ETO), 2002 vs. UK Electronic Identification and Trust Services Regulation (eIDAS), 2014

While ETO, 2002 facilitates secure digital transactions within Pakistan (Javed, 2020), the UK eIDAS Regulation (2014) offers a wider, EU-wide framework for digital identification and trust services. The eIDAS Regulation is broader, covering all EU member states, whereas ETO is more localized to Pakistan’s digital transaction ecosystem (Haggerty, 2018).

The comparative analysis highlights that while Pakistan's cybersecurity laws, such as PECA, 2016, PTA, 1996, and ETO, 2002, share some commonalities with their counterparts in the US and UK, they also differ significantly in scope, implementation, and enforcement. Pakistan’s laws focus on issues like disinformation and online harassment in ways that are not as emphasized in the US or UK laws. However, the US and UK frameworks provide broader surveillance and platform immunity provisions, which present a different approach to content regulation.

Effectiveness and Challenges of Cybersecurity Laws of Pakistan

Pakistan has made significant strides in formulating laws and regulations to address cybersecurity concerns and combat cybercrimes. However, despite these efforts, there are still numerous challenges regarding the effective implementation of these laws. This section explores the effectiveness of Pakistan's cybersecurity laws, including the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016, the Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996, the Electronic Transactions Ordinance (ETO), 2002, and others, and outlines the challenges that hinder their success.

Effectiveness of Cybersecurity Laws in Pakistan

The effectiveness of cybersecurity laws in Pakistan is a topic of ongoing debate, highlighting both achievements and limitations. While the legislative framework is established to combat digital threats, questions persist about its real-world impact on curbing cybercrime and ensuring public confidence.

1. **Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016**

The Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016, is Pakistan's most comprehensive law addressing cybercrimes, disinformation, and the misuse of technology. The law criminalizes a wide range of cybercrimes, such as hacking, identity theft, online harassment, and spreading false information (PECA, 2016).

Key Provisions and Effectiveness:

- **Section 20: Offenses Against Dignity of a Natural Person**: This provision makes it illegal to spread defamatory content online. It has been instrumental in tackling cyberbullying and defamation cases. However, its effectiveness is often limited by vague definitions of what constitutes defamatory content, leading to misuse or inconsistent application (PECA, 2016).

- **Section 31: Power to Remove or Block Information**: This section allows the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) to order the removal or blocking of harmful content. This provision has proven effective in curbing access to extremist material, online hate speech, and disinformation. For example, the PTA has acted swiftly to block websites that promote terrorism and other forms of violence (PECA, 2016).
- **Section 33: Unauthorized Access to Information Systems**: This section addresses hacking and data theft, which are central to cybersecurity. It empowers authorities to take action against cybercriminals involved in unauthorized access to digital systems, ensuring a safer online environment (PECA, 2016).

Despite these provisions, PECA faces challenges related to its scope and enforcement, which are discussed below.

2. **Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996**

The Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996, established the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), which plays a central role in regulating telecommunications and the internet. The PTA has been instrumental in ensuring the security of the country's telecommunication infrastructure (Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996).

Effectiveness of PTA under the Act

- **Section 5: Powers of PTA**: PTA has the authority to regulate telecommunication networks, including the power to block content deemed harmful or illegal. This power has been essential in controlling disinformation and fake news (Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996).
- **Section 23: Licensing for Telecommunication Services**: By issuing licenses to internet service providers (ISPs), the PTA ensures that telecom operators comply with national regulations. This has helped maintain the integrity of the national telecommunications infrastructure (Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996).

The effectiveness of the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority under the Pakistan Telecommunication (Reorganization) Act, 1996, is evident in the swift actions taken against harmful online content. However, the PTA's regulatory power has been criticized for lacking transparency and being susceptible to political interference, which can hinder the impartial enforcement of regulations.

3. **Electronic Transactions Ordinance (ETO), 2002**

The Electronic Transactions Ordinance (ETO), 2002, is another important law that contributes to cybersecurity in Pakistan by promoting the legality of electronic records, signatures, and transactions. While its primary focus is e-commerce, it has provisions that support cybersecurity (Electronic Transactions Ordinance, 2002).

Effectiveness of ETO, 2002

- **Section 6: Legal Recognition of Electronic Records**: The ETO grants legal recognition to electronic records, helping secure digital transactions and reducing the risk of cyber fraud (Electronic Transactions Ordinance, 2002).
- **Section 11: Authentication of Electronic Signatures**: By recognizing electronic signatures, the law facilitates secure communication and transaction processes, which are vital for businesses and individuals in Pakistan's digital economy (Electronic Transactions Ordinance, 2002).

Though ETO, 2002 has been effective in providing legal recognition to electronic transactions, it has not been updated in recent years to address emerging cybersecurity threats such as data breaches and sophisticated online fraud. The law also lacks comprehensive provisions for personal data protection, which remains a significant gap in the cybersecurity legal framework (Electronic Transactions Ordinance, 2002).

Challenges in the Implementation of Cybersecurity Laws in Pakistan

The implementation of cybersecurity laws in Pakistan faces multifaceted challenges that hinder their effectiveness and public trust. These issues range from resource constraints and coordination difficulties to concerns over transparency and potential misuse of regulations for censorship. Following paragraphs give details of the challenges of Pakistan's cybersecurity laws.

1. **Ambiguity and Overreach in Legal Provisions**

One of the key challenges of Pakistan's cybersecurity laws is the ambiguity in some of the legal provisions, especially those in PECA, 2016. For instance, Section 20, which deals with offenses against dignity, does not clearly define what constitutes defamatory content online. This has led to concerns that it could be used to curb freedom of speech and expression. The law is open to interpretation, which results in inconsistent enforcement (PECA, 2016).

Similarly, the Section 31 provision of PECA,2016 which empowers PTA,1996 to block online content, has faced criticism for potentially being used to suppress dissent. The lack of clear guidelines on what content can be deemed as "harmful" can lead to overreach, and individuals or organizations may face restrictions on their online activities without proper justification (PECA, 2016).

2. **Insufficient Resources for Enforcement**

One of the major challenges faced by Pakistan’s cybersecurity enforcement agencies, particularly the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), established in1974 is insufficient resources. Despite the enactment of laws like PECA, 2016, and the establishment of the FIA’s Cyber Crime Wing in 2007, the agency struggles with inadequate funding, personnel, and technology. The Cyber Crime Wing is often overwhelmed by the growing number of cybercrimes, ranging from data breaches to online fraud and disinformation campaigns (PECA, 2016).

3. **Lack of Awareness and Digital Literacy**

A significant challenge in the implementation of cybersecurity laws is the low level of digital literacy and awareness among the general public. Many individuals are unaware of the legal implications of their online actions, which can lead to inadvertent violations of the law. For example, users may unknowingly engage in illegal activities such as sharing fake news or participating in online harassment without understanding the legal consequences (PECA, 2016).

4. **Cybersecurity Infrastructure Gaps**

Despite the enactment of laws such as PECA, 2016 Pakistan continues to face significant gaps in cybersecurity infrastructure. The country lacks a cohesive national cybersecurity strategy and an integrated approach to combating cyber threats (PECA, 2016). The absence of a centralized cybersecurity agency makes it difficult to coordinate efforts across various sectors, and cybersecurity policies remain fragmented.

5. **International Cooperation**

Cybersecurity is a global issue, and Pakistan’s laws face challenges in terms of international cooperation. Many cybercrimes involve cross-border elements, and cybercriminals often operate from foreign jurisdictions. As a result, Pakistan must improve its cooperation with other countries and international organizations to combat cybercrime effectively (PECA, 2016).

Public Perception and Criticism of Existing Cybersecurity Measures in Pakistan

Public perception and criticism of existing cybersecurity measures in Pakistan highlight significant concerns over the effectiveness, transparency, and fairness of the country’s approach to handling cyber threats and regulating online activities. While Pakistan has enacted key legislation like the

Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016, and established the Federal Investigation Agency's (FIA) Cyber Crime Wing in 2007, the public's trust in these measures remains mixed, with a significant portion of society expressing dissatisfaction (Khan, 2020).

Concerns Over Government Control and Censorship

A major criticism of Pakistan's cybersecurity measures is the perception that they are often used as a tool for state censorship and control over the internet. The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), under laws such as the PECA, 2016, holds significant power to remove or block online content deemed to be harmful or offensive, including disinformation. While this provision can be beneficial for curbing cybercrime and disinformation, it has raised concerns about excessive government control over digital spaces. Many critics argue that these measures are frequently used to suppress dissent, restrict freedom of speech, and target political opposition, journalists, and activists (Rehman, 2019). The power vested in the PTA to remove or block content (under Section 31 of PECA) without sufficient checks and balances has sparked concerns over the abuse of authority. For example, the blocking of social media accounts, websites, or content related to political dissent, religious beliefs, or independent journalism has been a point of contention. This has led to accusations that cybersecurity laws are being weaponized to stifle free expression rather than protect citizens from actual cyber threats (Hussain, 2018).

Ineffective Law Enforcement and Slow Progress

Another key criticism centers around the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) and its Cyber Crime Wing. While the FIA was tasked with investigating cybercrimes, including hacking, fraud, and online harassment, public perception suggests that it is under-resourced and lacks the technical expertise required to address the growing sophistication of cyber threats. Despite the Cyber Crime Wing's establishment in 2007, its effectiveness in handling cybercrimes, particularly those related to disinformation and online fraud, is questioned. The FIA struggles with a backlog of cases, a shortage of trained personnel, and a lack of modern investigative tools, hampering its ability to keep up with the rapid evolution of cyber threats (Naseer, 2020). Moreover, the FIA's slow pace in processing cybercrime cases and the lack of tangible outcomes often lead to frustration among the public. High-profile cases of cyber harassment and financial fraud are rarely resolved promptly, which fosters a sense of mistrust in the system (Ali, 2022).

Inadequate Public Awareness and Education

A significant issue contributing to the public's skepticism about Pakistan's cybersecurity measures is the lack of awareness and education regarding the importance of cybersecurity. There is minimal emphasis on public awareness campaigns about safe online practices, and the consequences of cybercrimes are not well understood by most citizens. Many people continue to fall prey to scams, phishing attacks, and identity theft because they lack knowledge about basic online security protocols (Farooq, 2023). While there have been efforts to educate the public, especially with the introduction of the National Response Centre for Cyber Crime (NR3C), which works alongside the FIA, the outreach and impact of such initiatives have been limited. Without widespread awareness about the risks of cybercrimes and how to avoid them, the effectiveness of cybersecurity laws remains limited (Malik, 2020).

Lack of Coordination Between Agencies

Public perception also reflects frustration with the lack of coordination between various law enforcement agencies and departments responsible for cybersecurity. The FIA often works in isolation, which results in inefficiencies when tackling cross-jurisdictional cybercrimes or complex cases involving multiple perpetrators. Without proper coordination with other agencies like the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA),1996 and the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA), 2009, the country's cybersecurity efforts lack the coherence necessary to address issues like disinformation campaigns or cyber terrorism effectively (Ali, 2022). In conclusion, while Pakistan has taken significant steps in enacting laws and establishing institutions to address cybercrimes and improve cybersecurity, public perception remains clouded by concerns over government overreach, ineffective enforcement, and a lack of education and coordination. To improve public trust, the government must focus on ensuring transparency in the enforcement of cybersecurity laws, enhancing the capacity of law enforcement agencies, and launching comprehensive public awareness campaigns. Only with these measures can Pakistan hope to establish a secure and trusted digital environment for its citizens.

The Role of Technology and Platforms in Addressing Disinformation in Pakistan

The rise of disinformation and fake news has become a major concern in Pakistan, undermining public trust, fueling political polarization, and sometimes inciting violence. As digital platforms and social media have become dominant sources of information, the responsibility of addressing disinformation falls not only on governments but also on technology companies operating these platforms (Farooq, 2023). In Pakistan, collaboration between the government and tech companies, along with the use of technological solutions, plays a significant role in combating the spread of disinformation (Ahmed, 2021).

Response of Social Media Companies and Digital Platforms

Social media companies such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, along with messaging platforms like WhatsApp, have come under increasing scrutiny in Pakistan for the spread of disinformation (Ali, 2022). In response, these platforms have implemented a range of content moderation policies designed to detect and prevent the spread of false information. However, these measures have often been reactive rather than proactive, and their effectiveness has been questioned (Khan, 2020). For example, Facebook has introduced fact-checking tools in partnership with third-party organizations and has taken action against accounts spreading misinformation, particularly during election periods (Javed, 2021). Similarly, Twitter has introduced labels on tweets containing misleading information related to elections, health, and government policies (Malik, 2020). However, the scale of disinformation and the rapid spread of false narratives often outpaces the platforms' ability to remove harmful content in real-time. Despite these efforts, critics argue that social media companies have not done enough to address the root causes of disinformation, such as the creation and amplification of false narratives by coordinated inauthentic behavior (Hashmi, 2021). Platforms are also often criticized for their failure to protect users from cyberbullying, hate speech, and harassment that frequently accompany disinformation campaigns (Hussain, 2018).

Collaboration Between Government and Tech Companies

The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), under the framework of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016, has sought to impose greater control over digital platforms to curb disinformation (Government of Pakistan, 2016). The PTA has repeatedly asked social media companies to comply with local regulations, which require platforms to remove harmful content, including disinformation, within a short period. In 2020, the Social Media Rules, which fall under PECA, were introduced to impose greater accountability on digital platforms operating in Pakistan. These rules require platforms to have local offices, enable government access to user data, and remove content deemed harmful to national security or public order within hours of notification (Farooq, 2023). While these regulations were intended to tackle disinformation and prevent cybercrimes, there are concerns about their impact on freedom of expression. Critics argue that these laws give the government excessive power to censor content and suppress dissent (Ahmed, 2021). In some instances, the government has requested the removal of content that critiques government actions or promotes political opposition, raising concerns about censorship (Hussain, 2018). The collaboration between the government and tech companies is often marked by tension, with social media companies advocating for greater autonomy in how they moderate content, while the government pushes for stricter control. The balance between ensuring a free and open internet while protecting citizens from the harms of disinformation remains unresolved (Khan, 2020).

Technological Solutions and Their Limitations

In terms of technological solutions, platforms have turned to artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) to address disinformation more effectively. AI-based detection tools are used to identify and flag suspicious content, including fake accounts, bots, and coordinated inauthentic behavior (Javed, 2021). For instance, Facebook uses AI to detect fake news and remove or flag posts that violate its policies. Twitter also employs AI to identify and label misleading tweets or accounts engaging in malicious behavior (Hashmi, 2021). However, while these tools have improved the detection of disinformation, they are not foolproof. AI algorithms can struggle to distinguish between satire, opinion, and genuine misinformation, leading to both false positives (removing legitimate content) and false negatives (allowing disinformation to spread) (Farooq, 2023). Moreover, these systems may be biased toward certain types of content, failing to address disinformation in languages other than English or overlooking culturally specific misinformation (Hussain, 2018). Another limitation is the speed at which disinformation spreads. Even when platforms can identify false content and take it down, disinformation often spreads rapidly across various channels, including private messaging apps like WhatsApp, which are harder to monitor. These apps provide anonymity and are resistant to traditional content moderation efforts, making it challenging for both tech companies and governments to address the problem effectively (Ali, 2022). In conclusion, while social media companies and digital platforms are making efforts to combat disinformation in Pakistan, significant challenges remain. Collaboration between the government and tech companies has not been without friction, particularly regarding the balance between regulation and freedom of expression. Technological solutions, including AI-based detection and content moderation, offer potential, but their limitations in accurately identifying and addressing disinformation quickly enough leave room for improvement. Moving forward, a more balanced approach involving greater transparency, better technological tools, and continuous collaboration between all stakeholders is essential for combating disinformation in Pakistan.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice in Combating Disinformation in Pakistan

To effectively address the growing problem of disinformation in Pakistan, a multifaceted approach is required, one that integrates robust policies, improved technological solutions, and better coordination between stakeholders, including the government, tech companies, and civil society. Below are key recommendations for policy and practice to enhance the country’s response to disinformation.

1. Strengthen Legal Framework and Regulations

While Pakistan has taken initial steps with laws like the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016, more comprehensive legal reforms are needed to keep pace with evolving digital threats. One key recommendation is to update and expand existing laws to include more specific provisions related to the spread of disinformation, including accountability for social media companies that fail to remove harmful content.

The Social Media Rules (2020), introduced under PECA, should be refined to strike a better balance between regulating disinformation and protecting freedom of speech. The government should work with international experts and stakeholders to draft transparent laws that ensure disinformation is addressed while safeguarding citizens' rights to free expression. Additionally, clear definitions of "misinformation" and "disinformation" should be established, along with the consequences of violating these regulations.

2. Promote Public Awareness and Digital Literacy

One of the most effective ways to combat disinformation is through education. The government should invest in public awareness campaigns aimed at educating citizens about the risks of misinformation, how to spot fake news, and the importance of verifying information before sharing it. Digital literacy programs should be integrated into school curricula and community workshops to equip individuals with the skills to critically assess online content.

In addition to government-led campaigns, partnerships with tech companies, media organizations, and civil society groups can help amplify the message and increase public awareness about the dangers of disinformation. Engaging influential figures, such as journalists and social media influencers, in these campaigns can further enhance their reach and impact.

3. Foster Collaboration Between Government and Tech Companies

Collaboration between the Pakistani government and tech companies is essential for effectively addressing disinformation. As part of the ongoing dialogue, tech companies should be encouraged to establish regional offices in Pakistan to ensure compliance with local laws and faster responses to harmful content. These companies must also share more detailed transparency reports, revealing how they identify and address disinformation, as well as how they handle government requests for content removal.

Moreover, social media platforms must take a more proactive role in detecting and preventing the spread of false information. AI-based tools should be further developed to improve accuracy and minimize errors in flagging content. However, it’s crucial that these tools are used responsibly and without violating user privacy. Collaboration can also extend to sharing knowledge and best practices for tackling disinformation, ensuring that all stakeholders are better equipped to handle new challenges.

4. Implement Effective AI-Based Solutions for Content Moderation

Technological tools, particularly AI-based solutions, can play a significant role in combating disinformation. The government should work with tech companies to further develop and implement machine learning algorithms that detect and remove fake news more efficiently. While AI solutions have limitations, their continuous development could make content moderation faster and more accurate, enabling real-time responses to emerging disinformation threats.

However, AI-based content moderation must be balanced with human oversight to address context-specific issues and prevent over-censorship. A hybrid approach combining AI tools with skilled moderators can ensure that harmful content is flagged and removed while protecting free speech.

5. Enhance Cooperation with International and Regional Partners

Disinformation is a transnational issue, and addressing it requires international cooperation. Pakistan should strengthen its collaboration with international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the European Union (EU), and other regional stakeholders to share best practices, data, and research on combating disinformation.

At the regional level, Pakistan can work closely with neighboring countries in South Asia to tackle cross-border disinformation campaigns, especially those that exploit ethnic, political, and religious divisions. This could involve sharing intelligence and coordinating responses to disinformation that crosses national boundaries.

6. Support Independent Fact-Checking Organizations

Fact-checking organizations are a critical part of combating disinformation. The government should support the development and growth of independent fact-checking initiatives in Pakistan. These organizations can collaborate with social media platforms to flag false information and provide verified content to the public. By bolstering the capacity of local fact-checkers, Pakistan can create a more informed society that can better distinguish between credible sources and deceptive content. Moreover, partnerships between fact-checking organizations and news outlets can help ensure that accurate information reaches a broad audience. Transparency in the methodology used by these organizations is also essential to ensure public trust. Combating disinformation in Pakistan requires a comprehensive approach that involves legal reforms, public education, technological innovation, and international collaboration. By updating and refining existing laws, promoting digital literacy, fostering collaboration between government and tech companies, and supporting technological solutions such as AI, Pakistan can take meaningful steps toward addressing the disinformation crisis. With these recommendations, Pakistan can protect its citizens from the dangers of fake news while safeguarding fundamental rights such as freedom of expression.

Conclusion

In this analysis, we have explored the challenges and strategies involved in addressing disinformation in Pakistan. Key findings highlight that while the government has made efforts through laws like the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016 and the Social Media Rules (2020), the enforcement and effectiveness of these regulations remain limited due to gaps in resources, coordination, and implementation. Moreover, despite the proactive role played by tech companies in combating disinformation, more robust partnerships with the government and civil society are needed to ensure that both the legal and technological frameworks align with evolving digital threats. The need to balance freedom of speech with the need to combat disinformation is central to Pakistan's approach. While laws like PECA aim to address the spread of harmful content, they must be carefully implemented to avoid overreach and censorship. Ensuring transparency in the enforcement of regulations and protecting citizens' right to free expression are critical to maintaining public trust. At the same time, effective regulation is essential to prevent the detrimental effects of disinformation on public discourse, societal harmony, and national security. Looking ahead, future research should focus on the efficacy of current disinformation laws and the role of emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and machine learning, in content moderation. Policy reforms should also prioritize the development of a more dynamic and flexible legal framework that can adapt to the rapidly changing digital landscape. Furthermore, strengthening international cooperation and building the capacity of local fact-checking organizations should be prioritized as part of a broader strategy to address disinformation both locally and globally.

In conclusion, while Pakistan has made significant strides, there is a pressing need for continued collaboration and innovation to effectively combat disinformation while safeguarding democratic freedoms.

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