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Covering and Countering Extremism in Pakistan's Developing Media

Summary

- With a rise in terrorist activity spreading fear through highly publicized attacks, Pakistan's media landscape has increasingly been used as a battleground between those seeking to promote violent conflict and others seeking to manage or deter it.
- Pakistan's media community has not yet developed an adequate or widely accepted strategy for responding to this context of persistent extremism and conflict.
- The rapid rise of extremist radio stations in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) provinces has paralleled an increase in terrorist attacks, facilitated by affordable access to FM radio, loose government regulation of broadcast media and militant control of pockets in KPK and FATA.
- Negative media attitudes toward the Pakistan-U.S. relationship often reflect national political differences and market incentives for sensationalist coverage. These attitudes can be transformed through changes in the diplomatic relationship between the countries based on open communication rather than institutional media reform.

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Introduction

The particularities of Pakistan's social and political climate are reflected in a mediascape grappling with how best to cover domestic terrorism and Pakistan-U.S. relations. Pakistan's media must balance demand-side pressure for sensationalist content with the need for professional standards and reform, while also competing with extremist rhetoric and confronting physical dangers and limitations. On December 6, 2010, the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) convened a panel of experts and practitioners of media in Pakistan for a public discussion of these issues. Co-sponsored by the Institute's Center for Conflict Analysis and Prevention and Center of Innovation for Media, Conflict and Peacebuilding, the panel featured Wajahat Ali, William P. Fuller Fellow at The New America Foundation; Imtiaz Ali, a former USIP Jennings Randolph Senior Fellow; and Zahid Hussein, senior editor at *Newsline* and correspondent for the *Times of London* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Sheldon Himelfarb, associate vice president at USIP, moderated the event.

A Changing Mediascape

The media in Pakistan has transformed from a predominately state-run industry a decade ago into an independent broadcast, print and online media community. While vernacular and English

language print and broadcast outlets now reach across the country, the divide between these language-based audiences and sensibilities presents a considerable communication challenge. Television news networks are highly influential among the elite and mainstream middle class in Pakistan, and their extremely popular primetime talk shows reach a predominately urban audience in Urdu, English and regional languages. Radio is more prevalent in the less wired rural areas, including FATA and the KPK province, which are the epicenters of Taliban-led militancy.

Television and radio broadcasts are becoming big business for Pakistan, and media are becoming increasingly vocal in their coverage of international and domestic politics. The Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), which controls licensing for television and radio in the country, has issued licenses for more than 100 private FM radio channels across the country. These stations operate alongside 31 state-run channels and the BBC, Radio Free Europe and Voice of America. The state-run Pakistan Television Corporation operates six channels alongside more than 50 private television stations licensed by PEMRA.¹ The growth of radio in particular has increased information sharing in all areas of the country, including far-flung regions underserved by television and print media. This diversity in content and language promotes a vibrant domestic media community where consumers can choose from a range of perspectives.

Ratings, Violence and Responsibility

Following the 2007–08 occupation of Swat and other districts by the Taliban, the Pakistan media has become increasingly critical of the Taliban and radical extremism, often exposing Taliban leaders as anticonstitution and antidemocracy. These media organizations also struggle with issues relevant only to covering persistent terror-based conflict and violence such as balancing public safety concerns with information freedom or striking a tone of moderation when sensationalism sells. With many outlets owned by the state or families with little professional experience, editorial decisions often contradict established journalistic practices. Information-based analysis is often superseded by emotionally charged criticism of the government and its policy choices.

Accurate and honest reporting of the news without contributing to violence or promoting messages of extremism is an ongoing challenge for the Pakistan media. There is a pressing need for a “grand strategy” for covering terrorism and extremism, as Wajahat Ali terms it, which incorporates the demands of viewers and readers with professional ethics and sensitivity to promoting moderation in political thought. “The real challenge before every media organization is to cover militant activities without spreading new anxiety,” Ali explained. “They must mold public opinion against militant factions and try to raise the cost of using violent means to achieve political objectives within their society. As I look at it, we in Pakistan largely failed to do that.” Any strategy will need to be communicated across the media community and not rest solely in the hands of management or opinion leaders. Only holistic, concerted efforts at reform will have any chance of lasting success.

But the media is used to a certain level of freedom in its practices and standards. “Media has played a kind of double-edged sword,” Zahid Hussein said. “On the one hand, it has actually played a massive role in raising the political consciousness of the people . . . But, on the other hand, it has also actually given the anchorperson who comes from a certain perspective [the ability to use] it for their own purpose and objectives.”

Cheaper, Deadlier Media

The growth in low-power radio in the FATA and KPK regions has paralleled the growth of extremism within those provinces. Extremist groups frequently use radio to rally support in these tribal areas. Pro-Taliban clerics are increasingly adept at utilizing pirate stations to promote extremist

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

The public event “Pakistan’s Media: Dissecting its Coverage of Extremism, Terrorism and Pakistan-U.S. Relations” convened Pakistan journalists and media experts Wajahat Ali, Imtiaz Ali and Zahid Hussein at the U.S. Institute of Peace on December 6, 2010. This Peace Brief summarizes the discussion among panelists, attendees and questions from online participants around the world via an interactive webcast. Hannah Byam is a research assistant with the Center of Innovation for Science, Technology and Peacebuilding. Christopher Neu is a senior program assistant with the Center of Innovation for Media, Conflict and Peacebuilding.



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and repressive agendas to an audience with few other media options. The government has been slow to act or nonresponsive to these stations, and the low cost of operation and high availability of frequencies means it is easy for stations to resurface. The government will need not only better regulation—particularly of community-based radio and illegal stations—but also the political will, resources and logistical know-how required for enforcement. According to Imtiaz Ali, any U.S. support of these efforts, especially in the highly charged tribal areas, should be offered as support for local media’s competition with pro-Taliban clerics, rather than as direct U.S. competition with the Taliban.

However, the physical realities of the country—including lack of infrastructure, active conflict and significant cultural divides—have created a disparity between training and resources available to the urban and rural areas. Resources need to be directed to the rural areas and the district press clubs currently hindered by a need for English language proficiency and security concerns. The tribal regions are more dangerous to cover and many media organizations have pulled back personnel from these areas. While some stations are providing gear and insurance for journalists working in less stable areas and active conflict zones, the government has been slow to promote the development of professional standards for safety. As Zahid Hussein concluded, the threats to physical safety in the tribal regions are not unique to Pakistan but reflect the dangers of covering the entire region’s conflict areas.

Implications for the U.S.–Pakistan Relationship

The Pakistan media’s current negative coverage of U.S.–Pakistan relations may be less an issue with the structure of the media and more a reflection of the two nations’ narrowly defined political relationship. As both countries are primarily concerned with security requirements and are traditionally opaque in their negotiations on related matters, the Pakistan media are often only reporting on the limited information available. While some outlets deliberately stoke anti-U.S. sentiment to create sensationalism, the opportunities to do so stem from the information vacuum. The panelists, however, argued that some of the U.S. media’s coverage of Pakistan and extremism is equally negative, suspicious and accusatory to any coverage found in Pakistan. The tone of the partisan presses in both countries reflects the divide between the U.S. and Pakistan governments.

Policymakers can best change the negative tone of Pakistan’s media by focusing efforts on increased transparency and public diplomacy, not direct media intervention. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s visit to Pakistan in July of 2010 was identified as a notable change in the status quo of formal diplomatic relations with the U.S. Clinton’s direct interaction with Pakistani citizens and generally more open, transparent approach throughout the visit signaled an opportunity to adjust the tenor of bilateral relations. This positive response represents an opening, Wajahat Ali believes, “to take a fresh look at this relationship . . . There is a window of opportunity here and U.S. policymakers should try to tap that.”

Endnote

1. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, <http://www.pak.gov.pk/BasicFacts.aspx>.