



Role of PEMRA in Media Regulation in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

PEMRA is the regulatory body that is important in regulating and controlling the electronic media arena in Pakistan. It was founded based on the PEMRA Ordinance 2002, whose main aim is to enhance the quality of information, learning, and entertainment using a free, fair, and responsible media. PEMRA has the role of issuing licenses, content monitoring, and legal and ethical compliance. It also intervenes to prevent hate speech, fake news, and content that can damage national interest or the morality of people. Although it is of regulatory significance, PEMRA has been targeted by critics on its impartiality as well as its perceived censorship of dissenting voices, which has led to the issue of press freedom. However, PEMRA remains one of the key players in informing the way media is discussed in Pakistan because of its efforts to focus on freedom of expression and responsible journalism. This paper examines the legal environment of PEMRA and the tools it has to implement law enforcement, and the difficulty in regulating a fast-changing world of media.

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Keywords: challenges, historical context, laws, opportunities, theoretical context

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) has a central role in influencing the media in the country of Pakistan. It was set up according to the PEMRA Ordinance, 2002 (Raza et al., 2025), with the main aim of regulating the setting up and running of all the private electronic media in the country. By so doing, PEMRA is able to control media content on the basis of national, religious, cultural, and moral values (Khan & Khan, 2024). Article 19 of the Constitution of Pakistan ensures that the right to freedom of speech is provided, but with reasonable limitations to the integrity and security of the country. PEMRA plays a regulatory role between such constitutional liberty and the necessity of order in society (Sarwar et al., 2022).

The regulatory activities of PEMRA involve the issuance of licenses to television and radio stations, content regulation, and disciplinary measures for infractions, including hate speech, obscenity, or the spread of fake news (Shoukat, 2024). It also implements the Code of Conduct 2015, which was created in conjunction with the media stakeholders. Critics nevertheless claim that PEMRA has frequently served as a political censorship tool and has weakened freedom of the media (Ullah et al., 2022). Although the work of PEMRA is justified as important to the unity of the country and its ethical standards, the issue of bias in enforcement and the absence of transparency remain (Arif et al., 2025). The functions of PEMRA are contentious and important in terms of the active political and social life of Pakistan (Ali, 2025). Regulation and media freedom are a balancing issue, which needs to be improved (Sangi et al., 2024), accountability, transparency, and autonomy through reforms (Iqbal & Khan, 2024).

Research Justification

PEMRA, which is the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority, is an important body in the regulation and management of the electronic media in Pakistan. The need to research its role can be explained by the fact that it has a huge impact on the freedom of expression, media independence, and democratic norms. Over time, PEMRA has received both commendation for restricting obscenity and hate speech and criticism of supposedly silencing opposition and excessive control of content. This two-sided nature requires critical scholarly analysis of whether PEMRA is performing its mandate well or is working under political pressure.

In the era of high rates of digitalization and the growing dependence on electronic media, the regulatory framework of the authority has to be adjusted to the new challenges of misinformation, cyber harassment, and political propaganda. The policy, legal foundation (PEMRA Ordinance, 2002), and the enforcement mechanism of PEMRA will be investigated in detail to outline the strong and weak aspects. Besides, this study can illuminate gaps between regulation and practices, which would be beneficial to policymakers, journalists, and media houses. Given the complicated media-political relations in Pakistan, the research is very critical to the issue of determining whether PEMRA encourages responsible journalism and the public interest or suppresses media liberties. The results would be useful in

influencing policy changes that would provide a healthy regulatory space in accordance with democratic and constitutional principles.

Research Objectives

1. To discuss the historical context of the role of PEMRA in media regulation in Pakistan.
2. To highlight the theoretical context of the role of PEMRA in media regulation in Pakistan.
3. To analyze the laws regarding the role of PEMRA in media regulation in Pakistan.
4. To identify the key challenges regarding the role of PEMRA in media regulation in Pakistan.
5. To explore the opportunities for the role of PEMRA in media regulation in Pakistan.
6. To propose effective prevention and intervention strategies.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a systematic review methodology, with research objectives established accordingly. A comprehensive literature review was conducted (Komba & Lwoga, 2020). Research findings were categorized based on their content (Hiver et al., 2021; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006), and classified information was incorporated into the study by organizing it into headings (Gan et al., 2021; Pawson et al., 2005). The evaluation of classified information and titles formed the basis of the study (Page, 2021; Rahi, 2017), ensuring the integrity of the research subject and its contents (Egger et al., 2022; Victor, 2008). The criteria for selection are listed.

1. **Relevance:** Researches that directly addressed the questions posed by this study are included.
2. **Quality:** Studies that meet a certain quality threshold (e.g., methodological rigor, bias risk) are included. Most of the research is from Scopus-indexed and Clarivate Analytics journals and reputed publishers.
3. **Recency:** Consideration of the publication date to ensure that the review reflects the most current evidence. Most of the studies are from the last three years.
4. **Language:** Only studies published in English are included.
5. **Data Completeness:** Previous studies must provide sufficient data on outcomes of interest for practical synthesis; this is also ensured in this research.

This study did not use primary data from human participants; therefore, no ethics clearance letter from the ethics committee was required.

LITERATURE REVIEW

PEMRA, an agency that was established through the PEMRA Ordinance 2002, was charged with the responsibility of regulating the electronic media and improving the level of information, education, and entertainment. PEMRA was established as a separate body to bring some transparency and equality in the media

market (Khan & Khan, 2024). It has, however, been criticized that PEMRA has been politicized quite often and lost on several occasions to the different regimes in an attempt to silence the criticism and control the narrative by using regulatory powers (Shoukat, 2024). It leads to a question of independence and objectivity of PEMRA, especially in politically sensitive situations (Arif et al., 2025).

Other academics observe that the duality of PEMRA is that it promotes the growth of media and controls them through penalties. In reference to Ullah et al. (2022), in spite of the fact that PEMRA has played a significant role in developing the private electronic media in Pakistan, its authority is commonly misused to issue show-cause notices and ban channels that undermine the government. Similarly, Iqbal and Khan (2024) posit that the regulatory measures employed by PEMRA are not uniform and transparent, resulting in biased rule provisions. These patterns of regulatory performance show that the legal framework of PEMRA should be re-evaluated and that the institutional responsibility should be strengthened (Raza et al., 2025).

The scope of regulation of PEMRA is also becoming complex because of the digital development of the media. The authority, according to Huma and Warsi (2023), has challenges controlling online streaming platforms, vlogs, and influencers on social media platforms that are not necessarily subject to the jurisdiction of PEMRA. Moreover, the proposals of the amendment of the law of PEMRA and the establishment of a media tribunal system have led to an uproar in the press and the civil society that sees the changes as the intention to curtail freedom of the media (Raza et al., 2025). In this way, the literature emphasizes the importance of reorganizing the role that PEMRA plays so that it would be able to balance between regulation and media freedom and democracy (Ali, 2025).

Historical Context of the Role of PEMRA in Media Regulation in Pakistan

With the PEMRA Ordinance, 2002, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) was created as another major shift in media regulation in Pakistan during the regime of General Pervez Musharraf (Ali, 2025). Before PEMRA, there was an electronic media that was mainly state-controlled by the Pakistan Television (PTV) and Radio Pakistan that existed under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting (Ullah et al., 2022). PEMRA began with an intention to liberalize and privatize the media industry with the idea of encouraging diversity and ownership by individuals (Sarwar et al., 2022). It was endowed with the roles of issuing licenses, maintaining ethics, and avoiding monopolies in the broadcasting business.

Nevertheless, even in its early days, PEMRA's independence was doubted because of the centralization of the executive. As Khan and Khan (2024) argue, even with its regulatory mandate, PEMRA tended to be used as a means to silence media that criticized the government. In 2007, amid the emergency rule by Musharraf, a number of private channels had been suspended via the PEMRA orders (Arif et al., 2025). The post-2008 democratic transition was more or less liberalized, but the use of regulation practices still exhibited political influence (Iqbal & Khan, 2024).

Moreover, the emergence of digital platforms in the 2010s jeopardized PEMRA and its functionality, as the structure of the regulator was created to suit the traditional broadcast media (Shoukat, 2024). Therefore, the history of PEMRA can be described as the complex interaction between liberalization, government regulation, and the dynamics of the media in Pakistan

Theoretical Context of the Role of PEMRA in Media Regulation in Pakistan

The functions of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) can be examined critically using different theoretical perspectives of media regulation, governance, and democratic accountability. The social responsibility theory of the press is one of the key frameworks that state that the media must be free but with responsibility to society through the conduct of ethical standards and the interests of the people. This theory is in line with the mandate of PEMRA to control the content, maintain decency, and facilitate diversity. Regulation is, however, oppressive when it is restrictive or politically instigated, as this has been seen to go against the spirit of being socially responsible.

The other applicable standpoint is that of Habermas, as the theory of the public sphere, where he highlights the importance of the media in aiding free/rational discourse vital in democracy. In this perspective, the regulatory authority that PEMRA has should also be in such a way that it does not impede open discussion and access to various opinions. Also, the regulatory governance theory holds that regulators are supposed to operate freely, transparently, and in the rule of law. In the case of PEMRA, the issue of executive influence, favorable application is an indicator of the absence of real regulatory autonomy. Using the theoretical perspectives, it is evident that although regulation is needed, it should be balanced with principles of media freedom, fairness, and democratic accountability so as to have a genuine service to the populace.

Laws Regarding the Role of PEMRA in Media Regulation in Pakistan

- 1. PEMRA Ordinance, 2002 (Section 4):** PEMRA is an independent statute that helps in enhancing the information, education, and entertainment standards in electronic media.
- 2. Article 19 of the Constitution of Pakistan, 1973:** Guarantees freedom of expression and speech, which is subject to reasonable restrictions under the law, even those imposed by the PEMRA in the name of national security, order, decency, and morality.
- 3. PEMRA Ordinance section 20:** Includes the terms and conditions of the licensees, which do not allow the content to be obscene, indecent, false, or have the potential to provoke violence or hatred.
- 4. PEMRA Ordinance Section 27:** Gives PEMRA the authority to outlaw broadcasting of any program that contravenes its code of conduct or that poses a threat to the interests of the people.
- 5. PEMRA Ordinance Section 30:** Allows PEMRA to suspend or cancel licenses and impose fines in case of non-compliance.

6. Electronic Media (Programs and Advertisements) Code of Conduct, 2015: This code gives ethical rules to the broadcasters, such as the barring of hate speech, sectarianism, and coverage opposing the sovereignty of Pakistan.

Challenges for PEMRA in Media Regulation in Pakistan

- 1. Lack of Independence and Political Influence:** Although it was set up as an independent authority, PEMRA has often been seen as a government pressure group. Its ruling has been seen as having a political agenda, particularly when political instability prevails or when it is about election time, and so it lacks credibility.
- 2. Choosing to either enforce or not enforce laws:** PEMRA is also accused of the unequal enforcement of the rules. Some media houses face punishment when they commit errors. Still, others are said to escape the wrath of the law because they are associated with political parties, causing people to suspect favoritism and hypocrisy.
- 3. Weak Regulation of digital media:** PEMRA has its mandate mainly on broadcast media. As digital platforms become popular, such as YouTube, Facebook, and OTT services, the authority does not have the legal and technical capacity to control the online content.
- 4. Freedom of Expression vs. Content Control:** The problem of balancing media freedom and regulation is not an easy one. The prohibition of channels or blocked content is against Article 19 of the Constitution, which guarantees the freedom of speech.
- 5. Defective Monitoring and Implementation Machines:** PEMRA does not have enough resources and advanced monitoring mechanisms to keep track of the increasing amount of content on hundreds of channels and platforms, which minimizes its efficiency in the real-time implementation.

Opportunities for PEMRA in Media Regulation in Pakistan

- 1. Digital Regulation:** In the new era of digital media, PEMRA can take advantage of this opportunity to expand its jurisdiction by creating new legal regulations and cooperating with technology specialists to ensure that the content shared online is done so in a responsible way.
- 2. Ethical Journalism:** PEMRA can be proactive in promoting ethical journalism by conducting training programs and workshops, and campaigns that educate the media professionals on responsible reporting, prevention of fake news, and media ethics.
- 3. Enhancing Institutional Autonomy:** Public trust should be increased by reforming its governance system to guarantee its real independence from political interference. Practicality of the procedures in appointing the board members and accountability can be enhanced to build a positive image of PEMRA as an unbiased regulator.
- 4. Cooperation with International Media Bodies:** PEMRA can receive the latest global experiences in regulating content, media literacy, and technological tools of monitoring by cooperating with international regulatory authorities such as Ofcom (UK) or FCC (USA).

5. Public engagements and feedback mechanisms: Complaint portals and community forums can be used to make PEMRA engage citizens in the regulatory process by ensuring that the content regulation process is sensitive to the values and concerns of society.

DISCUSSION

PEMRA in media regulation in Pakistan is an interesting blend of state control, media freedom, and the interests of the people. Although PEMRA was created with a good idea to promote ethical broadcasting and the elimination of harmful content, its activities have been criticized as being politically biased and suppressing dissent. It casts doubts on its independence and openness. Nevertheless, PEMRA can also enhance itself by becoming more modern and transforming into a more efficient regulator, particularly by adopting the digital media structure and encouraging media literacy. Its credibility can be increased by strengthening institutional autonomy, equalizing the enforcement of laws, and consultation with the feedback of the people. The issue of regulation and freedom of expression has been a serious issue; excessively controlling the problem can erode democracy, whereas a lack of regulation can cause misinformation and anarchy. PEMRA, therefore, needs to restructure and rebrand itself as a weapon of censorship, but a protector of a responsible, ethical, and independent media that works in the best interests of the democratic and cultural interests of the people of Pakistan.

CONCLUSION

PEMRA is an important body that regulates the electronics media in Pakistan by monitoring the content standards and safeguarding the interests of the people. But the issue of its political clout, discriminatory implementation, and dated regulation system points to the necessity of change. To be effective in a fast-changing media environment, PEMRA needs to revise its legislation, strengthen the independence of the institutions, and pursue a moderate approach that does not override the freedom of expression but promotes responsible journalism. Through overcoming these problems and capitalizing on new opportunities, PEMRA can evolve into a responsible and open regulatory body that is consistent with democratic principles and the requirements of a digital society.

Recommendations

- 1. Equal application of Laws:** The laws ought to be enforced equally on all the media houses regardless of their political affiliations.
- 2. Enhance Open civic participation:** Establish portals and user-friendly feedback systems, and citizens can utilize them to complain or report violations.
- 3. Guard the Freedom of Expression:** Ensure that all the regulations are in agreement with Article 19 of the Constitution that promotes freedom of expression, but with the removal of abuse.
- 4. Guarantee Institutional Independence:** Reform PEMRA to make it independent and not executive-driven or political.

5. **Increase Surveillance Technology:** Spend on new technology and human resources to track the contents in real-time.
6. **Make Things More Transparent:** Publish the decisions, fines, and licensing of the PEMRA to help create transparency and accountability.
7. **Provide Journalist Training:** The journalists give regular workshops on ethics in journalism and media literacy among the practitioners.
8. **Review and Amend Laws:** Amend the PEMRA Ordinance, 2002, by introducing provisions about the regulation of the digital and online media outlets.
9. **Write Digital Media Rules:** Introduce a new system of regulation of data, online content and streaming, and social media.
10. **Work with Global Organizations:** Collaborate with other international organizations that regulate to implement best practices across the globe.

Research Limitations

Though the study offers important information concerning the contribution of PEMRA to the media regulation in Pakistan, it has some limitations. First, the research is mainly on secondary data, comprising academic articles, reports, and legal documents, which might not be reflective of what is on the ground or the behind-the-scenes political forces. Secondly, the institutional transparency and enforcement mechanisms can be analyzed only to a limited extent due to the lack of official PEMRA data and internal decision-making procedures. Also, the swiftly changing digital media and technology present difficulties in determining the effectiveness of the current legal framework, which is still outdated in PEMRA. The research lacks interviews with media professionals, regulators, or journalists to expand the results with practical thinking due to time and resource limitations. Finally, the analysis does not dwell on the differences between the regional regulation of the media but only on the general regulation of the press as a whole. These limitations can be overcome with the help of empirical data collection and fieldwork in future research.

Research Implications

The study on the effectiveness of PEMRA as a media regulator in Pakistan can provide a number of significant implications.

1. **Academic Contribution:** The study will add to the academic discussion on media regulation in less developed democracies, especially in a South Asian background.
2. **Enhanced Regulatory Practices:** The results may assist PEMRA and policymakers in embracing a fairer, clearer, and consistent regulatory approach.
3. **Foundation of the Future Research:** It lays the foundation of future empirical research using interviews, case studies, or regional comparisons in the media landscape in Pakistan.
4. **Media Freedom Support:** The paper focuses on bringing regulation and constitutional rights on par that could shape the fight to safeguard freedom of expression.
5. **Public Awareness:** It creates awareness among the citizens on their media rights and the legal mandate of PEMRA and pushes them to engage in civic activities.

6. Policy Reform Guidance: It mentions the necessity of amending the legal framework of PEMRA to cover the deficiencies regarding digital media and institutional autonomy.

7. Training and Capacity Building: The study can be used to educate media ethics training programs among journalists and regulators.

Future Research Directions

1. Audience Perception: Studies and Surveys of the perception of the audience can be used to examine the credibility and legitimacy of regulatory practices.

2. Comparative Legal Analysis: The comparison of the structure and powers of PEMRA with global regulatory authorities (e.g., Ofcom UK, FCC USA) can be used to identify the best practices to be applied during reform.

3. Digital Media Regulation: Research on how the functions of PEMRA can be changed to control online mediums such as YouTube, Facebook, and OTT services is critical in the contemporary media.

4. Empirical Case Studies: Future studies can utilize the casuistry of individual PEMRA regulatory decisions (e.g., channel bans or fines) to evaluate transparency and consistency.

5. Effects on Press Freedom: The effects of the actions of PEMRA can be investigated on the freedom of expression, especially during political crises or elections.

6. Provincial Implementation: Future research can comment on the enforcement of the laws of PEMRA in all provinces.

7. Stakeholder Perspectives: Interviewing journalists, media owners, regulators, and members of civil society may give a better understanding of the effectiveness and challenges of PEMRA.

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