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Media Freedom, Political Communication, and Democratic Governance

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ABSTRACT

Media freedom is a fundamental component of democratic governance because it enables citizens to obtain political information, evaluate public officials, participate in public debate, and hold institutions accountable. Political communication provides the channels through which governments, political parties, journalists, civil-society organizations, and citizens construct and contest interpretations of public affairs. This article examines the relationship between media freedom, political communication, and democratic governance through a conceptual review of political science, communication studies, and democracy literature. It argues that independent and pluralistic media strengthen democracy by exposing corruption, monitoring government performance, representing diverse social interests, facilitating informed electoral choices, and providing a public forum for political deliberation. Nevertheless, media freedom alone does not automatically generate democratic outcomes. Concentrated ownership, commercial pressures, partisan journalism, governmental censorship, disinformation, online harassment, algorithmic manipulation, and unequal access to communication technologies can weaken the democratic role of media institutions. The emergence of digital and social media has expanded opportunities for citizen participation and direct political communication, but it has also fragmented audiences and enabled the rapid circulation of misleading or emotionally polarizing content. Democratic governance therefore requires a balanced institutional framework that protects freedom of expression while promoting transparency, professional journalism, media pluralism, digital accountability, public access to information, and the safety of journalists.

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Introduction:

Democratic governance depends on the ability of citizens to receive reliable information, exchange political opinions, question public authorities, and participate meaningfully in decisions affecting collective life. Media institutions occupy a central position in this process because they connect citizens with political leaders, public institutions, electoral organizations, civil society, and one another. Newspapers, television channels, radio stations, digital news platforms, and social-media networks collectively influence which political issues receive public attention and how those issues are interpreted. Media freedom refers to the capacity of journalists and media organizations to collect, produce, and distribute information without unjustified censorship, intimidation, political interference, or economic coercion. It also includes access to information, editorial independence, diversity of ownership, legal protection, institutional pluralism, and the physical safety of journalists. A country may formally recognize freedom of expression while still limiting meaningful media independence through restrictive legislation, selective advertising, surveillance, ownership concentration, licensing controls, internet disruption, or violence against reporters. The contemporary international environment demonstrates the growing importance of this issue. UNESCO reported that global freedom of expression had declined by approximately 10 percent since 2012, while self-censorship among journalists had increased substantially. The 2026 V-Dem Democracy Report identified freedom of expression as one of the dimensions most severely affected by global democratic decline, reporting deterioration in 44 countries during 2025. Reporters Without Borders similarly described global press freedom in 2026 as reaching a 25-year low. Political communication is broader than journalism alone. It includes speeches by political leaders, electoral campaigns, parliamentary debate, government publicity, public-relations strategies, news reporting, protest communication, digital activism, and everyday political discussion among citizens. Political communication therefore involves continuing interaction among political institutions, media organizations, technological platforms, and the public. The relationship between media freedom and democratic governance is neither simple nor automatic. A free media system can improve public accountability, but media institutions can also reproduce social inequalities, promote partisan interests, sensationalize conflict, or spread false information. Similarly, digital platforms can expand political participation while simultaneously facilitating surveillance, manipulation, and polarization. This article consequently examines both the democratic contributions and the institutional limitations of media freedom. The article is organized into five principal sections. The first explains the conceptual relationship among media freedom, political communication, and democracy. The second discusses the accountability and watchdog roles of independent journalism. The third analyzes political participation, representation, and public deliberation. The fourth evaluates the transformation of political communication through digital media and disinformation. The fifth presents institutional and policy measures for strengthening democratic communication.

Conceptual Foundations of Media Freedom and Democratic Governance:

Democracy is not limited to periodic elections. Although competitive elections are essential, democratic governance also requires civil liberties, political equality, institutional accountability, public participation, rule of law, and access to alternative sources of information. Dahl (1998) identifies access to independent information as a necessary condition for citizens to develop informed political preferences. Without such access, elections may occur, but citizens cannot effectively evaluate competing candidates, government performance, or policy alternatives. Media freedom supports democracy by creating an information environment in which political claims can be examined rather than simply accepted. Independent journalists investigate government decisions, compare official statements with available evidence, and provide space for opposition parties and marginalized groups. In this way, media institutions reduce the information imbalance between rulers and citizens. Habermas's concept of the public sphere is particularly relevant to political communication. The public sphere refers to a social space in which citizens discuss matters of

common concern and form public opinion. From this perspective, democratic legitimacy depends partly on communication that is open, reasoned, inclusive, and independent of direct state domination. Contemporary media organizations constitute an important part of this public sphere, although commercial influence, ownership concentration, and unequal participation may limit its inclusiveness. Political communication also affects the public agenda. McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting theory explains that media institutions may not always determine what citizens think, but they strongly influence what citizens think about. The repeated visibility of certain issues—including inflation, unemployment, corruption, national security, education, or public health—can increase their perceived political importance. Their pioneering study established agenda setting as a major framework for understanding the relationship between journalism and public priorities. Media systems are shaped by national political and economic institutions. Hallin and Mancini (2004) demonstrate that relationships among journalism, political parties, state institutions, and commercial markets differ across countries. In some systems, professional norms and public-service institutions encourage editorial independence. In others, strong political parallelism connects media outlets with particular parties, business groups, or ideological interests. Democratic political communication therefore requires more than a large number of television channels or social-media accounts. It requires meaningful pluralism, including differences in political perspective, regional representation, language, gender, class, and social experience. When several media outlets are controlled by a small number of owners, apparent diversity may conceal concentrated economic power. Likewise, when government agencies control broadcasting licenses, public advertising, or access to official information, journalists may practice self-censorship even without direct legal prohibition. Media freedom should consequently be understood as an institutional environment. Its main components include legal guarantees of expression, protection against arbitrary censorship, editorial independence, access to public information, diversity of ownership, economic sustainability, professional ethics, digital rights, and journalist safety. Democratic governance becomes stronger when these components function together.

Independent Journalism, Accountability, and Government Performance:

One of the most important democratic functions of the media is to monitor the exercise of public power. Journalists investigate political decisions, public expenditure, administrative failures, conflicts of interest, human-rights violations, and corruption. By publicizing misconduct, the media can encourage parliamentary investigation, judicial intervention, administrative reform, electoral punishment, or public protest. The watchdog function is especially important because citizens cannot directly observe most government activities. Public budgets, procurement processes, regulatory decisions, diplomatic negotiations, and administrative appointments involve specialized information that is often difficult for ordinary citizens to access. Investigative journalism translates such information into understandable public knowledge. Media scrutiny can also influence officials before misconduct occurs. When public officeholders know that their decisions may be investigated and publicly debated, they may have stronger incentives to follow legal and ethical standards. Media accountability is therefore both reactive and preventive. It exposes completed wrongdoing while also increasing the anticipated political cost of future abuse. Nevertheless, the watchdog role depends on institutional independence. Journalists who fear dismissal, prosecution, physical violence, advertising withdrawal, or political retaliation may avoid sensitive subjects. Formal censorship is only one mechanism of control. More indirect pressures include withholding government information, denying access to official events, conducting tax investigations against critical outlets, pressuring media owners, filing excessive defamation cases, or directing state advertising toward supportive organizations. Economic insecurity presents an equally serious threat. News organizations facing declining advertising revenue may reduce investigative reporting because it is expensive and time-consuming. They may instead prioritize sensational, entertaining, or highly partisan content that attracts immediate attention. The democratic value of journalism therefore depends partly on sustainable financial models that do not make editorial survival

entirely dependent on government patronage, wealthy owners, or digital platforms. Public-service broadcasting can contribute to democratic accountability when it operates independently, receives stable funding, and serves diverse communities. However, public broadcasters may become instruments of official propaganda when their leadership, budgets, and editorial policies remain under direct political control. Institutional safeguards are consequently necessary to separate public ownership from government domination. Professional journalistic standards are also essential. Freedom without verification, accuracy, correction mechanisms, or ethical responsibility can damage public trust. Democratic journalism should distinguish fact from opinion, disclose conflicts of interest, protect confidential sources, verify claims, correct significant errors, and avoid incitement against vulnerable communities. Accountability should apply to media organizations as well as governments. Independent press councils, transparent correction policies, editorial codes, ombudsman systems, and accessible complaint mechanisms can strengthen professional responsibility without creating state censorship. The objective is not to prevent criticism but to increase the reliability and legitimacy of public communication.

Political Participation, Representation, and Public Deliberation:

Media institutions enable political participation by informing citizens about elections, government policies, legislative debates, public consultations, and civic campaigns. Individuals are more capable of participating when they understand political institutions, recognize available choices, and believe that their voices can influence public outcomes. Traditional media have historically served as intermediaries between political elites and citizens. Political parties communicate their programs through news coverage, interviews, advertisements, and public debates. Journalists question candidates, compare policy proposals, and interpret election results. Citizens then use this information to evaluate competing political alternatives. Norris (2000) argues that engagement with political communication can create a virtuous circle in which politically interested individuals consume more public-affairs information, become more knowledgeable, and participate more actively. However, the relationship may also produce inequalities because highly educated, economically secure, and politically interested citizens are often better positioned to obtain and interpret political information. Representation is another important dimension of democratic communication. Media coverage influences which social groups are recognized as legitimate political actors. Women, religious and ethnic minorities, rural communities, workers, persons with disabilities, and economically marginalized citizens may be excluded when political reporting focuses predominantly on elite leaders and urban institutions. Inclusive journalism expands the democratic agenda by presenting problems that powerful groups may otherwise ignore. Reporting on unequal access to education, healthcare, employment, justice, housing, and environmental protection helps transform private suffering into public concern. When disadvantaged citizens are represented only as passive victims rather than political participants, however, media coverage can reinforce existing power inequalities. Democratic deliberation requires more than exposure to information. It involves the exchange of arguments, consideration of evidence, and willingness to evaluate competing perspectives. Media debates, interviews, opinion pages, public forums, and digital discussion spaces can contribute to deliberation when they present substantive differences rather than personal hostility. Commercial and political pressures frequently encourage conflict-centered communication. Dramatic confrontation attracts audiences, while complex policy analysis may receive less attention. Political actors consequently adapt their behavior to media expectations. Strömbäck (2008) describes this process as the mediatization of politics, in which political institutions increasingly respond to media logic rather than operating entirely according to their own institutional logic. Mediatization can produce beneficial transparency, but it can also encourage political performance, simplified slogans, permanent campaigning, personalization, and short-term decision-making. Leaders may prioritize policies that generate favorable coverage rather than those that produce long-term public benefits. Political communication then becomes centered on image management rather than democratic problem-solving.

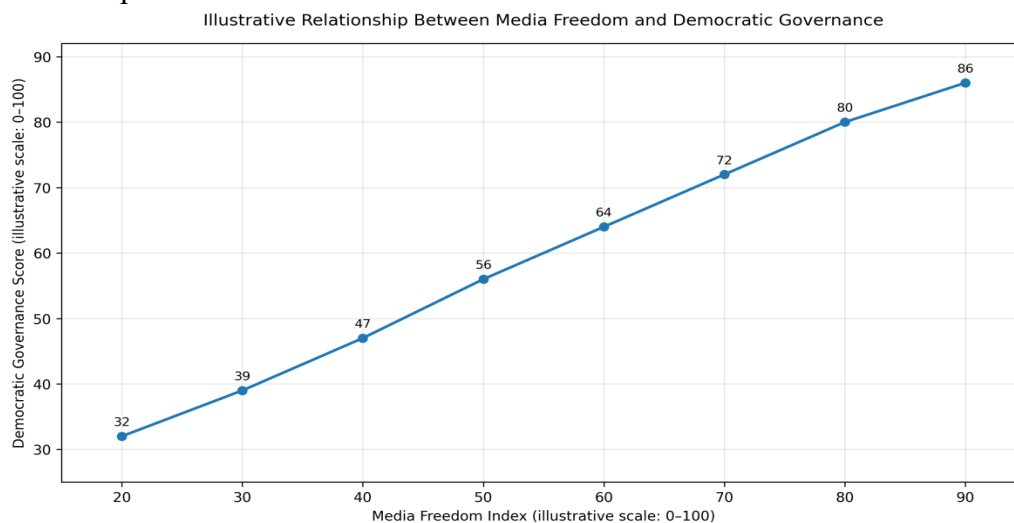
Digital Platforms, Disinformation, and Political Polarization:

Digital technologies have transformed the structure of political communication. Political leaders, activists, journalists, and citizens can now communicate directly without relying entirely on traditional media institutions. Social-media platforms allow rapid mobilization, real-time reporting, public criticism, fundraising, electoral campaigning, and transnational political networking. These developments can democratize political communication by lowering barriers to participation. Citizens can document events, challenge official narratives, organize collective action, and bring neglected issues to public attention. Digital communication is particularly valuable where traditional media are geographically limited or strongly influenced by political and economic elites. However, digital media have not eliminated traditional power structures. Chadwick (2017) describes contemporary political communication as a hybrid media system in which older and newer media logics interact. Television coverage may be influenced by social-media trends, while digital content gains authority when repeated by established news organizations. Political power increasingly belongs to actors capable of strategically combining broadcast, print, online, and platform-based communication. Digital platforms also introduce new forms of gatekeeping. Algorithms determine which messages become visible, recommended, or commercially valuable. These systems are generally designed to maximize attention and engagement rather than democratic understanding. Emotionally provocative, divisive, or misleading content may consequently circulate more rapidly than carefully verified information. Disinformation differs from ordinary error because it generally involves the deliberate production or distribution of false or manipulated information. It can be used to damage political opponents, discourage voting, deepen social divisions, undermine trust in elections, or create confusion about established facts. Bennett and Livingston (2018) describe a wider “disinformation order” in which weakened institutions, fragmented audiences, partisan networks, and declining trust disrupt conventional democratic communication. Political polarization intensifies when citizens encounter primarily like-minded information or interpret all media through partisan identity. In such environments, even accurate reporting may be rejected when it conflicts with group loyalty. Political disagreement then shifts from competition over policies to hostility toward opposing communities. Online harassment creates additional barriers to participation. Journalists, women, minority representatives, academics, and human-rights activists may face coordinated abuse, threats, impersonation, or the disclosure of private information. Such practices narrow the public sphere by making political expression more dangerous for particular groups. Government responses to digital harm must be carefully designed. Broadly worded misinformation, cybercrime, national-security, or public-order laws may be used to suppress legitimate journalism and political dissent. Democratic regulation should therefore satisfy standards of legality, necessity, proportionality, independent oversight, and procedural fairness. Technology companies also carry democratic responsibilities because their decisions affect political visibility, advertising, data collection, recommendation systems, and content moderation. Transparency concerning political advertisements, automated accounts, coordinated manipulation, algorithmic ranking, and data use can improve public accountability. Media and digital literacy remain important long-term responses. Citizens should be able to distinguish reporting from sponsored content, evaluate the credibility of sources, recognize manipulated images, verify claims, and understand how algorithms influence information exposure. Literacy programs should be integrated into schools, universities, professional training, and public civic-education initiatives.

Institutional and Policy Measures for Democratic Communication:

Strengthening democratic governance requires an integrated approach to media freedom. Legal protection is necessary, but legislation alone cannot create an independent and pluralistic communication system. Institutional reform must address political interference, economic sustainability, ownership concentration, professional standards, technological power, and unequal access. First, constitutions and ordinary laws should clearly protect freedom of expression, journalistic activity, access to information, and confidential

sources. Restrictions should be precisely defined and subject to independent judicial review. Criminal defamation, vague national-security provisions, and excessive penalties should not be used to silence public-interest reporting. Second, governments should implement effective right-to-information systems. Public institutions should proactively disclose budgets, contracts, procurement decisions, policy documents, and administrative data. Information commissions must possess sufficient authority, independence, funding, and enforcement capacity. Third, media ownership should be transparent. Citizens should know who owns, finances, or controls major news organizations. Competition rules may be required where excessive concentration limits political pluralism. Cross-ownership involving television, newspapers, radio, telecommunications, and digital platforms deserves particular scrutiny. Fourth, public advertising must be allocated according to transparent and non-discriminatory criteria. When governments direct advertising primarily toward favorable outlets, public funds become instruments of editorial influence. Independent auditing and public disclosure can reduce such manipulation. Fifth, journalist safety should be treated as a governance priority. Threats and attacks against journalists require prompt, impartial, and credible investigation. Protection mechanisms should include emergency support, legal assistance, safety training, digital-security resources, and special consideration for journalists facing gender-based or identity-based harassment. Sixth, public-service media should be insulated from partisan government control. Appointment procedures, funding arrangements, editorial charters, and accountability structures should promote independence and representation of diverse communities.



Note: Synthetic values created for conceptual illustration; they are not observations for specific countries.

Summary:

Media freedom, political communication, and democratic governance are deeply interconnected. Democracy requires citizens who can access information, compare competing claims, criticize public authorities, and participate in political decision-making. Independent media institutions make these activities possible by monitoring government, exposing misconduct, representing diverse communities, setting the public agenda, and facilitating political debate. The democratic role of media cannot be reduced to the simple absence of official censorship. A genuinely free communication environment also requires editorial independence, financial sustainability, transparent ownership, professional responsibility, legal protection, access to public information, journalist safety, and meaningful representation of diverse social groups. Media organizations that are formally private may still be politically dependent when they rely on concentrated ownership, government advertising, or partisan financial networks. Political communication has become increasingly hybrid. Traditional journalism, political institutions, social-media platforms, and citizen networks continuously influence one another. This environment has expanded opportunities for civic

expression and political mobilization, but it has also increased the speed and scale of disinformation, harassment, surveillance, and polarization. The central democratic challenge is therefore to protect open communication without allowing governments or private technology companies to exercise unaccountable control over public debate. Regulation should be lawful, proportionate, transparent, and supervised by independent institutions. It should protect citizens from manipulation and violence without criminalizing legitimate criticism or investigative reporting. For developing democracies, including Pakistan and other South Asian states, media reform should focus on the implementation of constitutional freedoms, access-to-information laws, transparent public advertising, independent regulatory institutions, journalist protection, digital literacy, and diversified media financing. Political leaders must recognize that critical journalism is not an obstacle to governance. It is a mechanism through which errors can be identified, corruption can be challenged, and public confidence can be strengthened.

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