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Media and National Identity Formation in Pakistan: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis

Abstract

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Keywords: Media, National Identity, Pakistan, Historical Analysis, Social Media, State-Controlled Media, Public Perception

Authors:

Tazeem Imran:(Corresponding Author)

Lecturer, Department of Pakistan Studies,
National University of Modern Languages,
Islamabad, Pakistan.

(Email: tinaqvi@numl.edu.pk)

Sadia Masood: Lecturer, Department of Pakistan Studies,
National University of Modern Languages,
Islamabad, Pakistan.

Uzma Malik: Lecturer, Department of Pakistan Studies,
National University of Modern Languages,
Islamabad, Pakistan.

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Media and National Identity Formation in Pakistan: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis

Authors:

Tazeem Imran: (Corresponding Author)

Lecturer, Department of Pakistan Studies, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan.

(Email: tinaqvi@numl.edu.pk)**Sadia Masood:** Lecturer, Department of Pakistan Studies, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan.**Uzma Malik:** Lecturer, Department of Pakistan Studies, National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Abstract

The media has played a significant role in shaping national identity, a subject of growing interest globally and, more specifically, in Pakistan, where it has actively influenced public perceptions of the nation's identity and its position in the world. This paper seeks to explore the construction of national identity in Pakistan and how various forms of media ranging from state-controlled traditional outlets to social media platforms have constituted and transformed Pakistan as both a space for and a component of what is recognized as national identity. In constructing the 'image' of Pakistan after independence, the media particularly state media was instrumental in promoting a unified Muslim identity in South Asia. In contemporary times, however, the proliferation of private and social media has diversified these narratives, resulting in a fractured yet dynamic national identity.

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Keywords:

Media, National Identity, Pakistan, Historical Analysis, Social Media, State-Controlled Media, Public Perception

Introduction

The media and national identity formation are a very intricate and essential aspect of today's society, particularly in a country such as Pakistan, where the question of national identity retains the importance of the paramount sort (Qazi, 2020). It was after the inception of Pakistan in 1947 that the various types of media were used to communicate national ideas, preserve collective memory, and foster a sense of oneness within a country with its diverse population. However, as a cultural

institution and as a medium of communication, the media has been crucial in deciding what being Pakistani is. It arises in the way people think of their history, their religion, their language, and the national symbols that bring a person to a collective sense of national belonging in which he or she is defined.

It was born in the epochal geopolitical event of British India splitting into Pakistan and Bangladesh. At the time of Pakistan's founding, its new state had an urgent task to make sense of a



national identity apart from its Indian counterpart. The identity constructed was basically on religious unity for the integration of a good number of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural groups within the country, in this case, Islam (Shabbir, Ali, and Batool, 2024). The media began to become very important to this identity-making process. Radio Pakistan and then the centuries that followed, and Pakistan Television (PTV) had been quite active in disseminating a state-sanctioned national identity narrative based on Islamic values and historical continuity to Muslim empires, with the hope that destiny would eventually see the tribe that was Pakistan turning Muslim.

Early on in Pakistan's independence, control over the media was in the hands of the state. Radio Pakistan was launched to spread national cohesion, patriotic mood, and religious morality when the time of independence was ripe and to disseminate national consciousness among people. PTV's initial entry into the 1960s saw the state gain new ways to depict public opinion. In addition to broadcasting news and entertainment, these platforms were used to transmit messages of solidarity, religious solidarity, loyalty to the state, and others. There was little dissenting voice to these national holidays, military victories, political milestones, and moments that could be enjoyed as collective pride. The state's vision of nationhood also limited print media in case the print media was expected to mirror the insights of the state. This top-down model of identity formation had been followed for several decades; it influenced future generations of Pakistanis and how future generations of Pakistanis would view themselves and their country.

In the 1990s, however, it was a different scenario in the media presentation in Pakistan. Media liberalization created a wave of the emergence of private television channels, independent newspapers, and commercial radio stations (Hashmi et al., 2024). This was the beginning of a cessation of media pluralism. Most of the time, privately mediated views that challenged the state's official narratives went into public discourse, and private media outlets served as vehicles for these. Ethnicity, language identity, sectarianism, and regionalism were now new channels and voices that added new issues worth paying attention to. National identity was no longer

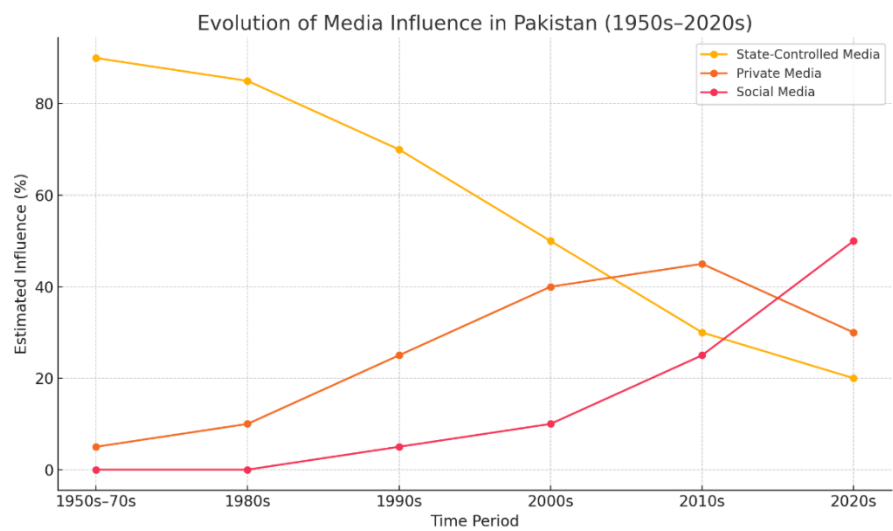
a unitary concept, and the national identity turned into a forum for various groups to compete over the right to define what type of being was a Pakistani.

In the 21st century, digital and social media appeared, and this change was even sharper. They used platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube that enabled individuals and communities to talk about in the public sphere, but did not depend on traditional media gatekeepers. Social media, although, has not been all well either. Complicated identity discourse has become complicated by misinformation, digital propaganda, and online echo chambers. From political parties, religious groups, state institutions to name a few, political parties, religious groups, and state institutions have frequently used social media to defend their positions, some of which have themselves reduced social media further into polarizing and digging deeper into the exclusivist narrative with such offers as reinforcing their exclusivist narrative. Furthermore, there have been discussions about the right to freedom of expression through digital surveillance and web censorship, and the sense of inclusivity of discourse about identity in the digital space.

While this has happened, there is no doubt that the media continues to play a key role in the making and contestation of the country's national identity in Pakistan. From the ideological broadcasts from state media to the fragmented, multifaceted debate on social media, the media narrates how Pakistanis see themselves in history, society, and the world. It narrates, frames, and (re) imagines how symbols of the nation are interpreted.

This paper aims to analyze the role of media in Pakistan's national identity formation. It will explore the historical role of state-mediated media in only one religious identity and what influence media liberalization has had on more diverse identity telling. It will also examine the current role that social media plays in both challenging and amplifying the views of the understanding of the nation (Muhammad, 2021). The study looks at media in various periods and formats to interpret the fluid, changing, and often conflictual character of nationhood in Pakistan.

Figure 1



Literature Review

And between screen and nation: The relationship between media and national identity in Pakistan has become open along with the political and media contagions of the country. Indeed, during the last 70 years, researchers have addressed how the different ways in which media are used by them, ranging from state-run to digital social platforms, have had a vital role in shaping, confirming, and occasionally running into the idea of a homogenous national identity (Grunebaum, 2021). It has been concerned with the central role of media in the determination of identity, belonging, and national consciousness in a society in which culture and ethnicity are highly diverse, such as Pakistan.

Pursuing, until the early decades after its independence in 1947, a focus on state-controlled media, which played a role in promoting national

unity, the academy lay dormant until a rebirth in the 1960s. In this age, nation-building was done through state-owned media institutions like Pakistan Radio and Pakistan Television (PTV). Early scholars, however, emphasized that Pakistan was being promoted as a homeland for South Asia's Muslims to the world in media by the early state, using media to bolster and define a religiously infused national identity. This story was used to separate the new country from its Indian neighbor and unify the different and diverse linguistic, ethnic, and regional youth of this country into one Islamic identity. However, in this period, scholars such as Hamid M. Khan and Iqbal emphasized the media having a top-down nature that crudely out that content was being passed out from the state and was used to fit in their ideological frames and choke opposition.

Table 1

Media and National Identity Milestones

| Time Period | Media Landscape | Identity Narrative |
|---------------|--|--|
| 1947–1970s | State-controlled (Radio, PTV) | Religious nationalism, a unifying focus |
| 1980s | Islamization under Zia | Religious orthodoxy, exclusion of minorities |
| 1990s | Media liberalization, private TV | Rise of pluralism, regional voices emerge |
| 2000s | Digital emergence: Rise of private discourse | Public contestation, media criticism grow |
| 2010s–Present | Social media dominance, fragmented identity | Diverse identities, inclusion vs. polarization |

In the 1980s and early 1990s, media was used in a way to use the media as a propaganda instrument of the state, as the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq institutionalized Islamic ideology through his media policies. This time, studies showing how PTV programming was rewritten and restructured in accordance with religious orthodoxy to produce a version of Pakistani identity thoroughly identified with Islamic values were also attended (Arslan et al., 2024). With spiritual and patriotic fervor, national holidays, curricula in school, and military achievements were portrayed. Reinforcing the dominant discourse, the media further served to marginalize non-Muslim and non-mainstream voices in the national narrative from the start of the Pakistani state.

A significant change in Pakistan's media industry took place after the liberalization of the media industry in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Initially, private channels, independent newspapers, and online platforms, which were never a part of the state apparatus, slowly disrupted the national discourse by taking it over. Zohra Yusuf and Shafqat Hussain noted that this liberalization brought up new forms of the debate on national identity (Brass, 2024). This started a process of media containing a multiplicity of perspectives, which contradicted once-accepted state narratives and permitted the expression of regional, ethnic, and sectarian identities that had been silenced before. As independent talk shows, current affairs programming, and investigative journalism only became an option, the scope of public debate also expanded, and public discussion became more and more critical of what it meant to be Pakistani.

Nevertheless, these have drawbacks. The media, as Asma Jan and Shahid Javed Burki stress, is a double-edged gift that helps in making the identity of people. At the same time, it is inclusive and dialogical on the one hand and exclusive and majoritarian on the other. Along with his work, Khaled Ahmed helps put forth that the media has kept feeding stereotypes and bias towards the Balochi and Pashtun communities as the covering hardened on them becomes thinned out, and Balochi and Pashtun societies become amenable to being reported upon as their richness, and not as something to be suspect or disruptive about.

In addition, the utilization of social media by political actors and institutions for identity narratives has been concerning. Over the past 10 years, digital platforms—platforms fuelled by disinformation, nationalism-led propaganda, and echo chambers—have pulled apart, rather than brought together, disparate points of view and encouraged group reflection.

Then, there is literature about media and national identity in Pakistan that brings to attention the intricacies of this supposed dynamic (Matić, 2020). New ways to include and express themselves have beckoned an era of state-dominated decentralized and digital media and, with it, new obstacles of fragmentation, polarization, and misinformation. This unfolds when Pakistan is trying to find itself in the midst of an increasingly mediatized world and shows how media cannot merely shape perceptions but develop the nation.

Research Question

What was the formation of national identity in Pakistan through history and current times, and what exactly played the role of the media in bringing this national identity forward as a reflection, as well as contestation, of the country's socio-political circumstances?

The purpose of this research question is to investigate the intricate and changing methods of media and national identity in Pakistan (Ashraf, 2023). Given this objective, it analyzes the varying ways in which the spread and use of different forms of media—the state, the private media, and the digital platforms, that is, social media—conspire to shape, reinforce, and contest the nation's identity since the inception of the country to today. By asking such a question, the organizers acknowledge the vital role played by the media in defining the Pakistani imagination, a point underscoring the country's peculiar history of religious, ethnolinguistic, and regional diversity.

Throughout history, the state has used the media to foster national unity based on Islamic ideology and cultural unity (Mihelj & Jiménez-Martínez, 2021). On the other hand, the media were liberalized in the 1990s, and new narratives that opposed the state's standpoint and offered the public diverse voices were introduced

into the public sphere of discourse. Social media has transformed into a place that sticks to both inclusion and polarization, an area where identity is framed and contested.

This research question aims to understand the dynamic processes by which national identity has been imagined and redefined based on Pakistan's changing political and cultural environment, as media reflect, reinforce, and, at times, resist dominant narratives.

Research Objectives

1. This thesis analyzes the role of state-controlled media in molding Pakistan's national identity in the early years after independence in constructing religious, cultural, and political narratives.
2. Focusing on the impact of privatization and media liberalization from the 1990s, when private media outlets started flourishing, to form a national identity.
3. To discuss the role of social media in the contemporary era and how a new kind of national identity has traits in the form of political engagement and general discourse.
4. To analyze the effects of competing narratives in the media, especially regarding religious, ethnic, and political groups, on people's perception of national identity.
5. This paper attempts to understand the role of the media in strengthening or questioning the dominant discursive constructions of Pakistani national identity to establish the media's role in social cohesion and identity politics in Pakistan.

Research Methodology

In this study, a mixed-method approach will be adopted to study the representation of national identity via the media in Pakistan (Aghapouri, 2020). Because of the historical and contemporary layers of media influence on narratives around national identity, methods of inquiry will be combined to offer a more sophisticated vision of how narratives of national identity are made, conveyed, and contested.

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative part will be confirmed by the content and discourse analysis of various media

forms such as publicized Epic news channels, private news outlets, and Social media Websites. This analysis will use historical archives like old newspaper articles, radio transcripts, television broadcasts, etc., to understand how they dealt with the national identity during the early decades after independence. Digital news websites, televised talk shows, and social media will be some sources (Talbot, 2022). The portrayals will be analyzed thematically to identify dominant and recurring patterns, especially about religion, nationalism, ethnicity, and regionalism. It will be specific to the media's image of the construct of unity, dissent, and 'the other', and how those images move with political transition or crisis.

Quantitative Analysis

For the quantitative part of the study, the surveys and social media analytics will be used to understand the perception of the national identity of the public as well as the influence of media narratives on the same. The structured surveys will be distributed to a diverse demographic sample of Pakistan regarding age, region, gender, and socio-economic background. The surveys will analyze how people consume media, which people they trust, and how their media consumption relates to the understanding of national identity (Mylonas & Tudor, 2023). Array Engagement metrics of data from social media platforms such as likes, shares, retweets, and comment threads. This will allow you to measure the reach and the popularity of different narratives and which type of content is driving the most interaction on the themes of national identity.

Case Studies

In addition, the research will include a case study of specific media events or campaigns that have had a significant effect on constructing national identity. No other example other than Pakistan's Independence Day, the Cargill war, the General Elections, or the Protests. The following case studies will examine how the media covered the event itself, the audience's reaction to the event, and whether the narrative promoted or challenged former dominant conceptions of national identity. Each case will be based on how the media has influenced the collective memory and identity of the monumental events.

Expert Interviews

Journalists, media scholars, political analysts, and content creators will be interviewed in semi-structured interviews. The idea of these interviews is to tap into the field and professional knowledge about the history of media in Pakistan, the influence of media on state power, and the impact of digital platforms on national discourse (Bose & Jalal, 2022). The media content and the qualitative data from the interviews will be triangulated to enrich findings and interpretation of results using the data, and the qualitative data will be coded and analyzed.

Taken as a whole, this wide-ranging research design seeks to produce empirical data and contextual understandings to provide the grounds for what ought to be a thorough investigation of how the media of Pakistan has passed and continues to impact the look of national identity.

Result Findings

This research has found that the media has been playing a basic and developing role in forming Pakistan's national identity. In historical and contemporary contexts, the media have not only mirrored but also contributed to the nation's sociopolitical dynamics in constructing and contesting what it means to be Pakistani. The study shows that national identity in Pakistan is a highly refined and in flux concept, which means that it is variable and contested and largely influenced by media narratives.

The primary vehicle for emphasizing a unified national identity during the decades that followed independence was historically the state-controlled media, usually with Radio Pakistan and Pakistan Television (PTV) at the lead (Das, Bhattacharyya, & Sarma, 2022). The identity was predominantly religious and cultural, forming a close alignment with the vision of Pakistan as a homeland for South Asian Muslims.

But only in the 1990s did it open up the media sector and give rise to a more pluralistic media environment. Private television channels, independent newspapers, and commercial radio also ran competing narratives of national identity. The study says that the formation of identity was undermined by this shift, which was tantamount to a shift away from a state monopoly. The private media started to report on the problems in the

regions, the linguistic diversity, sectarian conflicts, and political corruption. Programs and talk shows gave vent to divergent opinions as well, which, like the society, were pluralist and not in conflict with the pluralistic nature of Pakistani society. The time was also when a more general public conversation on identity started to break from religious nationalism and shift to other kinds of ethnic, regional, and political identification.

The social media era in the 2000s was also an identity era. In short, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube became powerful tools for individual expression and collective mobilization. Social Media, they say, has become very important as a space to counter the mainstream narratives. These platforms have become spheres for marginalized groups such as Baloch activists, feminist collectives, religious minorities, and youth movements to put forth other readings of Pakistani identity (Kukreja, 2020). It was these spaces that allowed for this more decentralized and more democratized dialogue, without identity forced from above but from below.

While tensions exist in their own right, these fragmented media landscapes have also done so. But social media provided (former) voices and social media exacerbated polarization, misinformation, echo chambers, etc. Identity politics are accentuated during a national or political drama, and competing narratives often collide. It is becoming more and more apparent that state institutions are trying to recoup control of digital spaces through censorship and surveillance.

The research finally unveils the tricky convergence between state-sponsored media and social media, private media, and social media to create the image of national consciousness in Pakistan. Media capitalizes on its power to pick up momentum and rearticulate the nation's interpretation of its social 'we,' a dynamic, diversified, sometimes at odds condition.

Discussion

The results of this study are several significant findings for us to understand how the media is changing the perception of national identity in Pakistan. The discussion shows how the state-run transition to the diverse and decentralized media arena affects the assembling, dispatching, and

competition of the national personality. Identity projection and perception during each of the media development phases (state-run, privatized, digital) have been revealed to have not only fragmenting but also unifying tendencies in the national discourse.

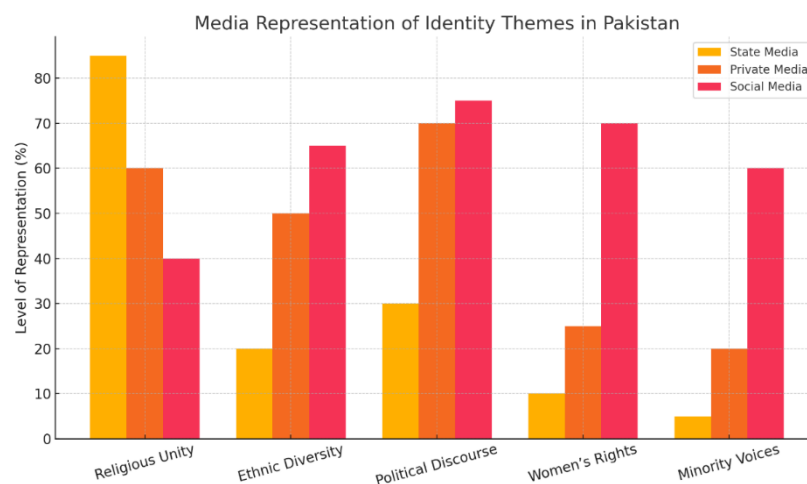
The initial years of Pakistan's formation were characterized by a role given to state-controlled media in facilitating a homogeneous national identity based on Islam and shared history. Radio Pakistan and PTV played a helpful role in the state line to emphasize the written line of religious unity, the nationalist and doomed nation-state (Hopkyns, 2020). When the national identity was conceived in this top-down approach, a very homogeneous idea of national identity was created, with the ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian diversities being brushed under the fringes. In times of conflict and national celebrations, the media was constantly working to reinforce the collective sentiments to the extent that the feeling of nationhood was powerful. And I know that what this model did was provide no space for dissent from the Pakistani person, no alternative ways of understanding what it is to be a Pakistani who, as a Pakistani, grew up in Pakistan.

With the media liberalized in the 1990s, there was room for private media outlets to present the

nation according to their preferred ways rather than the state's ways. Arguably, independent papers or television channels publish at least several points of view on ethnic minorities, political opposition, and other civil society actors. This diversity is shown to be necessary to support a more inclusive national identity representation and unveil the abyss. On several occasions, however, private media sometimes raised awareness of identity-based issues, sometimes the regional and sectarian grievances, intensifying these identity issues and further enhancing their polarization.

Social media in the new millennium brought a significant change to how the legitimacy of national identity was forged. Unlike traditional media, social media does not rely on third-party production but on third-party dissemination. Twitter and Facebook have recently turned into arenas that debate national identity (Safdar & Khan, 2020). Notably, the discussion emphasizes the double effect of dealing with social media: it deconcentrates the national discourse among others, and it turns those on the margins into speakers of identity debates. Yet it also forms echo chambers where identities must be built, but in opposition to each other.

Figure 2



Indeed, this discussion also led to one of the central themes: the dichotomy between the nation's cohesion and the pluralism of identity. Media can and media can't be used to spread inclusivity and mutual understanding when they're misused. Secondly, digital narratives also raised a question

about freedom of expression and the existence of state-sanctioned identity frameworks in the state's attempt to manage and restrict control over it by using censorship or surveillance.

As a matter of fact, it ends with the news that the media in Pakistan is a mirror and a mold of the

identity of the local people. This, by doing so, represents the country's varied socio-political realities and impacts on public understanding of who is who in the country. The seduction of the integrative power of media is also a promise of the press that poses a challenge for policymakers, media practitioners, and civil society to search for ways of influencing the risks of the media's influence. To have responsible media that will promote pluralism, a cohesive and pluralist Pakistan will have to be created in the sense that the youth of Pakistan should give room to pluralism while maintaining a self-identical sense of national identity free of homogeneity.

Conclusion

Media as a form and function in the early days of statehood to the contemporary digital age has been central and enduring to the national identity of Pakistan. Because of the ideology of Pakistan, it was a must that whatever form that country takes, it should be able to survive and strengthen if it isn't cohesive and it is not able to communicate as a single unit. The media, especially in its state-run form, was one of the key tools for shaping and broadcasting the narratives of unity, mission, and brotherhood.

However, since their independence, from that period of the 1960s to the 1990s, the government has made use of state-controlled media like Radio Pakistan and Pakistan Television (PTV) to indoctrinate a single, shallow understanding of what national identity should look like. Here, Pakistan was born as a Pakistani homeland for the Muslims of South Asia, based on the idea that Pakistan was a homeland for the Muslims of South Asia, and Islam was going to be the centerpiece of Pakistan as a united entity. When we are busy trying to lay the groundwork for creating a prosperous new nation, religious festivities, military deployments, and cultural shows are all waged to develop and promote a Pakistani identity of unity that is overbearing on diversity. The state also marshaled ethnic, linguistic, or sectarian differences as an Other that had to be registered as harmful to the extent that centralized control was perpetually needed in a highly diverse country.

But this was a practical thing to do, to create an emotion of national pride and a motivation to get things done in many people, but with problems.

Besides, the regional voice was suppressed, and minority groups also lost out in the state's media. This would, hence, be the breakdown of discontent that ran through the following decades. The Pakistani ruling narrative, in general, did not have a lot of room for its occupant role in which one could be a Pakistani of ethnic groups like Baloch, Pashtun, Sindhi, or members of religious minorities.

The big leap forward was at the point of liberalism in the media industry in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Private channels in television, independent newspapers, and radio made the reality and diversified the media landscape that provided the public discourse with an additional platform. Second, many of these new voices began challenging the state's monopoly on national identity formation. Talk shows, investigative journalism, and opinion pieces on regionalism, sectarianism, class divides, and political corruption began appearing only after they avoided or censored such issues. Thus, it helped put forward a more pluralistic understanding of what is national in Pakistan regarding inclusive traits.

As expanded media did, more communities that were previously marginalized represented themselves. Mainstream forums began to talk about issues concerning ethnic groups. Meeting public opinion in new ways, political opposition invented new ways to communicate and, using the media, began establishing itself as an oversight of state power. There were, however, challenges to this pluralism. With so many channels for directly emphasizing attention came sensationalism, and sometimes, the media gave greater attention to (polarising) the same issues. National identity was not unified but broken as interest groups began to claim recognition and legitimacy.

They have asked for more on social media; movements like #AuratMarch and other online campaigns to contribute to proxy safety have also grown. More of them are now coming out as intersectional, as Pakistani and Baloch, as Muslim and a feminist, and as a nationalist and as a critic of the state. However, this multiplicity has further contributed to the discussion of national identity, but has been a source of growing tension. Online platforms, on the other hand, created discussion, misinformation, polarization, and virtual echo chambers that spread ideological segregation.

Also, the state's reaction to that new media environment has not been simple. On the one hand, the state has ceded power to the digital platform, while on the other hand, it has sought to regain control over digital expression through censorship, surveillance, and legislation aimed at digital expression. These, however, are acts that remind us of the struggle that has been around to determine who is entitled to say what Pakistan's national identity is. Both nationhood and the narrative of the nation have changed form and

come together, not without struggle between citizen voices and state authority.

In conclusion, the journey of the media in Pakistan—from a monolithic, state-controlled apparatus to a fragmented, digital ecosystem—mirrors the broader evolution of national identity itself. The media has so far been a double player, as it has not only united and divided, empowered and suppressed, but also reflected and redefined the Pakistani image. Hence, the identity of Pakistan will continue to be negotiated in the media as well.

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