

PEF Insights 2024

Media Engagement for Peacebuilding in Pakistan

*Contributing to National Stability, Pluralism
and Resilience*

*Key Insights, Principle of Engagement and
Recommendations*

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PEF: Cultivating Peace Through Media in Pakistan

“The power of religious media in shaping societal narratives is immense, influencing both positive and negative outcomes. By empowering this platform to advocate for peace, justice, and mutual respect, we have the potential to create lasting change and prevent the escalation of conflicts.” — Sabookh Syed, Anchor Person, PTV

Key Findings

1. Religious Content Consumption and Monetization: Religious content is highly consumed in Pakistan, indicating significant potential for religious media to impact peacebuilding initiatives. PEF's media training participants highlighted the strong correlation between high consumer interest in religious content and its monetization as a key driver for its production.

2. Imams and Religious Media as Key Influencers: Imams and Religious Media as Key Influencers hold significant influence as media figures due to daily interactions with the public during prayer times. This influence is amplified by religious media outlets, including television, print, and digital platforms, solidifying their dominant position in Pakistan's media landscape.

3. Unconscious Bias in Religious Journalism: Religious editors and journalists expressed that their greatest learning was understanding that they unknowingly were writing and reporting things that were based on their sectarian worldview and not necessarily on facts. Hence, much of their writing and reporting were biased, which they perceived as factual or truthful.

4. Primary Qualities of Media Professionals: Media professionals prioritize knowledge of current affairs, critical thinking, responsible journalism, impartiality, and reaching a broad audience as essential to their profession.

5. Key Barriers for Media Professionals: PEF's media training identified three primary challenges among Pakistani journalists and media influencers: a lack of professional environment, inadequate compensation, and systemic issues that hinder the media's ability to uphold journalistic integrity.

6. Journalists Lack Fake News Detection Skills: Our work with digital journalists revealed a significant gap in their ability to identify fake news. Participants expressed a clear need for enhanced training in this area, with 85% of the journalists admitting they were not familiar with fact-checking tools before attending the training.

7. Continuous Engagement of Media Professionals and Influencers
Based on PEF's media initiative, it is evident that continued engagement with *Media Professionals and Influencers* is essential. The alumni journalists effectively influence audience behaviors and perceptions by covering indigenous resilience and inspirational stories through their diverse media outlets.

This PEF Insights presents key findings, best practices, and recommendations derived from a comprehensive media engagement strategy. For over 14 years, the Peace and Education Foundation (PEF) in Pakistan has been at the forefront of enhancing education and empowering diverse communities to foster peacebuilding, social cohesion, and counter extremism. A cornerstone of PEF's initiatives is the *Media Voices for Peace (MVP)* program, which trains and mentors journalists to produce high-quality, and fact-based content on peace narrative. PEF named such media professionals as *Media Influencers*.

PEF first engaged influential religious and mainstream journalists in 2010, conducting a series of workshops to equip religious media with the skills needed for peacebuilding, reconciliation, and addressing extremist narratives, supported by a grant from the United Nations Alliance for Civilization. Since then, PEF's media engagement initiative has continued to evolve. This paper focuses particularly on the last

two years of intense programming and engagement of Pakistani journalists.

Project Introduction

The project "Engaging Media Influencers for Peace" based on PEF's decade-long engagement with the media including imams, religious editors, and religious influentials. This project is an expansion of PEF's media engagement with a more inclusive and pluralistic approach, bridging the divides among different media streams and platforms across Pakistan. The purpose of this initiative is to amplify the narrative of peace and inter-religious dialogue through religious, mainstream, and social media outlets. A total of 118 media influencers, both male and female, from various media were trained in peacemaking, sectarian reconciliation, and media skills. As a result of the training, participants were provided opportunities to develop and implement shortlisted 26 media seed projects. These projects utilized digital media such as TV and radio channels, print media such as newspapers, and social media platforms to disseminate peace narratives through multiple channels and media outlets. A key outcome of this initiative is the "Network of Media Voices for Peace," dedicated to fostering resilience, religious and cultural diversity across media platforms in Pakistan.

Understanding the pivotal role media plays in shaping public opinion, PEF proactively engages a wide array of media professionals, including editors, columnists, documentary makers, and reporters. This also includes influential figures from religious media across sectarian divides, representing print, electronic, and digital/social media platforms. PEF's innovative training programs equip this diverse network of media influencers with the necessary skills to address and combat critical issues such as fake news, misinformation, and hate speech. These programs emphasize the importance of promoting social reconciliation and peacebuilding strategies.

As a result, these trained media professionals have become advocates of responsible journalism, producing content that encourages

PEF's inclusive approach involves engaging journalists and media outlets across different regions, ethnicities, and genders. This unique, cross-cutting design allows Pakistani local, national, religious, and women journalists to interact, share their successes and challenges, learn world-class journalism skills, and develop lasting partnerships. These collaborations integrate peacebuilding, reconciliation, counter-extremism, and fact-checking tools for peace journalism.

“When women journalists tell the stories of women leaders, we challenge the narrative that women are merely victims. We showcase their importance as agents of change.” Fatima Nazish, DW

Cross-Cutting Selection of Media

1. Mainstream Media: Reporters and journalists covering various platforms (TV, radio, print, digital/social media).
2. Religious Media Influencers:
Print Media: Editors, contributors, and writers for religious journals and newspapers.
Broadcast Media: anchors, producers, and reporters for religious TV and radio programs.
3. Social Media: Bloggers and vloggers on platforms like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram.
Print and Online: Writers for religious magazines, newspapers, and periodicals
4. Minority Voices:
Women Journalists: From both mainstream and religious media backgrounds.
Women Activists & Social Workers: Focusing on women's rights.
Minority Journalists & Activists: Representing Christian, Hindu, and Sikh, communities.

sectarian harmony, facilitates interfaith dialogue, promotes gender empowerment, and provides nuanced coverage of ethnic and religious conflicts. By fostering a culture of reliable reporting and collaboration, PEF ensures that media influencers can effectively contribute to a more cohesive and inclusive society.

PEF's network of media influencers actively promotes positive narratives through various formats. The trained media influencers produce stories of everyday heroes, gender equality, and local peacebuilding efforts. These narratives are shared via documentaries, animated videos for children, forums, features, social media campaigns, and radio peace poetry and poster competitions. By celebrating local arts and culture, PEF's media network produces content that showcases worship places known for their acceptance of diverse communities and local heritage, ensuring these messages reach millions across Pakistan.

This strategic selection process fosters inclusivity and ensures PEF engages with individuals who can significantly influence public discourse. By focusing on responsible journalism and peacebuilding narratives, PEF aims to empower media influencers to counter extremist narratives and promote social cohesion in Pakistan.

“As a religious writer, I faced opposition from people of my faith community while covering stories about minorities. It was challenging but necessary to push through these barriers. I believe the role of media in promoting inter-religious harmony is vital, as it encourages dialogue and reduces sectarian biases.” — Hafiz Bilal Bashir, Religious Media Influencer

Enhancing Competencies in Key Thematic Areas of the 'Media Voices for Peace' Network in Pakistan Through a Nationwide Capacity Building Program

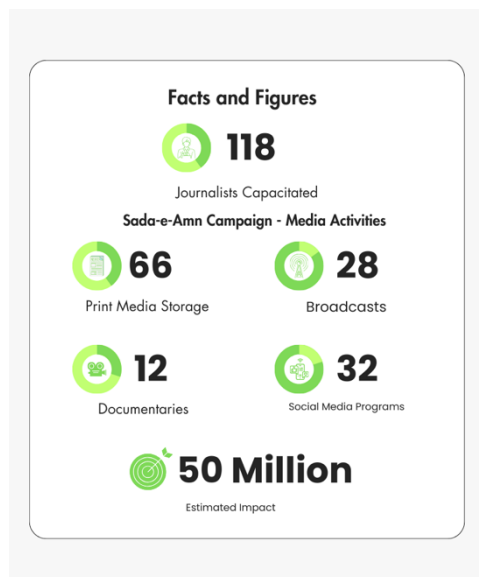
“In an age of misinformation, mainstream media must champion the cause of peace by ensuring accurate and balanced reporting. Our narratives can either fuel conflicts or build bridges, and the choice is ours.” — Farooq Malik, Hum TV

In Pakistan, where misinformation and biased reporting can escalate tensions and provoke violence, training in integrity and ethical standards is crucial for media professionals. Emphasizing factual accuracy and ethical journalism prevents the spread of false information that extremists use to fuel discord, fostering social cohesion rather than division. Given Pakistan's cultural and religious sensitivities, responsible reporting is essential to avoid sensationalism, particularly on sensitive topics like religious violence or blasphemy. This approach promotes a nuanced understanding of complex issues, countering simplistic and inflammatory narratives. The "Media Voices for Peace" network exemplified integrity and ethical standards through their inclusive coverage, such as the story from Lahore where a woman was saved from a mob, incorporating perspectives from all stakeholders.

“I witnessed discrimination firsthand when flood victims in Khairpur refused aid from us as Hindu volunteers due to religious differences. I believe media can play a crucial role in educating the public about religious diversity and the importance of coexistence, reflecting our rich history of diverse communities living side by side.”

— Rachna Kumari, Hindu Minority Activist.

Promoting peace journalism requires a deep understanding of local initiatives in interfaith tolerance, acceptance, gender equality, local peace heroes, and the arts and culture. PEF delivered specialized sessions on peacebuilding strategies, and the "Media Voices for Peace" network effectively applied these principles in their work. PEF employed a thorough review process to ensure all content adhered to the principles of peace journalism before publication. They produced documentaries highlighting how a Jain Mandir is preserved by a Madrassa in Multan, the initiation of Christmas celebrations in a mosque in Abbottabad, the struggles of Tabassum, the first woman leader of a Jirga, for women's rights, and the political empowerment of transgender individuals in Haripur. Training media professionals to represent diverse voices challenges extremist narratives and reduces the allure of ideologies that thrive on exclusion. "Media Voices for Peace" demonstrated this inclusivity by covering Hindu, Christian, Bahá'í, transgender, and persons with disabilities through documentaries and stories aired on national channels and digital platforms.



Principles: Media Engagement for Peacebuilding: Learning from the PEF Model

The Peace and Education Foundation's (PEF) successful application in Pakistan offers valuable insights into media engagement for peacebuilding, especially in religiously and culturally diverse environments. Here are the key principles highlighted by the PEF model:

1. Building Trust and Respect:

- **Develop Personal Relationships:** Establishing trust with key stakeholders and influential local figures is crucial. Decades of mistrust require genuine, long-term relationship building.
- **Respectful Engagement:** Demonstrating respect for religious beliefs and cultural norms fosters trust and cooperation.

2. Encouraging Change and Ownership:

- **Inspire through History:** Drawing upon history of peaceful coexistence derived from sub-continental and Islamic history can inspire stakeholders to consider peaceful principles and past examples of tolerance.
- **Empowering Change Agents:** Training programs should equip journalists and media influencers to be active peacebuilding change agents. Empowering them with the right tools and knowledge fosters leadership within their communities.

3. Promoting Inclusivity and Consensus:

- **Inclusive Participation:** Design programs that ensure broad representation of perspectives across gender, religion, ethnicity, region, and social class.
- **Consensus Building:** Facilitate dialogue and consensus-building to prevent potential opposition from those not initially involved.

4. Multi-Level Stakeholder Engagement:

- **Diverse Actors:** Engage a wide range of stakeholders, including religious media, print media, TV, radio, digital and social media representatives, and civil society organizations.
- **Indigenous Partnerships:** Partner with local journalists, platforms, media outlets, and press clubs for credibility and context. This fosters ownership and facilitates recruitment and project implementation.

5. Transparency and Communication:

- **Transparency is Key:** Maintain transparency throughout the process for trust building and integrity.
- **Active Listening and Empathy:** Acknowledge and address historical grievances and feelings of oppression. Active listening and empathy empower marginalized voices to participate in positive change.

6. Creating a Safe Space for Change:

- **Safe Environment for Exploration:** Create a nurturing environment where everyone can explore peacebuilding ideas without pressure or fear.
 - **Leader-Driven Outreach:** Motivate journalists and media influencers to engage others through their own outreach efforts. This organic approach often proves more effective and credible.
- 7. Indigenous Culture as a Unifying Force:**
- **Cultural Resilience Against Extremism:** Regions with thriving indigenous cultures, like the Cholistan nomads and rural Sindh, display lower extremist penetration, as confirmed by a 2023 UNESCO report on "Indigenous Languages and Peacebuilding in Asia." This connection was further emphasized by media professionals.
 - **Safeguarding Cultural Identity:** Implementing policies that safeguard indigenous languages and cultural practices through education and community-driven initiatives strengthens community bonds, as media stories highlighted.
- 8. Amplifying Marginalized Voices and Positive Narratives:**
- **Giving Voice to the Voiceless:** Media engagement can be a powerful tool for amplifying the voices of marginalized communities, ensuring their stories and perspectives are heard in the national discourse. This fosters empathy and understanding, promoting social cohesion.
 - **Power of Positive Examples:** Highlighting successful stories of peaceful coexistence and interfaith collaboration, as shared by media professionals, inspires hope and empowers communities to overcome divisions and build a more inclusive society. By showcasing positive narratives, media can counter the often sensationalist coverage of conflicts and violence, reinforcing the potential for peace and reconciliation.

By adhering to these principles, media organizations and peacebuilders can navigate the complexities of promoting social cohesion and countering extremism through responsible, inclusive, and empathetic journalism.

Recommendations

For Media and Civil Society Organizations

Incorporate Ongoing Training: Media organizations should continuously train their journalists in advanced reporting techniques using world-class best practices.

Empower Minority Voices: Press clubs should provide platforms for minority voices and collaborate with civil society organizations to combat misinformation by building the capacity of reporters and journalists.

Engage Religious Media:

Prevent Misinformation and Hate Speech: Religious media should be engaged to prevent the spread of misinformation and hate speech while using their influence to promote inclusive narratives.

Support Interfaith and Inter-sectarian Dialogue: Religious media should initiate and support interfaith and inter-sectarian dialogue through collaborative media projects that highlight shared values and promote mutual respect.

Enhance Connections Between Digital and Social Media Creators and Civil Society: Digital content creators, particularly those advocating for their own rights or involved in other rights-based advocacy efforts, should foster strong ties with civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). These connections will bolster advocacy efforts and provide additional resources. Conversely, civil society organizations and collectives should make a concerted effort to build alliances with digital creators on issues such as freedom of expression, access to information, and privacy.

Exchange Programs for Pakistani Journalists: Civil society organizations should initiate exchange programs in collaboration with regional and international media and civil society organizations striving for inclusive and pluralistic societies.

Recommendations

For Government of Pakistan

Independent Watchdog Mechanism: The government (PEMRA) should fund Academic Media departments and NGO' to serve as Watchdogs to identify extremist and fake news.

Public Education to Include Digital Literacy: The government should institute awareness and education campaigns to improve digital literacy in Pakistan. This initiative should start with the introduction of digital literacy courses at the primary school level, encompassing curricula on online harms, gender inclusion, social etiquette, and tolerance.

Develop Accessible Campaigns: The government should collaborate with digital artists and civil society to create visual-based campaigns targeting intolerance and social polarization. These campaigns should be accessible to people with low literacy levels.

Awareness Campaigns by Social Media Companies: Social media companies should invest in public education and awareness campaigns regarding safety features and community guidelines.

Invest in Media and Skill Development for Digital Creators: Government agencies, civil society organizations, and social media companies interested in promoting freedom of expression should invest in skills-based training programs, donate equipment, and facilitate media centers. These centers should provide digital creators with access to the necessary tools and resources to produce content without socio-economic barriers. Investments from both the public and private sectors in quality educational digital content are essential for economic viability and should come without strings attached.

Long-term and Consistent engagement Programming:

Beyond the political environment and change in government, there is need to implement sustained programming on various social themes in collaboration with government departments, civil society, and media organizations.

Strengthen Public-Private Partnerships:

Sustainable partnership to produce public interest content as stated in PEMRA Bill 2023 particularly tolerance and social cohesion.

PEF Network from Across Pakistan: Media Voices for Peace



PEF Network from Across Pakistan: Media Voices for Peace



About the Contributors

Azhar Hussain is the President and Founder of the Peace and Education Foundation. With over two decades of experience, he is a renowned expert in interfaith dialogue and peacebuilding. As a recipient of the Peacemakers in Action Award, Hussain has led initiatives globally, including in Mexico and Pakistan. His expertise in training and development has shaped policies and practices worldwide.

Ghulam Murtaza is the Director of the Peace and Education Foundation (PEF). With over 12 years of experience, he is a leading expert in countering violent extremism, human rights, and democratic governance. His work spans research, policy advocacy, and community empowerment, focusing on media engagement, youth empowerment, and interfaith dialogue.

Muhammad Hussain is a leading expert in peacebuilding and education, specializing in madrasa enhancement, media literacy, youth development, and interfaith dialogue. With over a decade of experience at PEF and as a faculty member at Columbia and Drew Universities, he has trained thousands and authored six books. Hussain is a sought-after speaker and consultant in the field.

About PEF Peace and Education Foundation (PEF) is a leading Pakistani NGO committed to fostering peace, tolerance, and democratic values through inclusive approaches. Leveraging education, capacity building, media engagement, and youth empowerment, PEF counteracts extremism and promotes interfaith harmony. With expertise in madrasa enhancement, curriculum development, media literacy, and youth development, PEF has trained thousands and implemented impactful programs nationwide. Their work has significantly enhanced media literacy, strengthened youth engagement, reduced sectarian tensions, and fostered a more inclusive and equitable society.



Website: <https://pef-global.org/>