

DIVERSITY AND PLURALISM: HOW PAKISTAN'S DIGITAL MEDIA REPORTS MINORITIES



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IRADA

Institute for Research, Advocacy and Development

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	4
List of Figures	4
Executive Summary	5
Introduction	8
Methodology	10
Limitations.....	12
Data Analysis and Findings	13
Big Media versus Indie Media: Majorly Different in Reporting Pakistani Minorities.....	13
Focus versus Reference	14
Singular versus Plural	15
Voices Amplified versus Voices Unheard.....	16
General Comments versus Expert Opinions	17
Women’s Inclusion versus Women’s Exclusion.....	18
Gender Blind versus Gender Sensitive	19
Accountable versus Unanswerable.....	20
Hapless Victims versus Agents of Change	21
Ignorant versus Informed	22
Recommendations	24



List of Tables

Table 1 Number of stories by news organization for legacy digital news media outlets ..	11
Table 2 Number of stories by news organization for non-legacy digital news media outlets.....	11



List of Figures

Figure 1 Comparison of coverage frames	14
Figure 2 Comparison of sourcing.....	15
Figure 3 Comparison of inclusion of minority voices	16
Figure 4 Comparison of reliance on minority voices as experts	17
Figure 5 Comparison of inclusion of gender perspectives.....	18
Figure 6 Comparison of gender themes	19
Figure 7 Comparison of accountability responses	20
Figure 8 Comparison of content framing.....	22
Figure 9 Comparison of solutions framing.....	23



Executive Summary

Pakistan's legacy news media is often guilty of fixating on political current affairs, harboring an urban bias and ignoring marginalized sections of the society. Over the last few years, however, a large part of a new crop of digital-only media organizations has purportedly started doing what older media organizations generally do not do. These new outlets claim to produce public interest content for and about those segments of the society that exist on the periphery. Are they any better than the legacy news media outlets at covering those marginalized segments? Or are they also falling in the same trap of sensationalist and clichéd coverage that the legacy news media outlets are known for?

These questions, and their answers, are important precisely because Pakistan is home to a wide variety of political, religious, ethnic, linguistic, economic and cultural groups and communities each of which is subjected to a specific set of discriminatory practices and exclusionary policies. For any rectification of this situation to work, the news media requires to be as inclusive of this diversity as it possibly can. One major framework for measuring whether it is making any effort to do that is to look at how it covers the most vulnerable section of the society – that is, religious minority groups and communities whose lives are affected by the daily intersection of multiple forms of discrimination. The sad fact is that their coverage generally illustrates how they are subjected to as much prejudice, discrimination and exclusion in the news media as they suffer in the rest of the society.

This research report uses this framework to answer the two questions raised above. It is part of a series that, since 2018, has evaluated the performance of the news media in covering Pakistan's religious minorities. It does this evaluation through a comparative analysis of the coverage of these minorities by online websites of legacy news publications and non-legacy digital news media outlets that are members of the Digital Media Alliance of Pakistan (DigiMAP), using nine indicators pertaining to public interest, journalism quality and content diversity.

The sample for this analysis includes 61 stories published by the websites of five legacy news media publications (Dawn.com, Tribune.com.pk, Thenews.com.pk, Nawaiwaqt.com.pk and Dunya.com.pk) which were compared with 67 stories (including videos) produced by 11 non-legacy digital news media websites (Balochistan24, Balochistan Voices, IBC, Journalism Pakistan, Native Media, Naya Daur, The Pen PK, The Peshawar Post, The Reporters, Tribal News Network and Voicepk.net). The time period covered by this sample started on June 1, 2022 and ended on September 10, 2022.

Main findings of this analysis are:

Non-legacy digital news media outlets provided enterprising coverage: Exclusive news stories that proactively explored the lives of religious minorities made up around 95



percent of the sampled output of non-legacy digital news media outlets. In comparison, only 10 percent of the legacy news media's coverage consisted of exclusive reporting. This only proves what is already known: that the traditional coverage of religious minorities is generally reactive, mostly based on statements issued and speeches made on special occasions. The digital-only news media outlets, on the other hand, seem to be invested in reaching out to minority communities to report on their pressing problems from where those problems exist.

Non-legacy digital news media outlets amplified minority voices: An overwhelming majority of the non-legacy digital news media content included quotes from minority sources (91 percent) and relied on minority sources as subject experts (79 percent). In comparison, more than half of the stories by legacy digital news media outlets (53 percent) did not quote a representative of the religious minorities they covered. This means that these stories did not include voices from the very communities they were about. Similarly, only one in five legacy digital news media stories included a religious minority representative as an expert source. Consistent with a baseline information gathered in 2018, this finding indicates that the legacy news media outlets have not changed their practice of ignoring religious minorities in their coverage.

More work needed for gender sensitive coverage: Stories done by the non-legacy digital news media outlets included the voices of more women than the stories produced by the legacy digital news media outlets did. Around 46 percent stories by the former included women sources compared to only 15 percent by the latter. The study, though, shows that both types of outlets need to improve their gender focus. Just under 20 percent of the non-legacy digital news media stories were specifically about gender-related issues while the legacy news websites fared even worse, with only 7 percent of their coverage of religious minorities having been devoted to gender-specific themes.

Digital journalism failed to hold government accountable: Only a third of the stories about religious minorities published by the non-legacy digital news media outlets included accountability responses from government officials while only a quarter of the legacy digital news media stories did the same. This was despite the fact that many of the stories being analyzed in this study highlighted government's failure to protect the rights of religious minorities and address their economic, social and political problems.

Non-legacy digital news media showed minorities as victims but also offered solutions: A majority of the stories produced by the non-legacy news media outlets (around 80 percent) showed the minority communities as victims or helpless. But, in a departure from previous trends, a majority of their stories (81 percent) also offered solutions to the problems faced by the minorities. These solutions included improvements in legislation, government's policies, rules and regulations, enforcement of a Supreme Court verdict known as Jillani



judgment and the provision of public funds to address their grievances. A majority of legacy digital news media stories also showed minorities as victims (59 per cent) but they provided solutions to the problems in only less than half of their stories (43 percent).

All these findings were shared with the Alliance for Diversity and Pluralism in Media – an advisory alliance of journalists and rights activists which promotes inclusive and pluralistic public interest journalism in Pakistan. After considering these findings, the alliance made the following suggestions:

1. **Balance the coverage of challenges with stories about opportunities:** Digital news organizations should continue to report the violations of minority rights but they should also focus on success stories from the minority groups to help reduce the alienation experienced by them and celebrate their participation in social, political and economic spheres.
2. **Address inherent bias and engage minority journalists to reduce helplessness framing:** Most stories included in the study have portrayed minorities as helpless victims. To rectify this problem, more learning opportunities should be provided to journalists so that they can recognize and address their inherent bias towards religious minorities which seeps into their stories more often than not. The non-legacy news outlets, in particular, should engage journalists from religious minorities to address this problem.
3. **Increase gender diversity in newsrooms to improve gender sensitivity of the content:** Digital news media outlets should increase gender diversity in their newsrooms and ensure that women journalists are also made part of their editorial decision-making mechanisms. This will, hopefully, increase gender inclusivity in the news stories produced by these outlets.
4. **Build rapport with religious minority communities:** The minority communities are generally reluctant to open up to journalists belonging to the majority community. Journalists, therefore, should build trust with them through repeated engagements. These communities should also be helped and encouraged to engage with journalists both more frequently and more openly.
5. **Develop investigative stories around Jilani judgment:** Digital news media outlets can, and should, do thorough and in-depth investigative reporting about the key aspects of Jilani judgment delivered by the Supreme Court in 2014 because it serves as a very useful analytical tool to examine the state of religious minorities in Pakistan.



Introduction

The Institute for Research, Advocacy and Development (IRADA) conducted a baseline study in 2018 on the representation of religious minorities in Pakistan’s news media and the characteristic features of the news coverage given to their issues¹. That study found that news media exhibited low interest in reporting about religious minorities and most of the news coverage of these minorities lacked voices from among them. This coverage was also often incidental and reactive as it was mostly done around acts of violence committed against religious minorities.

Based on the findings of that baseline study, IRADA started working on a media development project with member organizations of the Digital Media Alliance of Pakistan (DigiMAP) – a collective of independent, digital-only news media start-ups that focus on public interest journalism – to improve the media coverage of religious minorities. Under this project, DigiMAP members were provided small grants and mentorship in 2021 to produce and publish 50 pieces of public interest content about these minorities. At the end of that exercise, a research study was conducted to compare this experimental sample of supported content with the coverage produced by the legacy digital news media outlets – websites associated with traditional and established print and broadcast media houses of Pakistan – which were not a part of the development project but were earlier included in the baseline study². This research study proved the effectiveness of support provided to the DigiMAP members as the coverage of religious minorities produced by its member outlets turned out to be far better than the coverage of the same minorities by their legacy media counterparts on almost all counts of quality, diversity and inclusivity.

The study also showed that non-legacy digital news media outlets associated with DigiMAP produced more evidence-based, contextualized reporting than the legacy news media outlets did, addressing gaps highlighted by the baseline study, particularly the lack of proactive and empathetic storytelling. Their news content included more sources from religious communities and better representation of women than the content generated by the legacy digital media outlets, showing that training and support can help journalists listen to the communities better and produce higher quality news content within a human rights framework.

To build on the gains of 2021, IRADA scaled up its support for DigiMAP members next year so that they could produce more public interest content on religious minority groups. As a result, in 2022, these non-legacy news media outlets were provided capacity building workshops, small grants, news planning tools such as pitch forms and checklists, mentorship services and editorial support to publish 100 content pieces. IRADA also sought regular

¹ Alam, M. A., Rehmat, A., & Lehmann-Jacobsen, E. (2018). Narratives of Marginalization: Reporting Religious Minorities in Pakistani Media. IRADA. Accessed online at <https://irada.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Narratives-of-Marginalization-1.pdf>

² Naeem, W., Alam, M. A., & Rehmat, A. (2021). Digital Media and Diversity: How Pakistan’s Media Reports Minorities. IRADA, Freedom Network, and DigiMAP. Accessed online at <https://irada.org.pk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Digital-Media-and-Diversity.pdf>



guidance and advice from the Alliance for Diversity and Pluralism in Media, an independent coalition of journalists and rights activists that provide strategy advice for sensitive, inclusive and pluralist news coverage in the public interest, to continue improving the support project.

The research study is an exercise to analyze the outcome of that project. As the third review in a series -- following the baseline study of 2018 and the comparative analysis of 2021 -- it employs the same framework used previously to conduct a trend analysis of the news content generated in 2022 both by the DigiMAP members and a select group of the legacy news media outlets. Using news stories published between June and September 2022, it examines if improvements in quality, sensitivity and diversity that were observed in the supported content in 2021 have held up at scale or if expanding the content support programme has led to a deterioration in adhering to best practices of public interest journalism despite available technical and editorial support mechanisms. It also offers recommendations for addressing the challenges that remain to be addressed or the new ones that have emerged this year.



Methodology

This research study uses specific terminology to distinguish between the two types of digital news media outlets that form the data sample for its analysis. These terms are “legacy digital news media” and “non-legacy digital news media” and these are defined below:

Legacy digital news media: These are news websites of legacy news media houses– i.e, those business organizations that existed prior to the online information era and still continue to run print or broadcast news media outlets. Though these websites largely reproduce the contents generated by print and broadcast wings of their organizations, they sometimes also publish stories on their own.

For this series of research studies, first of all the news websites of those legacy news media houses were identified which are known to be the most visited and most influential, given their web traffic rankings and the findings of a media ownership monitor³. These rankings and findings were then reviewed in terms of availability, searchability, and accessibility of the news content to choose the following five websites for analysis: Dawn.com, The News International (thenews.com.pk), The Express Tribune (tribune.com.pk), Roznama Dunya (dunya.com.pk), and Nawai Waqt (nawaiwaqt.com.pk). These websites together offer a mix of English and Urdu journalism.

Non-legacy digital news media: The non-legacy news media outlets chosen for this study are digital-only journalism startups that publish their content on websites or social media networks and are members of the Digital Media Alliance of Pakistan (DigiMAP)⁴. These include: Balochistan24, Balochistan Voices, IBC, Journalism Pakistan, Native Media, Naya Daur, The Pen PK, The Peshawar Post, The Reporters, Tribal News Network and Voicepk.net.

The timeframe for data collection for this study was set at 100 days, starting from June 1, 2022 and ending on September 10, 2022. Daily monitoring and website searches carried out during this period showed that legacy digital news media outlets produced 61 stories related to religious minorities in those 100 days. The non-legacy digital news media organizations affiliated with DigiMAP produced 67 stories on the same subject in the same period.

³ Similarweb <https://www.similarweb.com/top-sites/pakistan/category/news-and-media/> and Media Ownership Monitor Pakistan: <http://pakistan.mom-gmr.org/en/media/>

⁴ Digital Media Alliance of Pakistan: <https://digimap.pk/>



The breakup of the content published by each news outlet is given in the tables below:

Name of news organisation	Number of stories on religious minorities
Dawn.com	19
Nawai Waqt (nawaiwaqt.com.pk)	8
Roznama Dunya (dunya.com.pk)	8
The Express Tribune (tribune.com.pk)	12
The News International (thenews.com.pk)	14
Legacy digital news media (Overall)	61

Table 1 Number of stories by news organization for legacy digital news media outlets

Name of news organisation	Number of stories on religious minorities
Balochistan24	4
Balochistan Voices	14
IBC	15
Journalism Pakistan	2
Native Media	10
Naya Daur	1
The Pen PK	13
The Peshawar Post	1
The Reporters	2
Tribal News Network	4
Voicepk.net	1
Non-legacy digital news media (Overall)	67

Table 2 Number of stories by news organization for non-legacy digital news media outlets

The main research question for the study was to compare the coverage of religious minorities done by the legacy and non-legacy digital news media outlets and determine which one of them did better in presenting their issues and problems while ensuring inclusivity, empathy and other journalism quality standards. Nine indicator questions, given below, were used for this comparative analysis:

1. Coverage frame: Was the news content incidental (for example, event-based or incident-based reporting) or exclusive (for example, issue-based reporting)?
2. Sourcing: Did the news content include multiple sources of information? (Yes or No)
3. Minority voices: Did the news content include human sources belonging to religious minority communities? (Yes or No)
4. Expertise: Did the news content feature members of the religious minority communities as subject experts for the issues highlighted in the story? (Yes or No)



5. Gender Perspectives: Did the news content include women as sources? (Yes or No)
6. Gender Themes: Did the news content focus specifically on gender issues or problems faced by women belonging to religious minority groups? (Yes or No)
7. Accountability: Did the news content include accountability responses from official sources in connection with the issues or rights violations highlighted? The accountability responses could show how officials are trying to solve the problem faced by the community. (Yes or No)
8. Content Framing: Did the news content show the religious minorities as victims, as helpless or as targets of violent incidents? (Yes or No)
9. Solutions Framing: Did the news content mention possible solutions to the issues highlighted, including by referencing the 2014 Supreme Court order (Jillani judgment) on the rights of religious minorities? (Yes or No)

Limitations

Following are the limitations of this study:

1. It uses the legacy digital news media outlets as a control group though this is not a purely scientific approach. Also, because the research team did not have any interaction with the chosen outlets, their coverage patterns during the data collection timeframe could have been influenced by several factors other than the ones being analyzed in this study.
2. The timeframe for data collection was arbitrary and based on convenience. The findings of the study, therefore, only reflect the content that was available during this time period and cannot be generalized for the overall coverage of religious minorities by the same news outlets throughout the year.
3. The identification of news content from the legacy digital news media outlets was based on web searches and monitoring and, thus, may have been inconsistent and incomplete. The data sample, therefore, should be viewed as non-exhaustive though the effects on the analysis of any relevant but missing stories should be regarded as purely unintentional.
4. The findings below are based on a limited selection of news items, as indicated above, and a specific set of research indicators. They, therefore, should be seen as indicative of the sample analyzed and should not be applied to the general coverage of religious minorities falling outside the study's own criteria.



Data Analysis and Findings

This section shares the data findings and discussion of results of the comparative analysis.

Big Media versus Indie Media: Majorly Different in Reporting Pakistani Minorities

It is a cliché to say that only apples could be compared with apples but, in complete fairness, some apples are clearly not comparable with other apples. So, while this study points out that 11 independent non-legacy digital news media outlets in Pakistan produced 67 stories about religious minorities in 100 days in the summer of 2022 and five legacy digital news media outlets (that are part of licensed TV, radio or print media companies) produced 61 stories during the same time on the same subject, there are vast differences in how these two types of news organizations operate:

- Firstly, and also most importantly, the non-legacy digital news media organizations do not have the financial resources that are on the beck and call of the legacy news media.
- Secondly, legacy media outlets have vast reporting networks, several reporters with specialized beats and experienced editorial desks that help their digital news platforms but the non-legacy digital news media platforms, in most cases, are often staffed by so few people that the same person might end up working as a reporter, as an editor and as a producer.
- Thirdly, the privileged access to official information or data and government functionaries that legacy news outlets enjoy because of their commercial, social and political clout and because of their established brand names is almost always unavailable to the new, small, and independent non-legacy digital news media outlets.

To sum it up, even when a study aims at doing a like-for-like comparison, it cannot overlook the discrepancies and differences in the two sets of news media whose contents it aims at comparing.

Considering these caveats, the digital platforms of legacy news media should have outperformed the small, poorly resourced non-legacy digital news outlets by a huge margin – both quantitatively and qualitatively. They do not. The output of legacy digital news platforms, indeed, leaves a lot to be desired and not just in terms of numbers of stories produced. Their news coverage remains largely based on statements, routine coverage of judicial, political, and civil society activities and seldom takes the trouble to explore an issue in detail.

The following analysis offers an in-depth look into the two sets of the stories produced by the two types of media outlets mentioned above and shows how they diverge sharply on the basis of most editorial and socio-political frameworks relevant to the coverage of the non-Muslim citizens of Pakistan.



Focus versus Reference

Were the stories incidental (based on some incident or event) or were they exclusive (based on the exploration of some issue)?

The data gathered for this study shows that more than 90 percent of the stories the legacy digital news media outlets produced (55 out of 61) between June and September 2022 were based on some incident – including but not limited to court cases, political events or meetings.

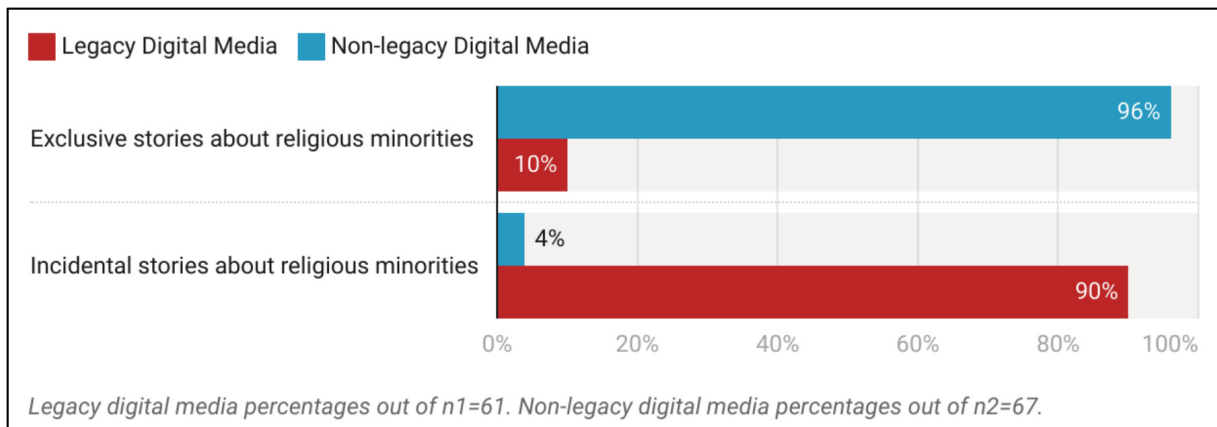


Figure 1 Comparison of coverage frames

In a welcome departure from the past, though, most of the incidents covered by the legacy digital news media are not of a violent nature. Many of them, in fact, are either about the participation of religious minorities in political processes or they concern assurances, issued by various functionaries of the State and the government on important national days, for the protection of their rights.

The non-legacy digital news media outlets, on the other hand, take a massive lead in producing exclusive content: with only less than 5 percent of all their 67 stories covering various incidents. A closer look, though, reveals that even these incidental stories do not have a usual event-based hook. Two of them explore how the Covid-19 resulted in job losses for many Christian families in Lahore and the third one follows up on a case of forced conversion in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

The exclusive stories produced by these non-legacy digital news media outlets – in a sharp contrast to the majority of the output of traditional legacy news media outlets – also do not exhibit a narrow focus on just a few routine topics such as religious freedoms, the condition of places of worship, forced conversions, and the lack of educational and economic opportunities for non-Muslim Pakistanis.



They, in fact, cover a whole range of subjects, including housing, shortage of burial places, absence of laws governing marriages and divorces, lack of access to clean drinking water, constitutional and political rights of religious minorities, the quality and efficacy of parliamentary representation of non-Muslim communities, their role in the formation of Pakistan and their representation and presentation in the national media. This diversified coverage clearly shows that the discrimination they face is not restricted to religious, social, and economic spheres but it extends to civic, political, constitutional, and cultural spheres too.

Singular versus Plural

Did the stories have more than one source of information – thereby making them more reliable?

The two sets of stories have another important qualitative difference: Only 16 out of 61 stories produced by the legacy digital news media outlets have more than one source of information. This means that, regardless of the vast financial and experienced human resource they possess, only 26 percent of their stories pass one of the most essential editorial tests – that a story must have at least two sources of information for it to be credible.

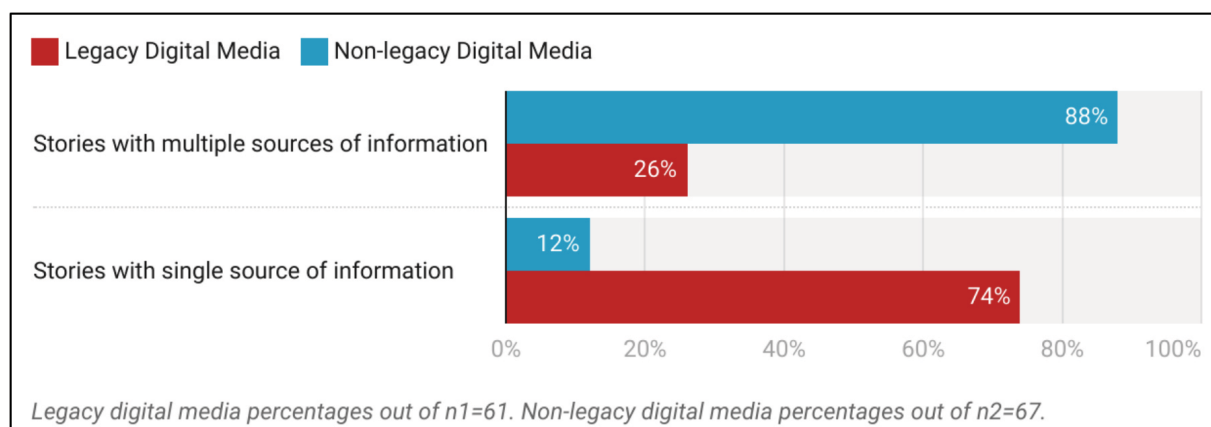


Figure 2 Comparison of sourcing

While this ratio corroborates the earlier conclusion that the most of the output by the legacy digital news media outlets is premised on the coverage of certain incidents, it also suggests that their reporting and editorial desks do not bother much about doing their job well when it comes to the coverage of religious minorities because they neither fear any social or financial implications (perhaps because the subjects of these stories are both too poor and too few to really matter to them) nor are they able to overcome their explicit and implicit biases in the favor of the majority Muslim community (to which they mostly belong presumably) and against the minority non-Muslim communities.



In contrast, non-legacy digital news media outlets have produced only eight stories that are based on information gleaned from single sources. A deeper examination, however, reveals that most of them have done so because of the nature of their format: Five of them are interview-based video reports. The first one is a video feature on Nankana Sahab, the birthplace of Sikhism’s founder Guru Nanak. The second is an interview of a Christian social activist who uses the right to information laws to draw the attention of authorities to the social, civic, administrative, and economic problems of ordinary citizens. The third, fourth and fifth single-source stories are interview-based discussions respectively about the educational discrimination being faced by non-Muslims in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, the Christian marriage and divorce law, and the mainstreaming of religious minorities in electoral processes.

This clearly suggests that most of the reporters and editors working at these outlets were not just careful that they must do their journalistic duty well by including more than one source in their stories, they were also empathetic enough towards the plight of non-Muslim Pakistanis to portray them in a journalistically professional manner.

Voices Amplified versus Voices Unheard

Did the stories include sources from religious minority communities?

An overwhelming majority of stories produced by legacy digital news media outlets suffer from a similar – but decidedly a more glaring -- flaw. Out of these, 35 do not quote even a single source from non-Muslim communities whereas another 19 have only one non-Muslim source. The number of stories that have two non-Muslim sources is just six and only one story has as many as seven sources belonging to minority communities. These numbers, however, hide the fact that most of the stories with multiple minority sources, indeed, are either collection of statements or they report speeches made at some event

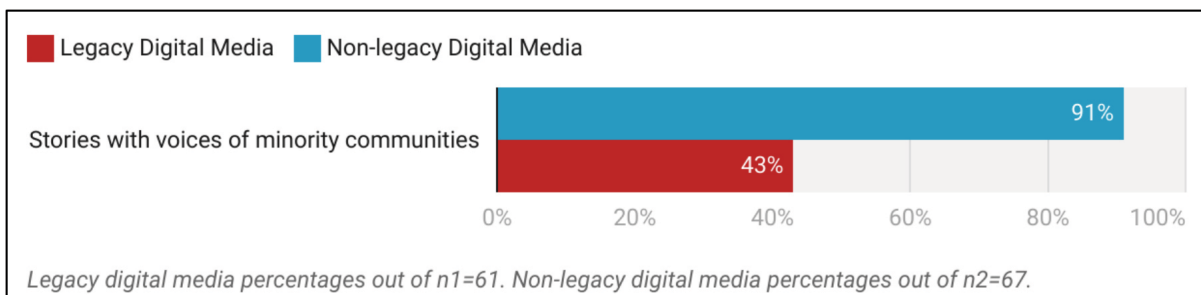


Figure 3 Comparison of inclusion of minority voices

This contrasts completely with the output of non-legacy digital news media outlets which have produced only six stories with zero sources from the minority communities whereas



the number of stories with more than one non-Muslim source is a staggering 44 out of 67. These include 11 stories that have three non-Muslim sources each, eight that have four non-Muslim sources each, five that have five non-Muslim sources each, two that have six non-Muslim sources each, three that have eight non-Muslim sources each and one story -- on suicides among scheduled caste Hindus -- has as many as 25 sources from minority communities.

This indicator clearly shows that most of the stories published by legacy media on religious minorities are 'about' the religious minorities, not 'of' them. For the journalists working with such media outlets, the views of the people from the minority communities do not seem to be important even in subjects and issues that concern these communities directly.

General Comments versus Expert Opinions

Did the stories feature human sources from religious minority groups as subject experts?

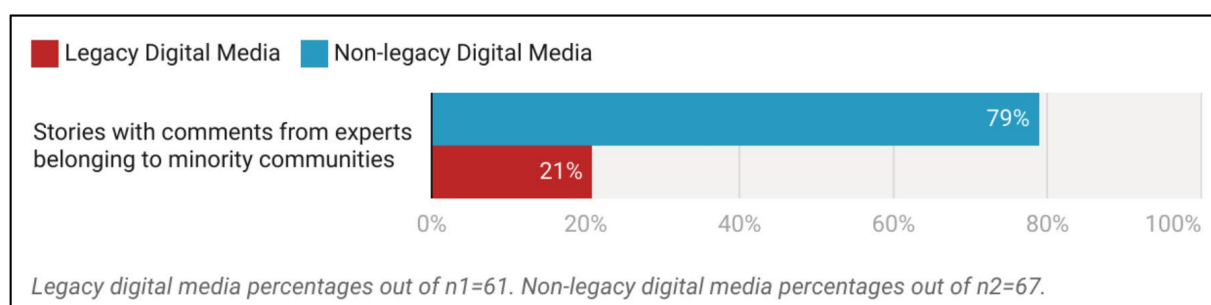


Figure 4 Comparison of reliance on minority voices as experts

That legacy news media outlets make little effort to reach out to religious minorities even while covering their issues is quite well known. The stories under review only corroborate it again because in 48 – or around 79 percent -- of them no expert from minority community has been quoted. Only 10 of them quote one minority expert each, two of them quote four minority experts each and one of them quotes seven minority experts.

It is, though, important to mention here that the people quoted in these stories are not experts in the technocratic sense, but they are rather civil society activists and legislators who come from religious minorities. Equally importantly, the writers and reporters of these stories have not contacted these experts proactively to seek their views but rather have quoted their statements or speeches delivered during public events.

The data gathered from the stories produced by the non-legacy digital news media outlets, however, paints a very different picture. It shows 79 percent of these stories quoted experts from the minority communities. In total, these stories included the views of as many as 108 experts belonging to non-Muslim communities living in Pakistan.



This suggests very vividly that the reporters and writers working for these non-legacy digital media outlets made a serious effort to understand the issues confronting the minority communities from the insider perspective of experts belonging to them. They have not just relied on the opinions of experts from the majority community who cannot but see these issues as outsiders and could thereby either misunderstand or misinterpret them.

Women’s Inclusion versus Women’s Exclusion

Did the stories include women sources?

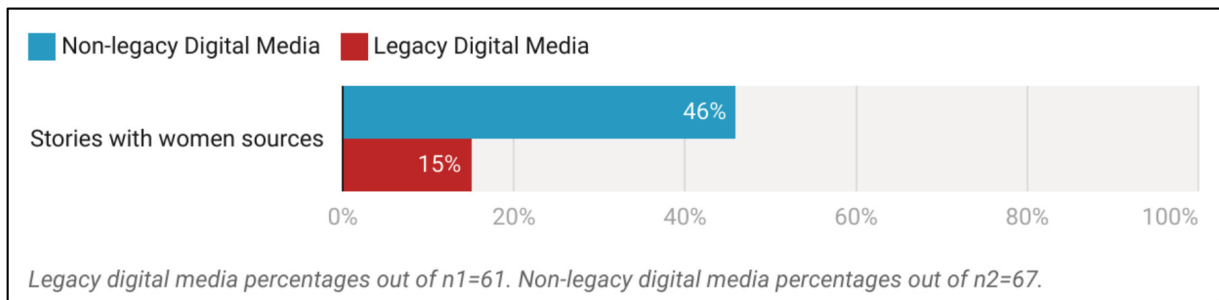


Figure 5 Comparison of inclusion of gender perspectives

Another area in which non-legacy digital news media outlets massively outperformed their traditional counterparts is the inclusion of women in their coverage of religious minorities. The 67 stories they produced during the time period under review have quoted a total of 66 women – both Muslim and non-Muslim – in spite of the fact that 36 of them did not include even a single woman source. In the remaining 31 stories (or 46 percent of the total 67 stories), those with at least one woman source are 19 whereas three stories each have two women as sources, three stories each have three women as sources, two stories have four women sources, three stories have five women sources each and one story – on suicides among scheduled caste Hindus -- has as many as nine women sources.

Interestingly, not all of these stories are written or reported by female journalists. While this number negates the generally held notion that women do not like to speak to male journalists, it also suggests that it is not the gender of a reporter or writer that helps them to break professional barriers and boundaries but rather the trust they can gain from the subjects of their reporting and writing.

In comparison to the achievement of non-legacy digital news media outlets in this regard, the failure of the legacy news media outlets appears very stark – around 85 percent of their stories did not quote a single woman source. Only six of their stories quote one women



source each while three others quote two women sources each. Even these stories comprise of either statements or speeches, some of them made by women.

Gender Blind versus Gender Sensitive

How many stories were about gender-related issues or about the issues faced by women from religious minority communities?

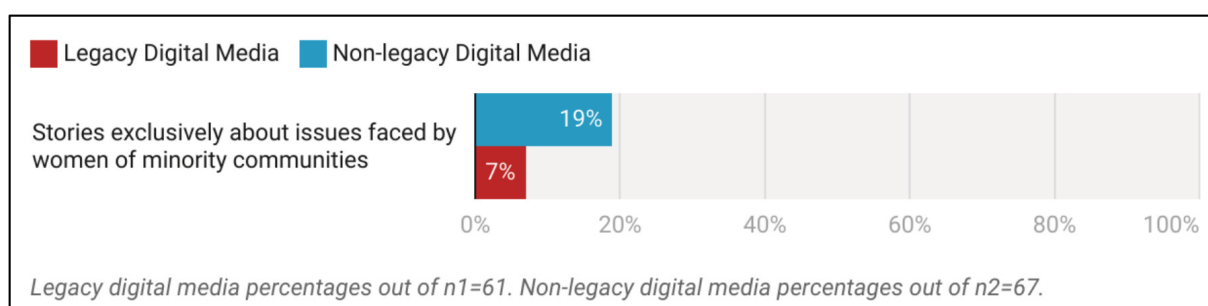


Figure 6 Comparison of gender themes

A well-known fact about Pakistani news media is that it does not cover gender-based or women's issues sufficiently, disregarding the fact that they form half of Pakistan's total population. This situation becomes worse when it comes to the coverage of minority women since they mostly live in remote and most under-developed parts of the country where journalists usually hesitate to go. Social and religious barriers further hamper interactions between minority women and journalists who are mostly male and usually belong to the majority Muslim community.

While both the sets of stories under review in this study also exhibit this negative bias, non-legacy digital news media outlets have done relatively better than the legacy news media outlets even in this aspect. Out of the 67 stories the non-legacy digital news media have produced in the period under review, 13 (or 19 percent) specifically concern issues facing the minority women. This could have been improved with better editorial guidance and supervision through a programmatic emphasis on the coverage of women belonging to non-Muslim communities.

The legacy digital news media outlets, on the other hand, have produced only four stories that specifically focus on the issues facing minority women – a mere 6.5 percent of their total output – which is unfortunately quite in line with the usual news media practices in the country. This lack of focus could be also put down to the fact that legacy news media outlets spend a lot of time, space and money on covering politics, ignoring all the rest of the issues in general and those concerning minorities and minority women in particular.



Accountable versus Unanswerable

Did the story include accountability responses from government officials or authorities in connection with the issues highlighted?

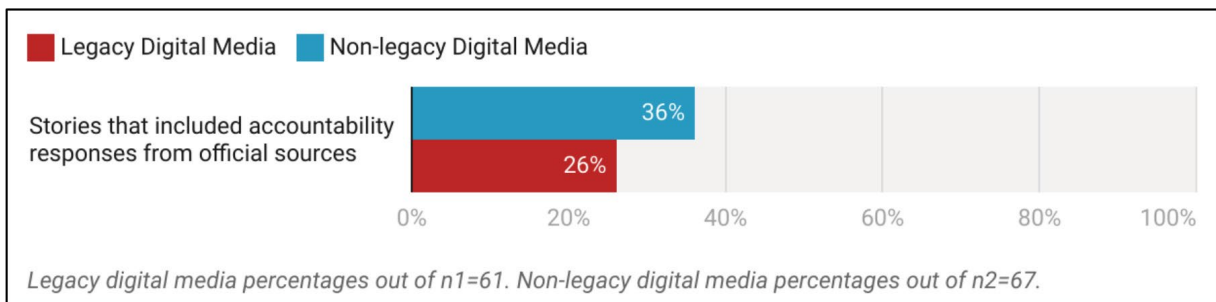


Figure 7 Comparison of accountability responses

The data about this indicator shows that legacy news media outlets have done more or less as well – or as bad -- as the non-legacy digital ones. Out of the 61 stories produced by the legacy digital news media, only 16 (or 26 percent) quoted either one or more officials whereas such quotes are found in 24 stories (or 36 percent) produced by the non-legacy media. There is, however, one vital difference between the two sets of stories. The reporters of the ones produced by the non-legacy digital news media outlets seem to have proactively sought official comments and versions on the specific topics they were covering; in contrast, several stories published by legacy digital news media outlets during the period under review have official comments and versions in the form of routine statements – often made during public events and not specifically given to the journalist concerned.

This is surprising given that the legacy news media outlets are established enough to spend money and human resources to include official comments and versions in their stories – a necessary condition for a story to be credible and balanced. Their well-established name and fame also suggest that their staff might have easier access to the government officials than those working for the little known independent non-legacy digital news media outlets have. Similarly, the reporting and editorial staff at the legacy news media outlets is usually quite experienced and their reporters generally enjoy strong personal contacts with the officials in the beats they cover.

Yet their stories under review demonstrate that the journalistic norm of approaching the government officials for comments and versions is clearly on the wane – particularly in the coverage of non-Muslim Pakistanis. This might mean that these outlets are not as much bothered as they should be about holding the government and its officials accountable on the issues and problems facing the minority communities.



Hapless Victims versus Agents of Change

Did the stories portray religious minorities as helpless victims and targets of violence?

Both sets of stories under review have covered almost the same number of violent incidents – four by non-legacy digital news media outlets and five by legacy digital news media outlets. This might mean that the time period covered by this study was a relatively peaceful one for religious minorities in Pakistan. Otherwise, as we already know well, when it bleeds, it always leads – an observation also supported in the context of reporting of Pakistani religious minorities by previous research studies in this series. News media organizations of all types never miss the opportunity to report on incidents of violence as and when they occur.

But that is as far as the similarities go between the non-legacy digital news media outlets and the legacy news media outlets being reviewed here. While the non-legacy media clearly states that religious minorities are almost always the victims of some kind of a religious discrimination or social, economic, legal or constitutional injustice, the legacy digital news media seem to be portraying a society in which the minorities enjoy considerable amount of religious, economic and political rights.

Like, for instance, 54 stories produced by the non-legacy digital news media outlets show that non-Muslims living in Pakistan are not just facing various forms of discrimination, they also find themselves unable to do anything to change their circumstances. A caveat to this finding is offered in the discussion of the next indicator on solutions-oriented coverage.

On the other hand, 36 stories produced by the legacy digital news media outlets show the minorities as victims. It is important to note that this is a majority or 59 percent of the total stories published by the legacy digital news media outlets. However, these victims are not shown to be helpless in all the cases because in at least nine stories they are shown to have some kind of direct or indirect agency to change their situation for the better. Whether these numbers reflect Pakistan's reality is an altogether different question.

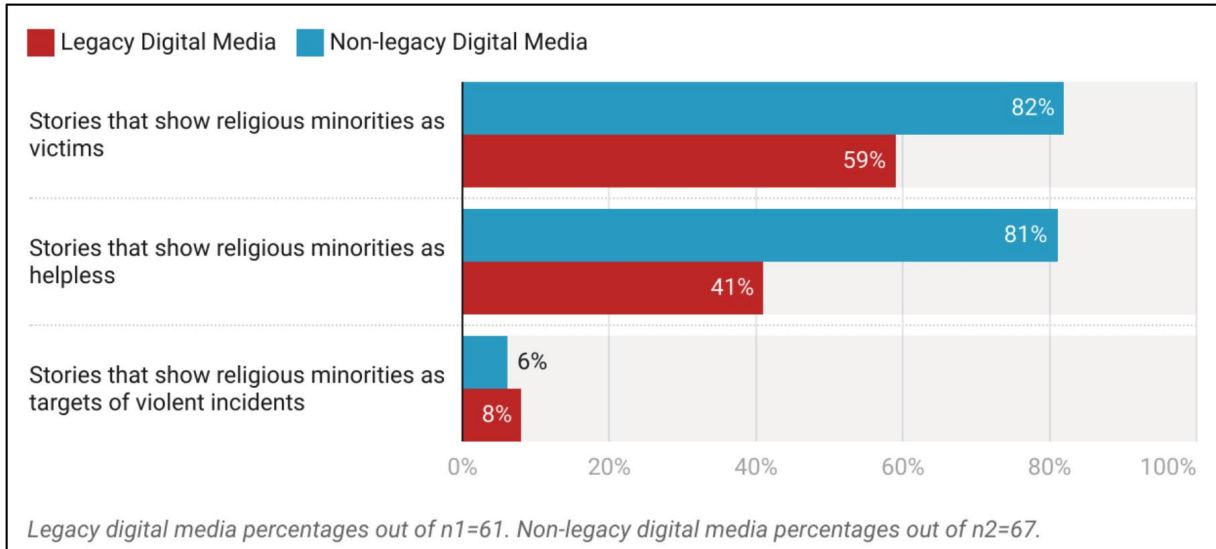


Figure 8 Comparison of content framing

Ignorant versus Informed

Did the stories mention possible solutions to the issues highlighted?

In 2013, the then Chief Justice of Pakistan, Justice Tassaduq Hussain Jilani, took a suo moto notice about acts of terrorism targeting non-Muslim Pakistanis and the vandalism of their places of worship. In June 2014, he and his two fellow judges issued a judgment that made it mandatory for the government to take steps for the protection and promotion of religious, educational, economic, legal, and political rights of the minorities. Since then, various groups and organizations working on improving the life of non-Muslim Pakistanis have been following up on this landmark verdict in order to ensure its implementation – which remains lackluster and half-hearted at best and non-existing at worst.

One of the major reasons for this situation is that the news media, in general, has spectacularly failed to present the Jilani judgment as a useful solution to the issues and problems faced by non-Muslims living in Pakistan. In fact, the judgment makes it to news headline only when some judicial proceedings take place to track progress on its implementation. This trend is clearly borne out by the stories produced by the legacy digital news media outlets during the period under review: Consequently, only one out of 61 of them mentions this judgment.

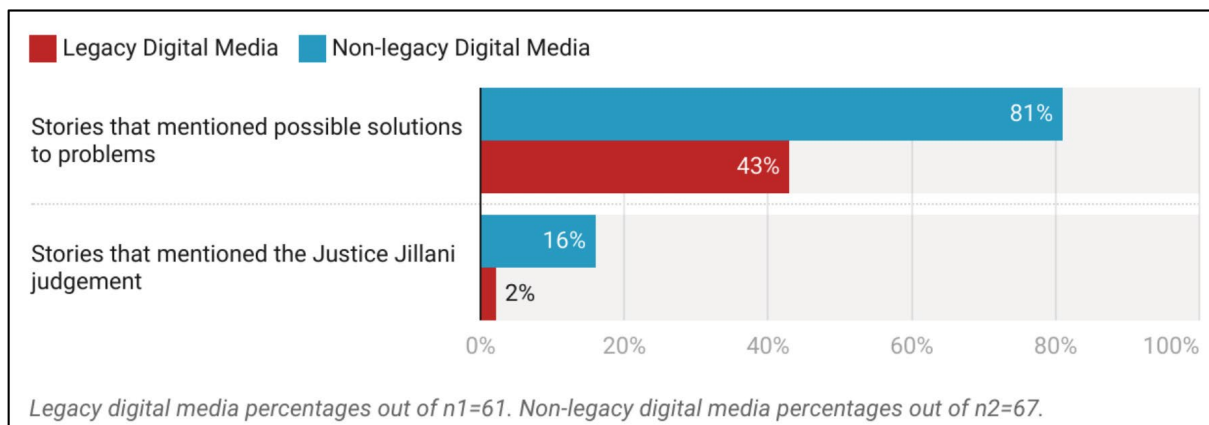


Figure 9 Comparison of solutions framing

The non-legacy digital news media outlets, however, have fared much better: 11 out of the 67 stories produced by them during the period under review refer to this judgment. At least three of them do not merely refer to it but offer detailed reporting on how its implementation could have addressed many questions about the status and the state of religious minorities in Pakistan but have not because of the government's lack of interest and attention.

It is also important to note here that while previously it was found that the non-legacy digital news media outlets portrayed religious minorities as victims and helpless in a majority of their coverage, the same outlets also mentioned possible solutions to the issues faced by minority communities in 81 percent of the stories. This indicates that while the portrayal of minority representatives requires further attention, these non-legacy media outlets are at least considerate about constructive reporting that could unearth evidence-based answers to systemic injustices and challenges.



Recommendations

The findings of the study were shared with the members of the Alliance of Diversity and Pluralism in Media (ADPM) in a meeting held in Islamabad in the first week of December 2022. ADPM is an advisory coalition of journalists and human rights defenders which works for the promotion of diversity and inclusivity in Pakistan's news media. The participants of the meeting provided following recommendations to improve the coverage of religious minorities:

- 1. Balance the coverage of challenges with stories about opportunities:** The digital news organizations should continue to report rights violations but they should also focus on success stories from the marginalized communities and minority groups. Such stories can help reduce the alienation experienced by these communities and groups by highlighting and celebrating their participation in social, political and economic spheres. Efforts being made by individuals and organizations to bring change in the lives of religious minorities in particular and in the lives of Pakistanis in general may also be highlighted.
- 2. Address inherent bias and engage minority journalists to reduce helplessness framing:** Most of the stories on religious minorities produced by the legacy and the non-legacy digital media outlets portrayed minorities as helpless victims. This might have happened due to the inherent biases of their reporters towards the issues and problems experienced by religious minorities. Even though many DigiMAP journalists received training on covering marginalization and knowing their internal biases during reporting, many of them still seem to be looking at religious minorities as the “Other” possibly due to the fact that the challenges faced by the religious minorities are almost impossible for the members of religious majority to even understand let alone empathize with. This problem could be overcome by providing more learning opportunities to journalists so that they can recognize and address their inherent biases and, thus, stop their perception of helplessness of minorities from seeping into their stories. Journalists from religious minority communities should also be helped to join digital news media outlets which must ensure that they also report on general issues – and not just on issues related to their own communities -- in order to establish and bolster their professional credentials.
- 3. Increase gender diversity in newsrooms to improve gender sensitivity of content:** The number of stories covering issues of women belonging to religious minorities was quite low in both the legacy and the non-legacy digital news media publications during the period covered by this study. This gap highlights the necessity of developing a special focus on gender diversity in the coverage of religious minorities. Digital media should try to increase gender diversity in their newsrooms and ensure that women journalists working with them are made a part of their editorial decision-making. This will, hopefully, increase gender inclusivity in the news stories produced by these outlets. News organizations should also train their male journalists about gender inclusivity and sensitivity so they can identify and interview women expert sources for their stories on



general current affairs -- such as politics, economy, and climate change etc., -- rather than using women's voices only for stories about women.

4. **Build rapport with religious minority communities:** The minority communities are known to be reluctant to open up to journalists belonging to the majority community because of their experiences of mistrust, discrimination and persecution. Journalists, therefore, should build trust with the minority communities through repeated engagements in order to prove their credentials as ethical and trustworthy interlocutors. They could also overcome the trust-deficit by working with journalists from the religious minorities, as an attempt to understand their communal plight and predicament. The minority communities should also be helped and encouraged to engage with journalists both more frequently and more openly.
5. **Build news investigations around the Jillani judgment:** The 2014 Supreme Court judgment about the rights of religious minorities, popularly known as the Jillani judgment, doubles as a very effective analytical tool to examine the state of religious minorities in Pakistan. It calls upon government to take several measures including putting an end to online hate speech directed towards religious minorities, developing a progressive and inclusive educational curriculum and protecting places of worship of religious minorities. The non-legacy digital news media outlets can, and should, do thorough and in-depth investigative reporting about the key aspects of this judgment and the status of its implementation as a means to highlight the plight of religious minorities in Pakistan.

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We envision a democratic, participatory, peaceful and just polity in Pakistan

OUR MISSION

1. Strengthening democracy *through* inclusivity and pluralisms
2. Strengthening local empowerment *through* devolution of powers
3. Strengthening governance through accountability and transparency
4. Strengthening justice *through* fundamental rights

OUR WORK

1. Promoting inclusivity and pluralisms *through* support for free speech, civil liberties, peace and rights of minorities and marginalized communities
2. Promoting devolution of powers *through* support for empowerment of provinces and districts, policy development, provincial-level legislation and local governance
3. Promoting accountability and transparency *through* support for right to information, free media, open internet, open government
4. Promoting fundamental rights *through* support for equality, access to justice and rule of law.



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