



# Content-Framing and Psychological Well-being under Regulatory Pressure: Editors' Perceptions of Post-PECA Implementation and its Psychological Health Impacts in the Public Health Context

Original Article

**Zeeshan Qasim, Inam Ullah Khan**Department of Communication and Media Studies  
Gomal University, Dera Ismail Khan, Pakistan.Email: [sovereign26@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:sovereign26@hotmail.co.uk)

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## Abstract

This research examines the impact of Pakistan's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act on the editorial content framing and psychological well-being of media editors. It's an attempt to address the limited empirical evidence on how governing pressures influence journalistic decision-making, cause occupational stress, and public health concerns. 200 editors were interviewed employing purposive sampling following the quantitative research design. The collected data were analysed through descriptive statistics and chi-square. Findings revealed a statistically significant relationship between regulatory pressures, editorial framing, and discovered that perceived surveillance, legal uncertainty, and external pressures lead towards professional anxiety, occupational stress, and precautionary decision making among editors, which tend to result in self-censorship and risk-sensitive editorial behavior. Demonstrating how legal frameworks impact institutional practice and professional psychology, the study contributes empirical data to framing theory and media regulation scholarship. The study recommends the need for policy reforms, institutional safeguards, and psychological support mechanisms for media professionals in Pakistan.

**Keywords:** PECA, Content Framing, Self-Censorship, Media Regulation, Psychological Wellbeing, Occupational Stress, Psychological Health, Public Health Concern.



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## Introduction

Over the past few decades, it has been generally believed that mainstream media play a pivotal role in shaping political, social, and economic narratives, thereby influencing public discourse (Entman, 1993). However, in semi democratic contexts like Pakistan media often walks a tightrope to serve the balance between national security and freedom of expression (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). In pursuit of this doctrine, most probably, a digital governance regulatory structure will be introduced and adopted by the acronym PECA (2016-2025). Media critics, home and abroad, argue that the gradual implementation of this act has resulted in a big dent in the already fragile state of media autonomy, speech liberty, and journalistic flexibility. Government narrative defends the framework as an effective tool introduced to empower law enforcement agencies in combating cybercrimes and online harassment (Yusuf, 2021; Bari, 2022). On the other side, journalists and media critics assert and debate these constraints primarily brought with a purpose to manifest political manoeuvring (Qasim & Roshan, 2024). Beyond institutional and structural implications, regulatory environments also produce psychological consequences that badly influence their mental and psychological health for media professionals, which is one of the greatest concerns for public health. Continuous exposure to legal scrutiny, surveillance concerns, and professional uncertainty may generate occupational stress, anxiety, and perceived vulnerability among editors. Such psychological pressures can influence editorial judgement, risk perception, and decision-making behaviour, thereby shaping content production indirectly through internalised control mechanisms. Therefore, examining the psychological well-being of editors provides a more comprehensive understanding of PECA's impact on media practices.

Empirical research examining the consequences of media regulation on psychological well-being remains limited to date, despite an increasing debate on digital regulation in Pakistan. Existing studies circling the domain largely focus on legal frameworks, press freedom, and institutional constraints, while insufficient attention has been given to the psychological experiences of editors operating under regulatory pressure. Moreover, quantitative evidence examining the relationship between regulatory frameworks and editorial behaviour remains even more scarce. Considering this, the researchers attempt to bridge this gap by investigating how PECA influences editorial framing practices and psychological well-being among Pakistani media editors. The study thus seeks to investigate whether regulatory pressure causes measurable changes in editorial decision-making and professional behaviour and examines whether perceived legal risk and surveillance contribute to occupational stress, anxiety, and self-censorship among editors.

The purpose of this study is, therefore, to examine the relationship between regulatory pressure under PECA, editorial content framing, and the impact on the psychological conditions and mental health that media professionals face in Pakistan.

## Literature Review

Media control remains a sensitive subject around the world, with governments claiming national security and public order as justifications for imposing restrictions (Price, 2019; McGonagle, 2020). Researchers claim that such barriers are often used for political manipulation (Coudry & Mejias, 2019). In consonance, Reporters Without Borders (2023) Press Freedom Index shows a significant fall in Pakistan's media freedom amid PECA.

A few more studies aimed at exploring the influence of Pakistan's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) on editorial practices revealed the existence of self-censorship, risk management, and deliberate use of strategic framing by editors (Rehman, 2022; Yousaf & Riaz, 2023). Operating in such environments, editors often tend to adopt either neutral or vague language (Ashraf & Mushtaq, 2021). If filtered from the point of view of framing theory, such choices by editors reflect the recalibration of journalistic norms under the influence of coercive political and legal conditions (Entman, 1993; McQuail, 2010). Such practices represent an active negotiation of the boundaries of expression rather than a passive response to the situation, making framing theory a critical tool for measuring how regulations like PECA influence not only content but also the underlying professional logic of newsroom decision-making (Hanitzsch *et al.*, 2019). Qasim and Roshan (2024) argue that censorship in Pakistan often extends beyond regulatory compliance and serves as a device to influence political narratives. They further suggest that such measures are frequently used as constitutional safeguards. Journalists who concentrate on subjects intentionally or unintentionally influence public narratives (Entman, 1993; Scheufele, 2004). Framing theory holds the potential to unfold and demarcate a line between the complex relationship of state control and editorial independence.

Studies exploring the functioning of media systems under pressure, for instance, by [Hallin and Mancini \(2004\)](#) suggest that the legal restrictions and controlling frameworks can significantly influence the editorial decisions, turning journalists into cautious navigators of government red lines. In such conditions, framing of contents becomes both a survival strategy and a form of subtle resistance for the media workers. The analysis of how PECA has impacted editorial choices in Pakistan's media sector is influenced by this approach.

The study underlines how public opinion can be influenced by content prioritisation. Legal restrictions frequently lead to self-censorship and skewed political reporting, say many media studies in authoritarian regimes ([Ornebring & Karlsson, 2020](#)). Recent scholarship on media regulation highlights the psychological dimensions of professional practice under restrictive environments. The concept of the “chilling effect” explains how perceived legal threats and surveillance produce fear, stress, and self-restraint among journalists ([Yousaf & Riaz, 2023](#)). Studies on occupational stress in journalism suggest that external pressures, legal risks, and institutional constraints may result in emotional exhaustion, professional insecurity, and anxiety, which subsequently shape editorial behaviour and decision-making processes ([Hanitzsch et al., 2019](#)). Such psychological responses function as internalised forms of control that complement external regulatory mechanisms, reinforcing self-censorship and strategic framing practices.

## Methods and Materials

### *Research Design*

The researchers chose a quantitative survey design for this inquiry to examine the relationship between regulatory pressure under PECA, editorial content framing, and psychological well-being among media editors. This design allowed us to systematically measure perceptions, attitudes, and behavioural responses related to regulatory constraints in Pakistan.

### *Sampling Strategy*

Among others, the purposive sampling technique was chosen by the researchers to select participants with direct editorial responsibilities in print and digital media organizations in Pakistan. A total of 200 editors participated in the study. The selection criteria included professional involvement in editorial decision-making and experience of media content production. This approach ensured that responses reflected informed professional perspectives on regulatory pressure and editorial practice that participants deal with in performing their daily professional chores.

### *Instrument Design and Data Collection*

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of Likert scale items measuring perceived regulatory pressure, changes in editorial framing, occupational stress, professional anxiety, and perceived loss of editorial autonomy. The instrument was developed based on existing literature on media regulation, framing theory, and occupational stress in journalism. For content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by subject experts in communication studies, and a pilot test was conducted with a small group of media professionals to assess clarity and reliability. Necessary modifications were made before final data collection for analysis.

### *Validity and Reliability*

Content validity was ensured through expert review of the instrument. Construct validity was established by operationalizing key variables based on established theoretical concepts in framing and media regulation literature. Internal consistency of the instrument was assessed using reliability testing, which confirmed acceptable measurement stability. Reliability analysis also produced and confirmed internal consistency values in the study by indicating the stability of measurement.

### *Data Analysis Procedure*

The collected data were later analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequency and mean analysis to identify patterns in editorial behaviours, and a chi-square test was also performed to examine the association between regulatory pressure and changes in content framing. Statistical analysis was conducted to determine the significance of relationships between external pressure and psychological outcomes.

**Ethical Considerations**

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Respondents were informed of the research's purpose and assured that their responses would be kept confidential. Personal identities were not recorded, and the information was used solely for academic purposes.

**Results and Discussion**

After extracting empirical evidence from statistical findings to establish the relationship between regulatory pressure and editorial behaviour, the subsequent discussion interprets these findings through the lens of framing theory, existing scholarship on media regulation, and the psychological effects of professional constraint.

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Profile of Respondents*

| Variable                | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Gender (Male)           | 150       | 75%        |
| Gender (Female)         | 50        | 25%        |
| Experience (1-5 years)  | 50        | 25%        |
| Experience (6-10 years) | 80        | 40%        |
| Experience (10+ years)  | 70        | 35%        |

**Statistical Analysis: Impact of PECA on Content Framing**

A chi-square test was used to assess the relationship between PECA and content-framing changes in Pakistan.

**H<sub>0</sub>:** PECA has not significantly influenced editorial content framing

**H<sub>1</sub>:** PECA has significantly influenced editorial content framing

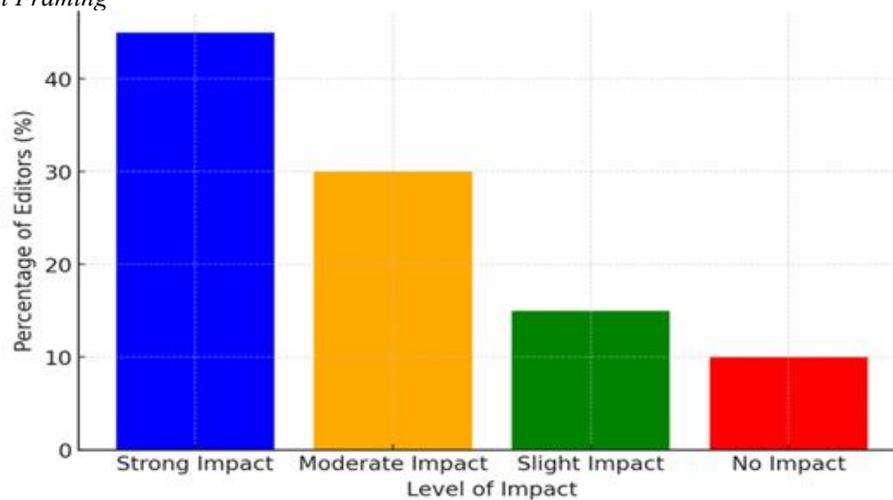
**Additional Hypothesis: Psychological Impact of External Pressure**

**H<sub>02</sub>:** External regulatory pressures under PECA have no significant impact on editors' psychological well-being.

**H<sub>12</sub>:** External regulatory pressures under PECA significantly affect the psychological well-being of editors, resulting in stress, anxiety, and professional insecurity.

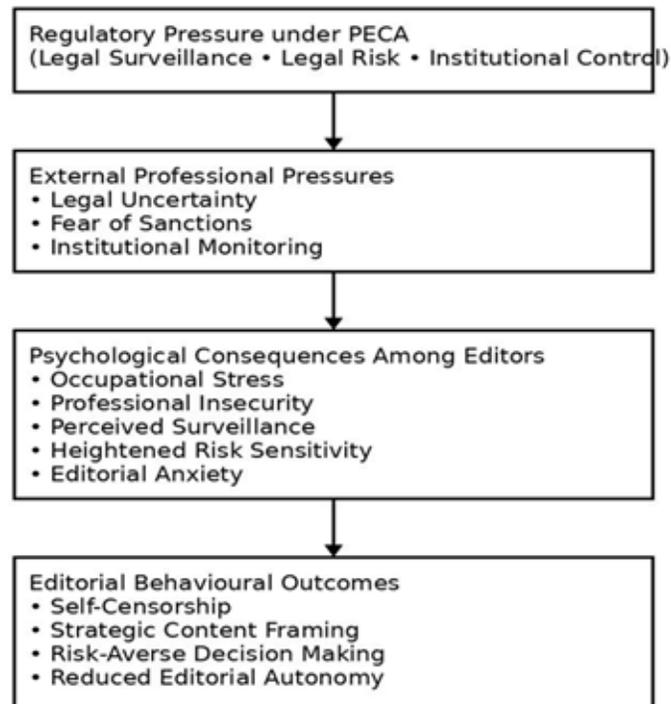
**Chi-square's results:** The chi-square test results ( $\chi^2 = 45.62, p < 0.01$ ) show a significant correlation between the enforcement of the PECA and editorial changes.

**Figure 1**  
*Impact of PECA on Content Framing*



The findings also suggest that regulatory pressure under PECA generates psychological consequences for editors. Respondents reported increased professional anxiety, perceived surveillance, and occupational stress, which influenced their editorial judgement and risk perception. These psychological responses contribute to precautionary decision-making and reinforce self-censorship as an adaptive professional strategy. The results support the argument that regulatory frameworks shape not only institutional practices but also the psychological conditions under which media professionals operate.

**Figure 2**  
*Impact of PECA on Editorial Behavior and Psychological Health*



The above Figure illustrates the dual mechanism by which regulatory pressure under PECA shapes editorial behaviour, combining formal legal constraints with internalized psychological effects.

## Conclusion

The study concludes that PECA is significantly influencing Pakistan's media landscape, and its enforcement is leading to increased self-censorship and strategic content framing among editors and other media practitioners. Since the enforcement of PECA in Pakistan, the editorial flexibility has been significantly reduced, with many editors increasingly opting for precautionary steps to reduce legal risks in the performance of their professional duties. The study further reveals, through empirical findings, that PECA's influence extends beyond structural and institutional changes to include psychological health effects on editors, which is a grave public health concern. External pressures contribute to occupational stress, professional insecurity, and heightened risk sensitivity, which collectively shape editorial behaviour and content framing practices in Pakistan. This demonstrates that regulatory control operates through both formal legal mechanisms and internalised psychological processes. After the promulgation of PECA, the findings position the psychological well-being of journalists as an emerging public health concern within regulated media environments in Pakistan.

## Limitations

This study has certain limitations as it must rely on self-reported responses, which may at times reflect subjective perceptions of regulatory pressure. The use of cross-sectional data may also limit the ability to examine the long-term effects of regulatory frameworks. The study focuses specifically on Pakistani media editors and, therefore, generalization to other media systems should be made with caution. Future research dealing with the phenomenon may employ longitudinal designs, a mixed methods approach, and comparative analysis across different regulatory environments.

## Theoretical and Practical Contributions

The researchers, through this study attempts to contribute to media regulation and framing scholarship by providing empirical evidence on the psychological consequences of regulatory pressures in Pakistan. It extends framing theory by signifying how legal frameworks influence not only content production but also professional cognition and behaviour. The study also provides practical insights for policymakers, media organizations, and journalist support institutions in the country and highlights the need for legal safeguards and psychological support mechanisms.

## Future Implications and Research Directions

The study's findings highlight the importance of developing balanced regulatory frameworks in Pakistan to protect national security and press freedom. It also suggests that media organizations could create institutional mechanisms to promote professional autonomy and psychological well-being. Future empirical scholars may look into the long-term effects of regulatory pressure, cross-national comparisons, and qualitative investigations into newsroom decision-making processes.

## Recommendations

**Policy Reform:** Amendments are needed to sections 20 and 37 of PECA to prevent its misuse against Journalists.

**Journalist Protection:** Legal aid networks need to be established for journalists facing deterrence and legal threats in the line of their professional duties.

**Training Programs:** Specialised training programs on digital security and legal rights under PECA need to be launched for journalists.

**Psychological Health Support Mechanisms:** Media organisations should establish institutional support systems to address the psychological health issue and the well-being, which is considered one of the greatest public health issues, affecting their lives in work as well as in social settings, for the editors and journalists working under regulatory pressure. Counselling services, stress management programs, and mental health awareness initiatives should be introduced to mitigate occupational stress, professional anxiety, and psychological insecurity resulting from external legal constraints.

**Extensive Research:** Diverse nature longitudinal studies need to be encouraged to explore PECA's evolving impact over time.

## Declarations

**Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate:** This study strictly adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki and relevant national and institutional ethical guidelines. All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Helsinki Declaration. We declare that this study followed accepted ethical standards for social science research, which involve human participants.

**Consent for Publication:** Here, we, the authors, give our consent for publication.

**Informed Consent:** We declare that informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection.

**Availability of Data and Materials:** Data will be provided upon written request from the corresponding author.

**Competing Interest:** We, both authors, declare having no conflict of interest.

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**Authors' Contribution:** Zeeshan Qasim conceptualized the study, conducted data analysis, and prepared the manuscript. Inam Ullah Khan contributed to data collection and manuscript review.

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