

Studenti vojenského studia na Univerzitě obrany by si měli být této hrozby vědomi zvláště intenzivně. Navzdory jejich specifickému profesnímu zaměření a přípravě na práci v oblasti obrany a vnější bezpečnosti státu však výzkum ukázal, že ne vždy přikládají bezpečnostním aspektům dostatečnou váhu. Tato skutečnost podtrhuje potřebu zvyšování informovanosti o rizicích spojených se sdílením osobních údajů online, zejména mezi těmi, jejichž profesní budoucnost se bude týkat státní obrany a bezpečnosti. Zvláštní důraz by měl být kladen na hrozby spojené s možnou rekrutací cizími zpravodajskými službami, přičemž organizačně nejjednodušším a zároveň nejefektivnější formou řešení by bylo začlenění této problematiky do vojenské odborné přípravy. Vhodné by bylo rovněž zakomponování těchto témat do nově připravovaných studijních programů, aby studenti získali potřebné znalosti k ochraně před zpravodajskými hrozbami již v průběhu svého vzdělávání.

***Tento článek vznikl na základě výzkumu podpořeného poskytovatelem Ministerstvem obrany České republiky, Univerzitou obrany a projektem Fakulty vojenského leadershipu „LANDOPS“.***

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*Peer-reviewed*

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## **Military or Militancy: Navigating Media Objectivity in National Security Coverage**

### **Armáda nebo militanti: objektivita médií při informování o národní bezpečnosti**

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**Abstract:** This study aimed to explore the media's perspective on the military and militancy, focusing on the professional behaviour of journalists and their commitment to the national cause. In-depth interviews were conducted with Pakistani journalists who reported from conflict zones. The findings suggested that Pakistan is engaged in a war against terrorism, and the media played a crucial role in glorifying the security forces in their fight against militants who challenged the state's authority. Journalists expressed that the government and military should adopt realistic measures to combat this threat. While identifying militants as terrorists, journalists noted that their professionalism is often influenced by patriotism and a national duty to serve the country. However, objectivity remained a core element of their reporting. The media, considered the fourth pillar of the state, should be granted the necessary freedom to report on conflicts. At the same time, self-censorship was deemed necessary to prevent content that might lead to radicalisation.

**Abstrakt:** Cílem této studie bylo prozkoumat pohled médií na armádu a militantní uskupení se zaměřením na profesionální chování novinářů a jejich oddanost národnímu zájmu. Byly uskutečněny hloubkové rozhovory s pákistánskými novináři, kteří podávali zprávy z konfliktních oblastí. Zjištění naznačují, že Pákistán je zapojen do války proti terorismu a média hrají klíčovou roli při glorifikaci bezpečnostních sil v jejich boji proti militantům, kteří se vzpírají autoritě státu. Novináři se vyjádřili, že vláda a armáda by měly přijmout realistická opatření v boji proti této hrozbě. Při označování militantů za teroristy novináři poznamenali, že jejich profesionalita je často ovlivněna vlastenectvím a národní povinností sloužit zemi. Základním prvkem jejich zpravodajství však zůstala objektivita. Média, která jsou považována za čtvrtý pilíř státu, by měla mít potřebnou svobodu

pro informování o konfliktech. Zároveň byla autocenzura považována za nezbytnou, aby se zabránilo obsahu, který by mohl vést k radikalizaci.

**Keywords:** Journalists; Military; Militancy; National Security; Pakistan.

**Klíčová slova:** novináři; armáda; militantní organizace; národní bezpečnost; Pákistán.

## INTRODUCTION

Pakistan is among those countries that have been experiencing both external and internal conflicts, where national security is the foremost concern. For a long time, Pakistan has been combating violent terrorist activities aimed at destabilising the country. As Pakistan has engaged in the global war on terrorism, rising terrorist acts have raised significant concerns regarding the state's security apparatus. The war against militancy and terrorism in Pakistan is pivotal to determining the future of this strategically positioned nation of over two hundred million people, armed with nuclear warheads and situated in one of the world's most volatile regions. Unrest within Pakistan not only impacts the country itself but also affects key neighbouring nations such as China, India, and Iran, as well as Afghanistan to its west. Moreover, the internal conflict has repercussions for the longstanding and significant relationship between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Pakistan's war against militant and terrorist groups, primarily led by the military, has been widely publicised and politically charged (Nawaz 2016).

Pakistan's mission in the War on Terrorism has significant social, economic, and political implications. The country bears considerable costs for its role as a front-line state in the fight against terrorism (Agha and Márton 2023). Quantifying the full extent of human suffering (including losses among opponents, civilians, and security forces) remains challenging due to the lack of standardised data (Bari 2010). Nevertheless, military and media relations have a long history, and when it comes to reporting on wars, these interactions often alternate between cooperation and conflict (Agha and Hussain 2017). During conflicts, the military and the media frequently rely on each other to shape the narrative of war, seeking public support and framing successes.

Recently, the relaxation of restrictions on the Pakistani media has led to increased visibility of journalists in the country's turbulent internal political environment and its foreign relations. This has contributed to Pakistan becoming one of the most dangerous countries for journalistic practices (Agha 2021). Recognising the development of communication culture in Pakistan's media is essential, particularly given the country's strategic importance in South Asia and its role in the global fight against Islamic extremism. A national survey, replicating research conducted by Arab and Indonesian journalists, reported that Pakistani journalists' ideology is shaped by nationalism, religious belief, and an increasing sense of professional competence. Their primary focus is on safeguarding national sovereignty while promoting social development (Pintak and Nazir 2013).

While militancy is widely discussed in both Pakistani and international scholarly circles, there is a noticeable lack of research on the media's perception of this issue. This study seeks to address this gap by critically examining the role of the media in reporting on the conflict. The research aims to explore how Pakistani journalists perceive the military, militancy, and their professional responsibilities concerning Pakistan's national security.

## SIGNIFICANCE

This study provides valuable insights into the media's perspective on military and militancy. It contributes to key areas such as national security, journalistic objectivity, and the challenges faced by journalists. Moreover, it is crucial for defence policymakers to comprehend journalists' perspectives on national security and the obstacles they encounter. Understanding these dynamics is vital for improving military-media relations, which could foster collaborative efforts to develop future strategies for combating terrorism.

### Research Objectives

- To explore the media's perspective on the military and militancy.
- To examine journalistic professionalism in ensuring impartial reporting.
- To investigate the limitations faced by journalists when reporting on military and militancy.

### Research Questions

- What is the media's perspective on the military and militancy?
- Given their prevailing views on the military and militancy, how can journalists maintain impartiality in their reporting?
- What are the main limitations faced by journalists when reporting on the military and militancy?

## 1 LITERATURE REVIEW

### 1.1 Militancy in Pakistan

Pakistan has recently witnessed comprehensive acts of militancy that have significantly pressured the country's security system. There is a longstanding history of both foreign and domestic factors at the core of militancy in Pakistan. Militancy is defined as

a condition in which force is used against the state and the populace at large, primarily by non-state actors, who are often driven by conservative, extremist, and violent ideologies. Their operations challenge the authority of the state. For years, Pakistan has been a target of such terrorist activities. It is evident that the issue of militancy in Pakistan is severe and deeply entrenched (Agha 2022). Furthermore, militant operations in Pakistan are complicated by the intertwining of political, economic, ethnic, or social causes with religious factors. This association with religion complicates the entire paradigm of militancy, as violence is employed to enforce radical ideologies and achieve the objectives of militant groups. According to Azam and Javaid (2017), militancy in Pakistan is multidimensional, nuanced, and deeply rooted, necessitating comprehensive resolution strategies that involve both the state and the populace. The National Action Plan (NAP), formulated by the Government of Pakistan, must be implemented effectively nationwide by all stakeholders to address this complex issue. Research indicates that the primary driver behind all forms of militant violence is religious extremism, which, combined with racial and political elements, forms a complex matrix challenging the state through terrorism. The pervasive influence of religion in the ideological state of Pakistan allows anti-state actors to easily exploit religious, political, and ethno-nationalistic sentiments among the populace.

## 1.2 Media Landscape

The media plays a crucial role in providing information at national, regional, and international levels; the populace depends on and trusts the information provided by the media (Hussain 2008). It influences the opinions of political leaders and the general public. On this basis, political actors, particularly in the context of militancy and terrorism, develop policies (Saeed et al. 2017). Hussain and Munawar (2017) argue that in the current era, given their ability to shape public opinion and direct policy support for humanitarian crises, the media play a key role in the outcome of conflicts. The media can either side with opposing parties, escalating conflicts, or remain impartial and independent, leading to peaceful conflict resolution without exacerbating future abuses.

## 1.3 Journalistic Standards and Practices

Extensive literature has emerged in recent decades to explore whether a set of universal standards for journalistic practice and norms exists that can be observed by both advanced and developing nations. The key discussion point is whether journalists worldwide share a common view of their role, tasks, and the environments around them, committing to a mutual set of ethical standards (Rao and Lee 2005; Deuze 2005; Callahan 2003; Herrscher 2002). Evidence suggests considerable variation in how journalists perceive their roles in different countries (Hopmann 2012; Romano 2003; Hallin and Papathanassopoulos 2002; Donsbach and Klett 1993). Studies exploring the standards,

attitudes, dogmas, and global views of journalists in Muslim nations often find that the implementation of Western journalistic principles is influenced by religious beliefs, local culture, and other factors (Ramaprasad and Rahman 2006; Ramaprasad and Hamdy 2006; Hanitzsch 2005; Bekhait 1998). Interestingly, major studies examining the perspectives and perceptions of journalists in Pakistan, a country with a dynamically developing media market in the Muslim world, are lacking. In Muslim-majority countries, the examination of journalistic practices occurs amid ongoing debates about the extent to which religious beliefs influence worldviews (Layman 1997; Hayes 1995; Wilcox 1990). Post-9/11, these debates have taken a different context, particularly in the US, where discussions have expanded to include the extent to which attitudes towards America and American policy are affected by Muslim beliefs (Mujani and Liddle 2004; Tibi 2001). Researchers note that in Pakistan, the development of a common national identity begins in schools, with an education system aimed at fostering a unified identity where Islam is a central unifying element of cultural unity (Durrani and Dunne 2010).

#### 1.4 Conflict and Communication

Historically, the interplay between conflict and communication has been evident, and it has become increasingly challenging for powerful nations to wage wars without controlling the extensive networks of information that now span the globe (Ottosen 2010; Carruthers 2008; Hamelink 2008; Bratic 2006; Thussu and Freedman 2003; Knightley 2002). Historians have documented the role of mainstream media during the two World Wars, the Cold War, and interventions in various Asian, African, and South American countries (Lynch and McGoldrick 2005; Spencer 2005; Knightley 2004). In these contexts, the media was predominantly controlled by the belligerent nations for defensive purposes, and opposition voices were suppressed. In specific conflicts, the role of the media is shaped by its association with state or anti-state actors and its independence from control. Generally, if the state is a party in a conflict, the media also becomes a participant. The media narrative of a specific conflict is often shaped and controlled by the government and military, which exert influence over the media to craft and disseminate a social image that serves their purposes (Lynch 2007; Wolfsfeld 2004). As militancy has increasingly dominated the coverage in Pakistani media, it is crucial to assess the media treatment of this war, to understand the factors influencing conflict reporting, and to analyse the patterns of news coverage in light of the national security perspective.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs the Objectivity Theory to understand the role of journalists in relation to their fairness in reporting on militant conflict in Pakistan. The goal of objectivity in journalism is to assist the audience in forming their own perspectives on an event by presenting facts alone, thereby enabling the audience to draw their own conclusions.

To maintain impartiality, journalists should report the truth, regardless of whether they personally agree with or like the information presented. Objective reporting aims to present issues and facts in a fair and transparent manner, free from the reporter's personal views or biases (Clark 2014). Within media practice, journalistic objectivity is a significant concept, encompassing honesty, neutrality, and truthfulness. Since the 18th century, numerous critiques and alternative approaches to this concept have emerged, sparking ongoing debate about the principle of objective journalism.

Objectivity in journalism requires that a journalist does not take sides on an issue. A journalist must report facts rather than offering personal views or interpretations of events (Bové, 1999). Although objectivity is a nuanced term, often applied to various processes and approaches, it is commonly defined through three interconnected concepts: truthfulness, neutrality, and detachment (Calcutt and Hammond 2011). Truthfulness refers to the commitment to providing only accurate and true information without distorting facts to enhance a report or promote a particular agenda. Neutrality means that news should be presented impartially and even-handedly, ensuring that the journalist does not align with any party involved. Detachment refers to the journalist's personal conduct; reporters must not only address issues impartially but also adopt a dispassionate approach, allowing them to present the news in a rational manner, thereby enabling the public to form their own opinions without media influence.

However, the notion of objectivity as fairness or impartiality has been criticised by some scholars and journalists, who argue that it can mislead the audience by failing to adequately pursue the truth. Critics suggest that complete objectivity is nearly impossible to achieve because news outlets inevitably take a stance by deciding which events to report, which stories to highlight, and which facts to include (Calcutt and Hammond 2011). Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's propaganda model theory proposes that such an approach to objectivity often results in favouring the views of governments and large corporations. While mainstream analysts agree that the relevance of news influences story selection, there is debate over whether catering to the interests of an audience undermines objectivity (Calcutt and Hammond 2011). Some critics argue that fairness and accuracy are more appropriate criteria. Under this standard, taking sides in a story might be acceptable as long as the chosen side is correct, and the opposing side is given a fair opportunity to respond. Many experts contend that true journalistic objectivity is not feasible in practice, and journalists must instead strive for transparency by providing balanced coverage of both perspectives, even if their own viewpoint is evident. Cunningham (2003) advocates for journalists to acknowledge their potential biases and work to counter them. He argues that "we need deep reporting and genuine understanding, but we also need journalists to admit what they do not know, and not mask that vulnerability behind a façade of authority or a rush of inaccurate assertions."

In light of these varying perspectives on journalistic objectivity, this study seeks to examine how journalists assess their role in reporting on militancy in Pakistan. Do they prioritise objectivity, their own perspective, or the perspective of others? In this context, objectivity refers to the actual events related to militancy and the role of the government and military; "their side" refers to the journalists' personal views, while "others' side" refers to government-influenced stories, military narratives, or even statements from militants. Alternatively, do they strive to take sides based on accurate and fair information?

### 3 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative approach, involving interviews with a group of journalists who have covered militant conflicts in Pakistan. Data collection was conducted through structured interviews, following a predetermined format in which key questions were formulated in advance, maintaining a consistent flow of inquiry across all participants. A questionnaire was designed, featuring a series of open-ended questions to gather information from respondents verbally. Notes and audio recordings were used to capture data, which was then analysed through thematic analysis.

In Pakistan, the media has often been a subject of debate, particularly regarding its stance on political and national security issues. For this study, a sample of journalists was selected, many of whom had close connections with the ISPR (Inter-Services Public Relations), particularly in relation to reporting on militancy. Among the respondents, some journalists expressed reluctance to discuss militant reporting and their relationship with the military's public relations department, while others maintained independence in their reporting, without any association with the ISPR or its policies. Compared to their male counterparts, only a few female journalists, with limited exposure, have reported on militancy. Nevertheless, those who participated in the interviews generally demonstrated a positive attitude and were willing to contribute fully to the research.

The interviews were conducted within the expected timeframe, with respondents providing detailed responses without unnecessary delays. Each interviewee endeavoured to offer their insights and experiences comprehensively. While a few journalists opted to be interviewed in outdoor settings or via email, the majority participated in interviews held in their offices. Respondents were given the flexibility to choose the date, time, and location of the interviews to ensure they felt comfortable in discussing their views.

In terms of the content of the interviews, the respondents appeared committed to engaging fully and conscientiously. Although some showed hesitation in openly discussing their reporting on militancy or commenting on military strategies or positions, most interviewees actively participated, speaking candidly about both the military and militancy. To protect the safety and confidentiality of the journalists involved, their identities have been anonymised and coded as J1, J2, J3, and so forth.

### 4 FINDINGS

In response to questions regarding their journalistic impartiality in reporting on the military versus militancy, their perspectives on both the military and militancy, as well as the challenges and obstacles they faced while covering the conflict, several key themes emerged.

## 4.1 Military Operations and the National Action Plan

Since the government articulated the national security strategy, journalists have acknowledged the importance of reporting real issues rather than succumbing to potential militant pressure. All interviewed journalists agreed that national security had not previously been a primary concern for them. However, after witnessing events in real time—particularly the suffering of civilians and the difficult circumstances faced by the military—their attitudes changed. J5 explained that once journalists saw the challenges faced by the defence forces and had the opportunity to visit the conflict zones, their perspectives on national security shifted. He stated, „It makes you understand how tough the challenge is and what the military’s true sacrifice is.“ Admiring the military’s efforts, J2 remarked, „Things are much clearer now due to the National Action Plan. As both a human being and a journalist, it is now evident what is right and what is wrong, what should be reported and what should not.“ Similarly, J3 added, „It has become clear to me that I am neither supposed to nor will I promote those individuals who are terrorists, no matter how appealing they may seem. They are enemies of the state, and thus they should be enemies of every person who is a part of the country.“

The journalists unanimously agreed that the issue of militancy has been taken seriously by the military and political leaders, who have taken pragmatic steps to eliminate this threat. J6 described how his perspective shifted after visiting various affected regions and interacting with local residents: „I gained a clearer understanding of the violence and the religion-based blackmailing employed by terrorists.“ Respondents highlighted that the military organises numerous workshops, such as the National Media Workshop and the National Security Workshop, where journalists are educated on the frontline challenges that the security forces and the State face in defending the country. J10 added that those who fail to appreciate these issues often lack an understanding of the complexities, yet are critical of others. However, J12 stressed, „National geopolitical and ideological stability is non-negotiable.“ Echoing this sentiment, J1 commented, „National security is of paramount importance to every Pakistani.“

J15 noted that Pakistan is engaged in a guerrilla war, which has significantly shaped his perspective on militancy. „For the sake of national security, we keep certain things to ourselves,“ he remarked. The journalists agreed that their professionalism is still strongly influenced by patriotism. J20 emphasised that a journalist’s loyalty to their country and its security forces often supersedes any negativity. J21 concurred, stating, „When a journalist enters a conflict zone, it positively influences their thinking. After witnessing military action against enemies, a journalist is naturally inclined to support them, which is reflected in both their emotions and their writing.“

## 4.2 Military-Media Relations

In addressing the relationship between the military and the media, particularly in relation to journalistic impartiality in reporting on militancy, respondents provided varied

perspectives. J23, for instance, offered a unique view, arguing, “There is no harm in maintaining ties with the military because those securing the country should be prioritised. There is nothing wrong in aligning with the armed forces who are defending the country against foreign and terrorist threats.” He further noted that the military-media relationship is often misinterpreted because, in the past, foreign outlets had unrestricted access to the country, often publishing surprising reports without government consent. However, with stricter media guidelines now in place, certain issues remain off-limits for national security reasons. Conversely, J11 provided a different stance, asserting, “We are not supporting the Indian military. My role is to work for the Pakistani military,” stressing that professional journalism is still maintained, with journalists reporting the reality as it is. Some respondents suggested that the situation varies based on context and past experiences. J28 remarked, “Pakistan is not facing a minor tribal issue but a significant national security conflict.” J30 added, “Both the media and the military are out in the open, confronting challenges like a Godzilla, with no time to rest.”

J16 highlighted the lack of regulatory control over the media in Pakistan, noting that certain events cannot be regulated once reported. Occasionally, the government and state face severe criticism from media outlets. He remarked, “I don’t think the media acts as a mouthpiece for the military.” Another respondent emphasised, “Loyalty to national territorial security is paramount, and in this sense, the military-media relationship is logical” (J27).

However, other respondents highlighted the dangers faced by journalists, who are often caught between military and militant interests. J25 pointed out, “Journalists are forced and threatened by both sides to act as their spokespersons. The media is in a crossfire.” In light of this, J24 recommended that during times of war, the media should align with the military and the state, stating, “With so many military personnel martyred and thousands of civilians killed, the media must stand with the military.” J12 echoed this view, stressing that those who work against the military—whether knowingly or unknowingly—aid the enemy’s agenda. He emphasised that no media outlet should act contrary to national or foreign policy, stating, “Working against the military does not make one a revolutionary. It has become fashionable to act revolutionary, but that is fundamentally wrong” (J10).

Most respondents agreed that the military-media relationship is strained and lacks friendliness. Several reasons for this tension were discussed, with suggestions for improvement. Respondents indicated that due to this uneasy relationship, the military is often suspected when a journalist dies. J2 remarked, “People believe it was the military who got rid of the journalist, one way or another.” J5 suggested that relations should improve, stating, “The media is seen as the fourth estate and should be treated cordially, not simply given orders. That’s not how the media operates.” He emphasised that journalists need to visit affected areas and report on the situation responsibly, which requires effective, cordial management. Some respondents considered the relationship a love-hate dynamic, with J8 noting, “Journalists lack access because neither the government nor the army trusts them. However, journalists must also report professionally; not everything needs to be in the news.”

Respondents frequently mentioned the limited interaction between the media and the military. J10 remarked, “There should be dialogue at least once or twice a month,

particularly during the war on terrorism.” J12 supported this, adding that the lack of communication fosters speculation, which could be mitigated through increased interaction, either in person, by phone, or via messaging. J14, a defence reporter, stressed that the media should avoid criticising key institutions such as the ISI (Pakistan’s intelligence agency) and the military. J16 highlighted the inherent tension, stating, “The military believes in secrecy, while the media believes in transparency. It’s like a marriage of opposites.” He suggested that both parties should find a middle ground, appreciating each other’s roles. J18 warned that the media must report information responsibly, as “information can inform the public, but it can also inform the enemy.”

While some respondents believed the relationship between the military and the media to be improving, others expressed dissatisfaction with its current state. J21 suggested that the military should employ senior journalists to liaise with the media, as only journalists truly understand the challenges of their profession. He also noted that the military’s strict control of information often hampers media efforts. J22 called for greater freedom for the media, stating, “The space for media coverage should be expanded.” Meanwhile, J13 expressed satisfaction, noting that journalists have been “enjoying excellent relations with the military over the past few years.”

Despite some optimism, most respondents agreed on the need to strengthen the bond between the military and the media. J10 remarked, “It’s a journalistic technique to ask tough questions of the military, but that’s different from accusing them of wrongdoing, especially when following an agenda.” Several respondents stressed the importance of training journalists to cover conflict situations professionally and called for more detailed briefings on national security issues. Respondents also highlighted the need for the military to accept critical analysis from the media, as well as the media’s duty to avoid undermining national interests. Ultimately, a balance must be struck, with both sides working to foster a more productive and cooperative relationship.

### 4.3 Militants as Anti-Pakistan

Journalists were asked whether the prevailing anti-militant sentiment in Pakistan affects their ability to report impartially, particularly when national security is at stake. Respondents shared their views on the issue. All interviewees agreed that militants are unequivocally seen as „terrorists and enemies of the country.“ However, they emphasised that this view does not influence their professional impartiality. J1 noted, „We consider them our enemies, but we are never influenced by this perspective. It is a conflict that must be reported sensibly.“ Given the complexity of the militant threat, journalists suggested that comprehensive information is required to evaluate and report such events accurately. Many respondents highlighted that there is no ambiguity when reporting against militants, as they are inherently anti-Pakistan. As J1 elaborated, „In the past, the media gave militants a platform, but after witnessing their violent actions, our perspective shifted. The view against them is not preconceived but formed through their actions, which have proven their opposition to Pakistan.“

The dominant national view against militants is seen as a direct consequence of their activities, which have tarnished their image. As J9 noted, „A journalist cannot highlight them [positively].“ Defence reporter J21 added, „We cannot change their mindset or idolise them.“ Respondents agreed that the media’s approach to militants has evolved. In the past, journalists lacked a clear understanding of militant ideology, often interviewing and covering them in detail. However, following a series of violent incidents, the media has increasingly aligned with the military and the state. While some argue that journalists must maintain objectivity, they also acknowledged that their improved understanding of the facts has shaped their current stance. Journalists must report accurately, verifying information before reaching conclusions. As J14 observed, „A journalist serves a cause—a social cause, a just cause. A cause for social justice.“

Nevertheless, J2 pointed out that sympathisers of militant ideology still exist within the media, stressing that, „When it is clear they are the enemy of the state, there is no other option but to report professionally.“ Meanwhile, J30 admitted being influenced by the prevailing national view on militants. In rare instances, journalists have been forced to compromise due to threats from militants. There remains ongoing debate over whether the media should grant militants access, as they could potentially sway public opinion. J7 noted, „There comes a point when the state’s survival and citizens’ survival are more important than basic rights.“ Similarly, J9 reflected on the inherent challenges of impartiality in reporting, stating, „A journalist can never be completely impartial. Patriotism and nationalism are always present. Idealism doesn’t always work.“

While condemning militant activities, J5 asserted that journalists are aware of their professional responsibilities, stressing that news reporting must be grounded in facts rather than personal opinions. „The analysis of news is different from reporting, where one does not place personal opinions but presents facts,“ J5 explained. He further emphasised that journalists should adopt a broader view when interpreting national security issues, rather than focusing solely on terrorism. Several journalists echoed this sentiment, stating that it is their duty to uncover the truth behind militants’ anti-national agendas. Defence reporter J30 remarked that the media must operate professionally, even when it involves risks to the state in the pursuit of free journalism. J15, discussing his channel’s editorial policy, added that his organisation strives to maintain balance in reporting. „One cannot be entirely pro-military or entirely anti-Taliban. There should be balanced reporting,“ he concluded.

#### 4.4 Anti-Taliban or Pro-Military Approach

In conflict reporting, some journalists adopt a one-sided approach, while others attempt to present both sides of the story. Regardless of their approach, reporting often reflects two predominant perspectives: either a pro or anti stance. When asked about their reporting style, many respondents expressed nuanced views, identifying themselves as pro-state, pro-Pakistan, pro-military, pro-society, or anti-militant. A minority of media professionals claimed to adhere to a neutral, factual, and balanced approach, focusing solely on the information they possess without taking sides. However, in doing

so, they risk being perceived as adversarial for not aligning with either side. Respondent J26 emphasised that ethics and standards are upheld by journalists who concentrate on the essence of the incident, including its impact and eventual outcomes. J21, who has experience reporting from tribal areas and interviewing militants, noted that while he covered these topics, he never presented a pro-militant, anti-military, or anti-state stance. J19 added, „If there is a security or intelligence failure and one reports on it, this should not be seen as anti-military or anti-state. It is a journalist’s professional duty to report what they witness—it is part of their responsibility.“ Similarly, J22 stressed that his commitment is to report what is right, stating, „Journalism is rooted in integrity. It is not about advocating for terrorists.“ Another respondent, J23, noted that organisational policies prohibit reporting from a pro-militant perspective, adding that „Debates should be generated, and questions asked to foster understanding.“

Respondents who identified their reporting as anti-militant or pro-military suggested that these perspectives were shaped by their organisation’s policies, personal experiences, and viewpoints. J21 remarked, „The media favours those who act justly, and it reports negatively on those who do wrong. The media supports the military due to the factual information presented.“ J5 noted that the media now consistently reports from an anti-militant perspective, contrasting with the past when some outlets reported favourably on militants. J30, who approaches reporting from a pro-society perspective, stated, „I am aware of the ethical and legal responsibilities of being a journalist. I understand why militants are anti-Pakistan, and 99 percent of the nation does not support them because you cannot deceive and mislead the public, nor can you impose personal interests under the guise of terrorism.“ Journalists who viewed their reporting as pro-military acknowledged that they had been labelled as such, but maintained that they simply adhered to factual reporting. J29 argued that, „A professional journalist should not propagate the words of terrorists, as doing so would foster radical thought and potentially spread similar messages throughout society.“

There were also claims that journalists who focus on anti-Taliban reporting are advancing Western interests. However, J19 highlighted that „There comes a time when one must choose between the survival of the state and the safety of its citizens, or between basic rights.“ He prioritised the survival of the state and citizen safety, reasoning that free media cannot ensure security. If the media reports on both terrorists and law enforcement without distinguishing between militants and the state, this may inadvertently aid militant success, which is detrimental to both the state and the media. J2 echoed this view, stating, „The media should be independent and pragmatic, but in times of war, some degree of media control is necessary.“

Respondents who favoured a pro-state or pro-Pakistan stance argued that they were inherently anti-militant and supportive of Pakistan and its security forces. They believed that Pakistan’s safety is ensured by its security and intelligence agencies. J27 remarked, „There is nothing wrong with glorifying state policies or security forces, and one should not oppose the state. This is common in every major state around the world.“

## 4.5 Issues Faced by Journalists

When discussing journalism, various concerns such as freedom of expression, the right to information, the safety of journalists, and other ethical challenges frequently arise. It is evident that when covering a conflict, journalists must contend with numerous difficulties, the extent of which depends on the specific conflict situation. In discussing these issues, many respondents highlighted that personal safety is their primary concern. Journalists may face threats from militants if they do not cover the militants' perspective. As a journalist, it is important to ensure that both sides are aware of their professional credentials when reporting on a conflict. A media correspondent (J4) noted that, in the past, journalists would cover both sides of the story, but now, as they report predominantly from the government's perspective, they receive direct threats from militants through phone calls, emails, and other means.

Respondents also pointed out that weather conditions can impede travel from conflict zones, and the risk of ambushes is a significant concern. At times, journalists may become stranded in transit, which is another key issue. J6 remarked, „You cannot go back, and you cannot go forward.“ Furthermore, J9 mentioned that newsrooms are particularly sensitive environments, as journalists cannot report on every piece of information they receive. „News editors and directors play a critical role in shaping news coverage, ensuring that nothing is reported that could create conflict with the military,“ they added.

Journalists also expressed frustration over the lack of access to information. Their questions often go unanswered, and they are not given the freedom by the military to investigate comprehensively. J10 explained, „We were not able to gauge public opinion on whether people felt safe or whether they agreed that the area was secure.“ Additionally, the organisation a journalist works for may impose limitations, restricting the scope of their reporting. Journalists often cannot expect favourable outcomes from either their organisation or the institution with which they are embedded.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the perspectives of Pakistani journalists regarding the military and militancy. To gather data, journalists with experience covering previous conflicts, such as those at the Line of Control (LOC) and the Kargil War, as well as those reporting on militancy, were interviewed to explore their views on national security issues. The study also investigated their impartiality in conflict reporting. In Pakistan, there is a prevailing perception that militants are anti-Pakistan. Therefore, journalists were interviewed to assess how they maintain professional reporting standards in such a context. Additionally, the study explored the limitations journalists face while covering these conflicts and examined their relationships with the media concerning the reporting of militancy. A dominant view among journalists is that militants are individuals seeking to enforce Sharia (Islamic law), comprising Pakistani citizens and hardcore Islamists who

have turned against the State and military. This opposition is based on the belief that both the State and military support American agendas and sentiments. However, with the implementation of the National Action Plan by the government, journalists gained a clearer understanding of the militants as enemies of the State, intent on destabilising Pakistan. This shift in perception has altered their attitude towards national security, leading to the conclusion that reporting must be conducted in a manner that does not compromise national security.

Regarding impartial reporting during conflicts, journalists emphasised their commitment to fair reporting. They maintain their objectivity despite the cordial relations between the military and media, reporting in accordance with the nature of the conflict and recognising the prevailing opinion against militants. They believe that government and military support is essential for accessing affected areas, which are often unreachable without such support, or, alternatively, without the assistance of militant groups. Consequently, journalists either accompany the military or establish connections with militant groups to obtain information from these areas. Journalists prefer seeking assistance from the government or military during conflicts rather than engaging with the country's enemies. They choose to collaborate with the military to ensure that their reporting does not compromise national security. While dependence on security forces does not imply a pro-military bias, it does provide the media with guidance on what should and should not be reported. Historically, insufficient assessment of media organisations has benefitted foreign outlets that accessed conflict zones without government permission, often resulting in stories that could potentially undermine national interests.

Moreover, recognising their adversaries does not necessarily imply that journalism can be biased. Adhering to journalistic principles is crucial, distinguishing between investigative journalism and news analysis. The prevailing negative view of militancy is not based on preconceived notions but on the actions of militants that have led to their anti-Pakistan image. When it is confirmed that militants are opposed to Pakistan and the constitution, journalists should align with the national cause in their reporting. Conflict coverage must adhere to high standards of conflict reporting while ensuring that national security is not compromised. However, achieving true neutrality in conflict reporting can be challenging. A balanced approach may be undermined by a one-sided perspective, and amplifying militant voices in the media could inadvertently promote terrorism and propagate negative sentiments within society. While media independence and objectivity are essential, in the context of national security, collaboration and some levels of regulation are necessary to prevent the undermining of national interests. National security must be preserved, as it is vital for the survival and safety of the state and its citizens.

Professionalism is essential in all forms of journalism, which is influenced by both internal (such as background and personal preferences) and external (such as organisational) factors. While free and fair journalism is ideally pursued, it is often overshadowed by opinionated journalism due to its cost-effectiveness. Regarding the prevalent view that militants are anti-Pakistan, journalists indicated that they must adhere to their organisation's policies. Each news outlet has specific standards and policies that journalists are required to follow. However, the majority of respondents acknowledged that their personal attitudes do influence their reports to some extent. Very few journalists maintained

that reporting should be entirely devoid of personal bias. A journalist must be responsive to conflicts, as this responsiveness contributes to their expertise and insights, which are ultimately reflected in their reporting. For professional reporting, journalists need to be well-informed to cover conflicts rationally. Objectivity is a key component of professional journalism; however, reports can lose objectivity when personal opinions are introduced. It is important to distinguish between being influenced by something and integrating that influence into a report versus inserting personal views into the report itself. The media plays a role in both highlighting what is right and critiquing what is wrong. It tends to favour the military based on factual information about militants.

Professionalism in journalism should not be assessed solely based on the manner of reporting but also on the sources from which information is derived. To uphold professionalism, journalists must cross-check the details they gather from various sources. Regarding the limitations associated with reporting on militants, journalists frequently highlighted issues such as security threats, constraints on independent reporting, and restricted access to conflict areas. Security threats are evident, as journalists in conflict zones face dangers comparable to those faced by security forces, due to potential attacks or ambushes. Threats from militants are also common, particularly after the media has begun criticising militants and presenting military viewpoints, even when attempting to provide a balanced perspective. Media practitioners have received threatening calls, and some media organisations have been attacked. Restricted access to conflict areas poses a significant concern for journalists, as it limits their ability to gather comprehensive information and report effectively on the conflict. Dependence on the military for access to these areas restricts journalists' ability to conduct independent reporting. They are often unable to explore freely and seek answers to their pressing questions.

The relationship between the military and the media is often fraught with challenges, leading to several issues affecting the timely and comprehensive dissemination of information. The discord between the military and media creates mutual suspicion, which ultimately hampers effective conflict reporting. The lack of coordination and direct communication imposes strict limitations on the coverage of conflicts. On the other hand, journalists are also expected to exercise self-censorship. Effective communication is essential from both sides: the media must operate responsibly, considering national interests, while the military should facilitate and coordinate with the media appropriately. Proper training and education for journalists on conflict reporting could enhance their ability to cover these situations more comprehensively, addressing one of the reasons for limited reporting. Media criticism of the military can sometimes be perceived as condemnation, which may restrict journalists from reporting certain incidents. However, such criticism can also be constructive and may lead to valuable outcomes over time.

***This article is derived from the researcher's independent study.***

***The author declares that there is no conflict of interest in connection with the publication of this article and that all ethical standards required by the publisher were accepted during its preparation.***

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