



Impact of Online Activism on Public Involvement in Criminal Justice System

Erum Hafeez¹

Abstract

In this information era the increase in the use of digital technology has transformed the way we interact, socialize, access and consume data. The study investigates the reach and impact of public engagement on the crime and justice system in the contemporary age of online activism and citizen journalism. Applying the mixed-method approach, data is gathered through a thematic review of high-profile criminal cases, interviews of experts and a public survey in Pakistan. The findings highlight that a majority of youth under the age of 36 are using social media, especially Facebook (around 60% of the respondents), as the main source of news about criminal cases. While heavy exposure to criminal cases on digital media (77%) seems to have a nominal influence on public understanding of the judicial system in the country. However, it provides them with a platform for online activism, which often leads to offline civil right movements and campaigns with demands for mob justice and vigilantism. Despite certain limitations, the study provides valuable suggestions and insights for the policy makers and researchers alike in the field.

Keyword: *Online Movements; Keyboard Warriors; Social Justice; Vigilantism; Slacktivism*

Introduction

Digital activism, also known as 'digilantism', is a type of activism that uses the internet and digital media as main platforms for mass mobilization and civil action. Formerly, online activists used the Internet as a vehicle for the dissemination of information due to its widespread and quick reach to mass audiences across borders. Later, it is adopted as an interactive platform of protest

¹ Associate Professor and Research Head in the Media Sciences Department at the Iqra University, Karachi, Pakistan

that often reflects and magnifies off-line protests. Other forms of digital activism include e-mail and social-media campaigning, smart mobs and blogs, virtual sit-ins, vigilantism, hacktivism or disrupting websites (Fuentes, 2014).

Following the proliferation of digital networks, online activism and citizen journalism have emerged as popular trends, which have largely transformed the nature of social, political and civil movements and thereby the process of opinion building and judicial structure (Rinne & Hayhtio, 2008). The democratization of digital platforms has allowed law enforcement agencies and opinion leaders to interact with masses openly. The use of social media by police (Goldsmith 2015; McGovern and Lee 2012) and courts (Johnston 2017) promote public access and involvement with the justice system.

Social Media provide people an opportunity to disseminate news about corruption and particularistic governance, even in a strictly controlled media context. Besides, it empowers civil society to mobilize citizens for the fight against crimes and corruption (Kossow & Kukutschka, 2017).

However, Verdenicci and Hough (2015) indicated that without sincere support from governments and external agents, citizen-centered anti-corruption mechanisms remain restricted, irrelevant and even damaging as citizen indifference and frustration increases and chances to reform decreases. Rothstein (2011) concurred that the rise of citizens with an awareness to guard and voice their grievances is one of the leading factors for rapid social reform through institutionalized 'big bang', as evident in low-corruption countries such as Denmark and

Sweden (Jensen 2014). But, it needs the backing and involvement of formal institutions, which turns it into sustainable change in the long run.

It is assumed that online platforms usually support informal justice practices and highlight public reaction to crimes. Prins (2011) has advocated e-victimology, discussed how social media engagement opens up new avenues for self-help and activism.

However, it might have some potential negative effects on the traditional justice system such as the influence of public opinion on juries in the court system (Patterson 2012; Browning 2014). Furthermore, privacy and protection of victims are also under serious threats due to digital media platforms. Powell (2015) and Fileborn (2014) studied increasing digitalism of victim-survivors and online movements in reaction to sexual violence and street harassment. Meanwhile, some researchers also highlighted the chances for a digital media 'pillory' i.e. intensified role of media in shaming 'ordinary' people when they commit minor offences (Waller 2014), and 'digilantism' (Stratton 2017).

Trottier (2017) indicated vigilantism as an emerging practice, defined as a user violation of privacy that surpasses online/offline differences and obscures relations of control and visibility between police and the public. Culberson (1990), as cited by Trottier, defined it as 'private violence' or 'everyday policing' (Burr and Jensen 2004) whereby people aim to assert their preferred form of criminal justice. It is often driven by lowered public trust in police and criminal justice (Haas et al. 2014). This trend can promote injustices, doxing (public display of the target's

highly sensitive personal details such as address, contacts etc. on the Internet), online as well as embodied harassment and violence towards alleged perpetrators. The phenomenon popularly known as 'viral justice' or vigilantism (Trottier 2017; Thompson Wood 2016; Rose 2014; Aikins 2013; Antoniadis 2012) emphasizes the need to study the type and effects of mass movements for justice that are enabled via digital platforms.

This study is an attempt to investigate the prevalence and popularity of 'digilantism' and its possible impact on high-profile criminal cases and resultant civil right movements in Pakistani society. Pakistan has one of the most dynamic social media landscape in South Asia. During the last decade, the number of internet users has been tremendously increased, reaching around 65.13 million with the penetration rate of 31.19% in December 2019 (Pakistan Telecommunication Authority, 2019). There are around 31.467 million Facebook users in Pakistan that comprise 15% of the total population of the country (internetworldstats.com, 2019).

Considering the phenomenal growth of social media in Pakistan, it is expected that online activism makes masses more aware of their rights by providing them with an open platform to discuss crucial issues and voice their opinions freely. Exposure to different schools of thought and beliefs are likely to create an empathic cyber environment, and an increasing awareness about diverse humanitarian matters. The vigilant social media and ever-available citizen journalism are expectedly leading to public empowerment over the elite and ruling class, and make them more conscious about their deeds and misdeeds by setting up an

effective check and balance mechanism, which is the core of democracy (Islam & Ashraf, 2014).

On the contrary, online media activists are often criticized for creating social unrest and public outrage on petty issues through fake news, irresponsible reporting and sensationalism. Breach of an individual's privacy and illegal, amateur expose of legal and judicial matters represent the flip side of social media activism in Pakistan (Islam & Ashraf, 2014).

In the absence of effective cyber laws, efficient regulatory mechanism and sufficient digital media education, citizen journalism and online activism are likely serve the vested interests of media conglomerates and elite class and, therefore, cause more harms than benefits (Zafar 2013). Thus, contrary to the general expectations, online platforms are creating negativity, cynicism, apathy and materialism. The urge to win popular vote often lead the opinion leaders to highlight the petty issues while the core matters of educational and economic progress are taking a back seat (Abedin 2013).

To investigate the impact of social media on activism and control of crime, both local and international research studies were reviewed thoroughly. The empirical evidences in the context were specifically focused. In order to do this, the data was collected through the interviews of relevant activists and practitioners besides an online public survey. The data were triangulated and themes were extracted that pointed toward the role of social media in criminal justice mechanism in Pakistan.

Literature Review

Modern interactive culture has empowered common people to screen and interfere in the lives of fellow human beings. (Andrejevic 2007; Niedzviecki 2009). Online media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and Whatsapp, enable users to discuss anything and anyone, publish their personal details and trigger mass movement asked for action. Besides, mobile phones now allow live recording and broadcast of any offence to public. Digital technology has thus blurred the boundaries between online and offline worlds. It is disturbing as many digital vigilantism activists may not be aware of the actual impact of their actions (Ronson 2015).

There is an evidence that internet media in general and social networks, in particular, are indispensable components of citizen empowerment. However, these tools work best if they are implemented in a society with strong overall capacity and environment for collective action (Mungiu-Pippidi & Dadasov, 2016). Kossow and Kukutschka (2017) concurred that the enlightened citizens can use internet access and social media to update themselves about crimes and activate support for anti-corruption movements.

Rose and Fox (2014: 771) reportedly conducted one of the debut studies about the effects of social media on communal collaboration with the criminal justice set up. They reached to the conclusion that while there is no evidence that social media contributes to increasing mass awareness and trust in the existing criminal justice system, it is proved that social media involvement

with criminal prosecutions triggers public demand for revenge and reinforce watchful approaches and reactions.

Digital revolution can rightly be called an Asian phenomenon. "From flash-mobs in Taiwan to feminist mobilizations in India, from hybrid media strategies of Syrian activists to cultural protests in Thailand, we witnessed the rise of civil movements that present the civilians as a change agent. (Shah, 2015: 10)." In this process of change, how digital media was used and influenced various aspects of Asian societies are crucial themes for empirical research.

Ashraf and Islam (2014:47) investigated the impact of media activism on Pakistan society and endorsed that currently social media is breaching all boundaries of individual privacy, morality and good taste. Hafeez (2017) indicated that there is a significant positive relation between the mediated exposure to violent crimes and mental distress. She recommended trained manpower with the public and private sectors collaboration, to take the optimum benefits of online platforms for public awareness.

Earlier, several researches were conducted to study the connection between media coverage of crimes and public views about criminality. Davis (1952: 325) discovered a positive link between news intake and masses terror of crime. Subsequently, a series of public surveys carried out in America in the 1980s discovered that people who excessively attend the crime news are increasingly conscious, and often anxious about becoming the victims to real-life crimes (Einsiedel et al., 1984: 131-136; Okeefe and Reidnash, 1987: 147-163).

Besides, a longitudinal study, analyzed the crime reporting of leading US television networks between 1978 and 1998, resolved that the widespread public concern about increasing crime rate as a significant national issue, is the result of extensive coverage of crimes on-screen rather than the reported incidents in reality (Lowry, 2003: 61-73).

Audience perspective about injustice and lawlessness is crucial since the state's response to popular opinion often shape policy decisions, social values, and sometimes even individual attitudes. Adriaenssen (2019: 1) established that exposure to mediated news is both directly and indirectly related to perceived crime seriousness, wrongfulness, and harm severity. Media violence and crime not only involved prone viewers but also affected other social segments by cultivating fearful attitudes or simply desensitizing them to real life agony through excessive exposure to fictional violence (Hafeez, 2016).

Cohen (1972) introduced the term 'moral panic' to identify the noticeable forms of mass perceptions and reaction to media coverage of crimes and violence. Several experimental pieces of research later reinforced Cohen's finding. One such research investigated the coverage of capital punishment in print media, and its impact on public opinion about it for around two decades (from 1970s to 90s) mentioned that mass backing for capital punishment was gradually deteriorated, parallel to the wider media reporting about imprecisions in the legal procedures, which often results into the execution of innocent people (Fan et al., 2002: 439-452).

Other subsequent work such as Tyler's book, 'Why people obey the law?' (2006) found a solid indication that the increasing media coverage of criminal cases is likely to reduce the public faith in the corresponding judicial system, which is crucial to the restoration of an effectively ordered, democratic society, with due respect for its laws.

Theoretical Background

This study examines concepts of activism, vigilantism and 'slacktivism' from academic and popular perspectives and relates these notions to the critical theory. Social media and technological advancements have transformed how individuals and groups create awareness, engage masses and demand for social change and justice (Meyer & Workman Bray, 2013; Van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004; Diani, 2000). Using recent, high-profile criminal cases as reference points enable us to examine prevalent scholarly sources to critically analyze modern trends of online activism and slacktivism, and associate the theoretical concepts of agency and social change to current civil movements for social justice (Glenn, 2015).

The word 'slacktivism' is a blend of the two terms 'slacker' and 'activism'. It refers to the gulf between awareness and action through the use of social media and shows a retreat from the conventional concept of activism. Knibbs (2013) describes slacktivism as 'feel-good back-patting' through viewing or 'liking' analysis of social issues without any action. It needs nominal time and effort, usually lacking utilization and evident impact in resolving any social issue.

Methodology

This study adopted Rose and Fox's (2014) mixed-method approach for data collection. It can broadly be divided into two sections including an online public survey that was carried out through a carefully-drafted questionnaire to gauge the implications of online activism and citizen journalism on public opinion related to the high-profile sampled criminal cases and relevant civil movements on social media.

Subsequently, interviews of representative opinion leaders including a civil rights activist, a journalists, a lawyer, a policeman, and a psychologist were conducted with the help of open-ended questions for an in-depth understanding of online activism and its socio-cultural and political implications.

The purpose of using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods of investigation is to validate the authenticity of the findings both on objective and subjective grounds with certain cases as reference points in the national context.

Considering the fact, an elaborate questionnaire was developed which was comprised of three sections. The first part includes questions that deals with the demographics of the sample population including their gender, age and academic background. The second section comprises of questions, aimed to investigate contemporary news-seeking patterns of the respondents alongside ranking of popular social media platforms as news providers in Pakistan. Whereas, the third section pertains to the queries related to the role of these online platforms in creating 'keyboard warriors', their influence on public opinion

and reaction to some high profile criminal cases and civil rights movements in Pakistan.

Sampling for Online Survey

Purposive random sampling technique was adopted for the public survey. Two criteria were used to extract the required sample considering the purpose of the study; firstly the participants should fall between 16 and 35 age brackets and secondly the participants should have an online presence with active accounts on identified social media platforms

An online survey of 350 social media users was conducted to assess the level of public engagement, especially that of youth, towards high-profile criminal cases and related online civil movements, from across the country. The questionnaire was disseminated via social media platforms including Google, Facebook, WhatsApp and personal emails to participants.

Sample Demographics

The public survey sample is comprised of 52 % men and 48 % women, which is representative of the overall gender ratio in the population of the country. According to the Pakistan Population (2019) data the male, female ration in Pakistan is currently 51 % to 48 % respectively. The sample of the survey includes diverse age groups representing teenagers and youth. Around 30 % of our sample consists of the people, falling between the age range of 16 and 20. It is subsequently followed by 43 % people, aged between 21 and 25, 15 % ranged from 26 to 30 and 12 % representation of people between the age of 31 and 35. More than half of our sample i.e. 58 % are university graduates and students followed by 31 % college and 11 % high school students. Since the scope of the study

is to assess the implications of online activism on youth and their engagement in mass movements against crime, the focus remains on the educated youth of Pakistan.

Table 1: *Sample Demographics*

	Respondents
Gender	%
Men	52
Women	48
Age Group	
16-20	30
21-25	43
26-30	15
31-35	12
Academic Level	
High School	11
College	31
University	58

Research Questions for Public Survey

RQ1. Are the most popular sources of news for people in Pakistan?

RQ2. Which are the most favorite online sources of news updates for people in Pakistan?

RQ3. To what extent online social media platforms contribute to public awareness about high-profile criminal cases and civil society movements?

RQ5. How do people use social media to respond to such criminal cases and movements?

RQ6. What is netizens' level of engagement with high-profile criminal cases and civil movements on digital media?

RQ7. Do digilantism and citizen journalism trigger hate and gender-related crimes or curb them? How does it influence the public opinion towards crime and justice system in the country?

Findings and Analysis

The news attaining habits of the sample in the current study seems to be congruent the patterns identified by the Pew Research surveys of audience habits, indicating perilous future for traditional news media and a fast transition to the Internet, as the primary source of news in young generation (Kohut, 2013).

Table 2: *Leading News Sources among Respondents*

News Source	Percentage/ Number
Online Sources (Social Media, Web browsers, Websites of News Organization and Mobile apps)	70% (245)
National TV News Broadcasts	50% (175)
Radio	32% (112)
Newspapers	11% (39)
Sample Size	350

Note: Respondents are allowed to mark more than one medium as their news source

Findings in Table 2 represent a major shift in trend i.e. people, especially youth in Pakistan heavily rely on digital media for news updates. Around 70% respondents said that they used online sources especially social media such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp for getting news updates (Hafeez, 2013) besides leading web browsers namely Chrome, Firefox, Explorer, Yahoo, and websites of some leading media groups such as Jang, Dawn, Express and Business Recorder

TV bulletins are still quite popular with around half of the respondents (50%) utilize national news broadcasts as the main source of news, followed by radio (32%), especially in far-flung areas, and newspapers (11%) that are relatively less popular and are gradually losing their status as the news source across the world (Franklin, 2014) as well as in Pakistan.

Table 3: *Ranking of Popular Social Media Platforms as News Source*

Social Medium	Percentage (numbers)
Facebook	60% (213)
WhatsApp	9% (32)
Twitter	8% (28)
Instagram	6.5% (23)
Snapchat	3.5% (12)
Others (Web browsers and websites of newspapers and channels organizations)	13% (46)

Note: Respondents are encouraged to mark their most preferred online news source (anyone only)

Interestingly, some of the most popular news sites and current sources of news were not even present in the last decade. For example, it is calculated that around 50% of the sampled population manage more than one social networking accounts and approximately 90% have at least one account presently. Facebook is the most popular platform with over 83% of respondents having its FB profile followed by WhatsApp at 47%. Overall, there are around 32 million Facebook users in Pakistan that comprise 15% of the total population of the country (internetworldstats.com, 2019).

In this context, it is perhaps not a surprise that around 60% of our sampled respondents use Facebook as their main source of news alerts and updates followed by WhatsApp, Twitter and

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Instagram with 13%, 9%, 8% and 6.5 % users' preference respectively, even though these networking platforms are not even meant for news collection and dissemination. Further, around 13 % of respondents rely on relatively reliable digital media sources including web browsers and websites of online newspapers and channels' organizations, as indicated by Table 3.

Before investigating the assumed association between citizen journalism and online activism, it is pertinent to assess how aware the respondents are about some of the high-profile criminal cases and civil right movements that have created massive hype and appeared in top trends in Pakistan as well as in global scenario recently.

Table 4: *Public awareness and Familiarity with High-profile Criminal Cases and Trends*

Criminal Cases and Movements	Familiarity %
Zainab Ansari (Kasur child rape and murder case, January 2018) (BBC News, 2018).	78.8
Asifa Case (Gang rape and murder case of an 8-year old girl in Kathua, Kashmir, India, January 2018) (BBC News, 2018).	60
Mashal Khan Case (Public lynching of a youth by his fellow students in Mardan University on Blasphemy charges on Facebook, April 2017) (The Nation News, 2018).	82
Qandeel Baloch Case (A social media celebrity known for her controversial, exotic videos and social media presence killed by her brother and cousin in the name of honour hailed from Multan, Punjab, April 2017) (Associated Press of Pakistan, 2017).	88
#Metoo and #Timesup (International campaigns initiated by journalists, Hollywood celebrities and take up by activists globally including Pakistan to fight against sexual violence and harassment by encouraging victims to speak up, 2017)(Langone, 2018).	50

Note: Answers combine those who said they were very familiar and somewhat familiar.

Respondents were allowed to mark more than one case

Table 4 shows that a large majority of the respondents (average 77%) were aware of the first four criminal cases that created havoc first on social media and then, subsequently, took the mainstream media by storm, in Pakistan as well as in the world in last two years. Nearby 50 % of people recognized online feminist movements #Metoo and #Timesup in our sample, which is yet a big number. This level of familiarity is quite surprising and considerably high in the ignorant Pakistani society, where still the literacy rate is 58% only (Ministry of Finance; Education, 2018).

Table 5: *Social Media Habits to Popular Criminal Cases and Movements*

Top Five Cases	Read updates and posts on Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter %
Zainab Rape Case	47
Asifa Gang Rape & Murder Case	34
Mashal Lynching Case	50
Qandeel Honour Killing Case	53
#Metoo and #Timesup	30
Movements	

Note: Respondents were encouraged to choose any one case out of the five that they pursued and posted about most

Table 5 indicates that a large majority of sample youth attained news and updates about high-profile criminal cases and civil right movements mainly through online media, which represents a major shift in the news consumption and engagement patterns of the users that is also affecting the mainstream news media industry.

Table 6: *Social Media Engagement/Activism related to High-profile Criminal Cases and Trends*

Cases	Posted/ Re-posted news relating to a case/trial/cause on Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and Instagram %
Zainab Ansari Case	15% (52)
Asifa Case	10% (35)
Mashal Khan Case	20% (70)
Qandeel Baloch Case	33% (115)
#Metoo and #Timesup	5% (17)
None of the above	17% (61)
Sample Size	350

Note: Respondents were encouraged to choose one case that they pursued and posted about most

Findings in Table 6 show whether these social media users participate proactively and somehow contribute or respond, by personally reposting or posting news about the cases from their online profiles as a 'news participator' a term used in the Pew Research (2013).

Certainly, the percentage gets down, with around 83 % of the respondents in total claimed that they posted once in a while. The percentage is varied between 5% and 33 %, depicting varied levels of the respondents' engagement, concerning the sample high-profile criminal cases and movements, as mentioned in Table 6. Mostly, online engagement ranged from liking a post and leaving a comment to posting and reposting the news, views and videos for the dissemination of news as well as awareness and initiation of dialogue and debate that often contribute to opinion building within one's online social circle. Nevertheless, it signifies a substantial percentage of the population that is consuming social media to get involved with popular criminal cases and mass movements.

Table 7: *Social Media Engagement with Criminal Trials*

Miscellaneous Questions about Social Media Activism	Yes (%)	No (%)
Have you ever used social media to communicate your thoughts or feelings directly to the suspected perpetrator of a crime?	13	87
Have you ever used social media to communicate your thoughts or feelings directly to the suspected victim of a crime?	10.5	89.5
Have you ever used social media to encourage other people to take action that directly targets the suspected perpetrator of a crime?	8	92
On social media, have you have been invited to join a group related to a criminal case?	19.5	80.5
Have you ever been part of a social media group related to a criminal case?	17	83
Have you ever created a social media group of your own related to a criminal case?	2	98
Sample Size		350

Note: Table 7 represents diverse forms and levels of public engagement on the social media platform.

From ten to thirteen per cent of the survey respondents shared that they tried to communicate with the perpetrators and victims of the criminal cases respectively. This level of public engagement was unimaginable before the advent of social media.

Besides, a substantial proportion of survey respondents i.e. 20.5 % reportedly being invited to join social networking groups devoted to criminal cases and around 17 % of them responded to such invitations positively. Though there is a comparatively lesser percentage of survey participants who accepted to create ever an online group related to a criminal case, around 8 % said that they did encourage other people to take action, which directly targets the suspected perpetrator of a crime. However, a search of Facebook pages using the names of

perpetrators and alleged perpetrators reveals dozens of different types of groups – some provide updates about the high-profile samples criminal cases, others devoted to conspiracy theories, and there are rest that seems to track the activities and personal lives of victims and perpetrators alike.

Interviews

Interviews of sampled opinion leaders including an online media activist, a journalist, a lawyer, a policeman and a psychologist were conducted with the help of an open-ended questionnaire for an in-depth understanding of online activism and its implications on public opinion and judicial system in the country.

Interview participants and background description

Though several online activists and opinion leaders were approached initially, five professionals from distinct relevant fields of law, judiciary, journalism, health (criminal psychology) and human rights were shortlisted as the purposive representative sample for interviews. Three out of five interviewees were women, which is indicative of the fact that in rape and honour killing cases, female activists seem to be more vocal online, a trend that is just contrary to the offline activism culture in Pakistan. The participants are all relevant professionals and all of them are informed and actively involved in the online movements related to the sampled high-profile cases. It is recognized that their personal and professional involvements with the sample crime cases and identified themes might influence their opinion about the issue but that is the need of the study and a part of the criteria for sample selection.

All interviews from five opinion leaders were recorded (either manually or audio-taped) in Karachi. The duration of each interview was between 15 and 20 minutes, excluding initial briefing and informal discussion. The participants were given a chance to discuss the interview questions and objective of the study before recording began, so that they could be clear about the purpose of the interview session and answered comfortably.

Considering the suggested guidelines, a questionnaire was developed before the interviews. Patton (1990) advocates that it is vital to prepare an interview guide, comprising of a list of questions, to ensure that all the relevant subjects are covered. This format allows keeping the questions open-ended, and structure of the interviews flexible enough to accommodate the additional information provided by the participants voluntarily during interviews.

The interviews for this study were comprised of two components. Primarily, the interviewers asked about the positive influences of online activism on public opinion and authorities (judicial) response to sampled criminal cases—particularly sensitive crimes such as rape, honour killing and blasphemy. Subsequently, respondents discussed the negative effects of online activism and civil right movements in rape, honour killing and blasphemy cases, especially its impact on victims' lives and the very cause of justice in society.

Finally, the recorded interviews were transcribed and theme-coded. It was done to identify the common and distinct issues in the data and also to show the diversity in the accounts of the interviewees. The thematic content analysis helped the

researcher to highlight patterns within the data. The precision of the contributors' responses was ensured by sharing with them the transcribed interviews and incorporate pertinent amendments to their feedback.

The following two research themes guided the study into what determines the positive and negative influences of online activism with reference to social justice in high-profile criminal cases including rape, harassment, honour killing and blasphemy offences.

Table 8: *Interviewees Coding*

Code	Profession	Experience	Gender
Respondent A	Journalist	20 years	Female
Respondent B	Policeman	10 years	Male
Respondent C	Lawyer	17 years	Male
Respondent D	Online Activist	5 years	Female
Respondent E	Psychologist	8 years	Female

Note: Codes are used while stating interviewees' responses below

Online coverage and activism in high profile cases bring issues to limelight and often leads to speedy justice.

The nature and content of crime reporting is very important. Harassment, rape, honour killing and blasphemy are serious criminal offences and quite often instigated by faulty social values and beliefs. These crimes, thus, need to be reported both on social well as in mainstream media to highlight the shortcomings of the legal and judicial systems in a well-rounded manner to aware masses and shape public opinion. However, highlighting only one aspect of such cases or trivializing it proves to be a negative influence.

As respondent A said that social media proves to be a strong tool for circulating news and views. She believes that the

rape case of Zainab, the honour killing case of Qandeel and the blasphemy case of Mashal Khan got due attention in mainstream media because of digital media. Besides, online activism affects these cases positively as the criminals in all the three cases got sentence from courts due to media-generated public and political pressures (Rana, 2018).

Public outrage exhibited on social media and subsequently reported by the mainstream media in Pakistan did spur action on part of the government in the high-profile sampled cases.

Commenting on the potential role of social media, respondent B added, that people are influenced by what their role model believes in, that is the reason why actors and models with a huge fan following set out to create awareness regarding child rape and honour killing cases. It reaches a wider spectrum of audience and thereby makes a wider impact as well. Following that, respondent C highlighted the role of social media in these words, Socio-cultural setup of Pakistan doesn't encourage rape and honour killing victims and their families to take legal action against the perpetrators mainly due to stigma and false perception of honour attached to women's body. However, in recent years, online platforms set a precedent and opened up a discussion about taboo issues and offence. Because of social media, these crimes are giving increasing coverage besides being discussed in public, which is indeed a good sign and a first step to resolve them.

Violation of code of conduct and ethical issues in online coverage of gender-based crimes is prevalent

Given our societal norms of stigmatizing victims of sexual crimes, it is not appropriate to post pictures of the victims or their family members or reveal anything that leads to their identification. Besides, it is also against the journalistic code of conduct across the world. However, what happened in such cases is a blatant violation of media ethics and human rights in our society.

Respondent D said that the media should've been careful, regarding the content shared. It's a part of the code of conduct in journalism to refrain from breaching the privacy of victims. For instance, bombarding pictures, names and addresses of the victims and even that of perpetrators (as happened in Zainab, Qandeel and Mashal's cases) on social media were unethical both for civil and social media journalists. She believed that being professional, journalists must take consent of the parties involved in criminal cases, especially the ones dealing with rape, honour killing, harassment and blasphemy that usually involve vulnerable sections of the society including women, children and minorities.

Respondent C summed it up in these words, "Privacy is a very basic right of an individual, and even if laws do not ensure it, ethics and norms should." Whether we like it or not, even the criminal has rights so posting the pictures of victims and even accused are against ethics and journalistic code of conduct, agreed upon by the mass media worldwide.

Online Activism distract attention from real issue and adversely affect the proceedings and judicial inquiry.

The danger in case of the hyper drive, online activism is that the media gets involved in weaving conspiracy theories rather than reporting it sanely with empathy as it was evident in Zainab, Mashal and Qandeel's cases.

Respondent A shed light on the same concern, social media often divert focus from the real issues. In gender-based crimes against minors, media needs to highlight measures for child protection, safety, and elimination of sexual offenders, which was simply neglected in the media circus of conspiracy theories. Sensitizing or rather desensitizing public through sensational or reckless media coverage of such crimes is another major area of concern.

As Respondent E rightly said, the language of media coverage must not shift the blame to the victim like it was the parents' fault that they went without their child (referred to Zainab's case whose parents were travelling when she was raped and murdered) and instead of shaming the victims or their families, the language should be very objective and straight without amalgamation of any melodrama. Careless and dramatic reporting of heinous crimes often leads to the immense public outrage, which could simply harm the real issue rather than resolving it.

Discussion

An inefficient justice system, lack of victims' resources and political influence from perpetrators are often highlighted as some of the main causes of an increasing rate of crimes and low rate of formal reporting with police and other law enforcement agencies. Unfortunately, in the absence of media coverage and

public pressure, even the cases filed often handle casually and hardly resolved.

Ideally, the efficiency of action and enforcement of rule of law eliminate the need for social media outrage and online civil movement for justice, however, it is not realized yet. Thus as Respondent A commented, "Until that happens, it is pressure built by all quarters including social media and civil society that will get us to the point when the state institutions fulfil their responsibility seriously."

Digital and social media are relatively free platforms in comparison to electronic and print media, however, with freedom of speech comes responsibility and a social media activist shall be cautious about.

As respondent C commented, "Since the information in digital space is a public property that reaches mass audience, one has to be careful in reporting and covering sensitive issues on social media because that information can be used against the victims as well as the activists alike."

On the other hand, respondent E believed that excessive media coverage of crimes harms the public psyche. She said, "Excessive and irresponsible media and online coverage of rape and honour killing cases have become an everyday norm for the masses and they get desensitize to these issues in real life."

In Pakistan, online activists and citizen journalists are as free as anyone else, but it can be risky too because certain institutions and state are intolerant of hardline views, especially when gender, politics and religious matters are involved.

As respondent D said, While posting graphic content online, there is an option to add 'explicit content ahead', it's a fair warning to people who are vulnerable due to their age, background or endurance level to avoid it. Unfortunately, this practice is not widely adopted in the rape and honour killings cases in Pakistan.

While online activism and civil movements played a key role in providing justice in the sampled case, it often failed to highlight the real causes of child rape, assault and murder of non-conformists. Zainab, Qandeel and Mashal cases were just the tip of the iceberg. Shahrezad (2016) rightly mentioned that a number of such cases were never unearthed, and while the online activists might rejoice over their small victory, another such victim may be crying over a similar case.

What we need to understand is that online activism is a temporary outburst, not a permanent solution to social evils. We ultimately need an effective and efficient legal and judicial system and institutional support to discourage the trend.

Conclusion

This research study offers an initial evaluation of how the growth of online media has affected public attitudes and actions towards high-profile criminal cases and the overall civil right and justice system in context. Finally, we have three primary findings:

Firstly, people are certainly using social media as a key source of attaining and disseminating news updates about high-profile criminal cases. Social media networks including Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp, are serving as leading newsgathering

and disseminating means for a majority of people, especially those under 36 years of age.

Secondly, social media practices about popular criminal cases have had a nominal influence on public understanding of the existing legal and judicial system as well as civilians trust in the criminal justice set up. Overall, mass awareness and trust levels are considerably low, irrespective of the fact that the people are social media user and online activists or not; rather heavy exposure to criminal cases and procedures make common people more cynical about law and order situation in general.

Thirdly, social media motivate and provide a wide array of platforms and opportunities to its users for civil and collective activism. Masses can form networks, communicate to fellow citizens around the country, and even directly communicate with trial participants. One aspect of this greater participation that we uncovered was an amplified inclination towards revenge and demand for mob or mass justice as happened in Zainab and Asifa's cases where people demanded public hanging of the criminals in Kasur and Kathua (Kashmir) respectively (Deb, 2018).

Limitations and Recommendations

The purpose of this research is to fill the gap in the academic literature regarding digital media as an emerging source of news dissemination and opinion building. To research the issue from diverse perspective, we used mixed method. Perhaps future studies will focus more on experts' opinion including jury, lawyers, psychologists, social media activists and opinion leaders. Diversity of method, in-depth qualitative and longitudinal

quantitative study with different samples taken from all across the country, regarding high-profile online criminal cases, might help to validate the finding of the current research. It is highly recommended that more such studies should be carried out in Pakistan and other South Asian countries, preferably as comparative analysis, to investigate the possible implications of popular social networking sites on mass reactions, variations in individual behavior, civil movements and activism.

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