

Civic Voices Vs Silence: The Impact of Press Restraints on Local Activism in Dera Ismail Khan

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Abstract

This qualitative research paper examines the relationship between community participation and media restrictions in Dera Ismail Khan, a southern district in Pakistan, renowned for its lively yet suppressed public discourse. Applying Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model, the study investigates scientifically how local journalists and activists cope with censorship, institutional pressure, and self-censorship. Using the triangulation technique, data are extracted from interviews, focus group discussions, and newspaper content analysis. The findings reveal that when the prevailing narratives support state ideology and shun critics, alternative civic expressions endure through coded language, clever framing, and subtle opposition. This empirical investigation gives insight into how the media operates in remote regions and reveals the resilience of civic engagement under pressure.

Keywords: Media Censorship, Civic Activism, Self-Censorship, Critical Discourse Analysis, Propaganda Model, Dera Ismail Khan.

Introduction

Open civic discourse is often difficult to maintain in remote places like Dera Ismail Khan due to prolonged security concerns, local disputes and sectarian-ethnic divisions. Dera Ismail Khan, commonly called D.I. Khan is the first down-hill district of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, which borders South Waziristan. The city is commonly viewed as a sensitive, challenging and high-risk region marked by militarism, sectarian divide and limited media freedom.

In Pakistan, media restrictions in conflict-prone regions are not only institutional; they also function as structural pressures that impact civic involvement, public discourse, and democratic engagement. Information flows are being more tightly regulated in places like Dera Ismail Khan because of ongoing security operations, sectarian tensions, and institutional surveillance. These conditions force journalists and activists to choose between their professional obligations and their personal safety. Dera Ismail Khan is a crucial location for studies on how civic discourse changes under ongoing media control, given the severity of these restrictions (Shah, 2025; Mann & Hameed-ur-Rehman, 2025).

Despite constant pressure, local activists and media here appear dynamic and resilient. They continuously adjust their approaches as survival tactics and stay engaged with people to support and build civic narratives and public discourse.

This research paper seeks to substantiate the ongoing phenomenon by focusing on negotiated speech, silent resistance, and deliberate silences that shape communication in the region. In short, the scope of this paper is to analyse how media restrictions affect civic engagement in Dera Ismail Khan.

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Literature Review

Freedom of Media in Pakistan

Pakistan has faced recurring periods of media censorship, often justified in the name of public morals, religion and national security. These types of censorship practices have been documented by scholars applying both traditional and digital research techniques (Hassan, 2018; Yousaf, 2021). The majority of research in Pakistan, however, focuses on major cities such as Islamabad, Karachi, and Lahore. As a result, these studies offer us only a limited understanding of media dynamics in smaller cities and conflict zones (Mumtaz et al., 2025; Fatima et al., 2025). This empirical gap urges the need to investigate the flow of content production and the deliberate silences that trigger civic action in small cities.

Herman & Chomsky's Propaganda Model

The five filters defined by Chomsky and Herman's Propaganda Model, i.e. ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak, and ideology, were originally developed to evaluate media in democracies. They argue that these filters benefit rich elites by influencing content (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Although the model originated in the United States, many scholars have effectively applied the framework to research, exploring findings in postcolonial and semi-authoritarian contexts, including Pakistan (Fatima et al., 2025).

CDA in Dera Ismail Khan

Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995) examines how discourse reflects and reinforces power dynamics, and is applied as a conceptual framework to structure the design of this research paper. CDA is believed to be valuable for measuring how language sustains authority within media; it is combined with Chomsky's propaganda model to thoroughly investigate how media discourse in Dera Ismail Khan promotes control mechanisms while allowing space for resistance.

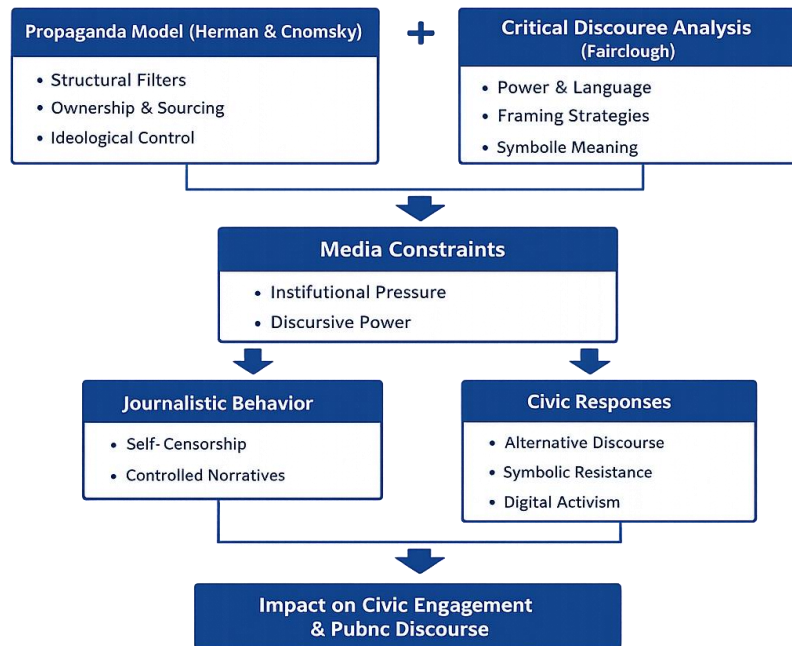
Conceptual Framework

To build a structure for this research paper, Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model and Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis were combined and integrated as a foundation for examining the structural and discursive dimensions of media control.

The Propaganda Model explains how institutional filters such as ownership structures, sourcing practices, and ideological pressures shape media output in Dera Ismail Khan. However, when this propaganda model identifies structural influences, it lacks the capacity to explain how such power relations operate through language and communication practices in any given setup.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) complements Chomsky's perspective in the present study and extends it by examining how power is reproduced through ongoing discourse, framing practices, and symbolic depictions in a conflict-driven region. By combining these approaches, the present study conceptualises media constraints as operating symbiotically at structural and discursive levels. Structural pressures helped to identify the impact on content productions, while discursive strategies such as framing, silence, and symbolic resistance helped identify how civic communication is shaped (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1998; Wodak & Meyer, 2009).

This integrated framework permits the study to explore how institutional control mechanisms influence journalistic behaviour and how civic actors respond through negotiated speech and alternative discourse practices in Dera Ismail Khan.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Media Constraints and Civic Engagement

The conceptual framework illustrates the integration of Herman and Chomsky's Propaganda Model and Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis to explain how structural and discursive media constraints shape journalistic behaviour and civic responses in Dera Ismail Khan.

Research Questions

1. How do local journalists and activists in Dera Ismail Khan understand and manage media constraints?
2. What dominant narratives emerge in the coverage of civic activism in local Newspapers?
3. How and why do media practitioners engage in self-censorship?
4. What forms of counter-narratives or resistance can be seen in media and civic communication?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs qualitative triangulation by combining interviews, media content analysis, and focus group discussions to provide a comprehensive understanding of the situation in Dera Ismail Khan.

Data Collection

- a) *In-depth Interviews*: Seventeen journalists, editors, and civil society figures were interviewed to gather data and empirical insights for this study.
- b) *Content Analysis*: Two local Urdu newspapers, "Sada-e-Haq" and "Dera News", are reviewed, and their content is analysed over a one-year period (January-December 2024).
- c) *Focus Groups*: Discussions are conducted with a group of 21 participants from academia and NGOs active in civic efforts in Dera Ismail Khan.

This triangulation ensures cross-validation (Denzin, 1978; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell, 2014).

Data Analysis

The present inquiry applies CDA principles to uncover power-laden messaging, implicit silences, and recurring themes to draw relevant findings. Chomsky's filters are also used to identify institutional influences and structural biases within media narratives in Dera Ismail Khan.

Findings and Discussion

Normalisation of Silence

Self-censorship is frequently identified by study participants as an essential survival technique. Unless they align with the state's agenda, journalists tend to avoid discussing topics such as security forces, radicalism, and political wrongdoing. To avoid backlash, some journalists admit to suppressing facts or killing their stories altogether. "There are times when the newspaper's silence speaks louder than the news itself," remarks a well-known local journalist. In consonance with the study's proposed theoretical foundation, the above finding reinforces the presence of the "flak" filter of the Propaganda Model, explaining how the fear of consequences influences Journalists and media behaviour in Dera Ismail Khan. From a CDA crow's nest, the findings also support the idea that silence acts as a discursive practice that mirrors internalised power dynamics.

Elite Alignment & Media Ownership

Strong connections to local elites, whether political, religious, or economic, are evident in both of the evaluated newspapers. Coverage is influenced by these relationships, especially in property disputes, sectarian matters, and NGO operations. It is common practice in Dera Ismail Khan to dilute or delete content that questions influential people.

The above findings also reflect adherence to the study's conceptual framework, particularly the "ownership" and "sourcing" filters of the Propaganda Model, indicating how structural relationships influence news selection and framing in Dera Ismail Khan.

Framing of Civic Activism

Words like "misguided," "foreign-funded," and "disruptive" are frequently used to discredit public activities such as awareness campaigns and protests. The underrepresentation or misrepresentation of activists' perspectives fosters public scepticism in Dera Ismail Khan.

In theory, CDA describes such a type of labelling practice as an ideological discourse that constructs legitimacy and delegitimises dissent in a given environment.

Alternative Discourse & Subtle Resistance

Despite these hurdles, opposition remains active and visible. Journalists use metaphors, satire, allegories, and cultural allusions to criticise authority without naming them directly. Activists switch to digital media, poetry, and religious symbolism to spread their message and avoid censorship. As one social activist put it, "We never shout; instead, we sing." "This is how we protest."

The above findings further strengthen the inventive theoretical assumptions, as the presence of these practices in Dera Ismail Khan explains discursive resistance, where marginalised actors, according to theory, reconfigure communication strategies within constrained environments.

Conclusion

The results reveal that curbs and constraints on media in Dera Ismail Khan function through both institutional pressures and discursive practices, which regularly shape the nature of civic engagement. Furthermore, this research shows that journalists and activists in this area employ explicit communication strategies to adapt, such as self-censorship, symbolic resistance, and the creation of alternative discourses to navigate and integrate into the restrictive conditions.

This research paper, by bridging Chomsky's Propaganda Model and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) within a single conceptual framework, provides a comprehensive explanation for researchers interested in exploring how structural control mechanisms operate and interact with language practices to regulate or silence ongoing public discourse. Meanwhile, dominant narratives reinforce existing power structures, and counter-discourses continue to emerge through coded expression and digital platforms.

The study contributes to development studies by highlighting how media regulation affects civic participation in peripheral areas like Dera Ismail Khan, which are often overlooked in media studies research in Pakistan. It also indicates the direction that future research should examine comparative regional contexts and explore the long-term implications of sustained media constraints on democratic participation and societal progress.

In Short, the study concludes that media restrictions in Dera Ismail Khan not only silence voices but also shape them alternately. Civic actors adapt to form strategic alliances, using innovative forms of expression, and rely on coded language. The propaganda model, when localised and paired with CDA, explains both the persistence of opposition and the endurance of dominant narratives. The study reveals a clear tendency for people to express themselves creatively when confined.

Data Matrix (Qualitative Thematic Analysis)

Table 1: Summarizes the core themes, codes, and examples derived from interviews and focus group discussions

Theme	Code	Description/Example	Frequency
Media Censorship	Direct Threats	Journalists warned not to cover certain topics	9
Self-Censorship	Topic Avoidance	Omission of sectarian violence or criticism of military	14
Resistance Strategies	Symbolic Language	Use of poetry or satire to criticize power indirectly	7
Ownership Influence	Editorial Filtering	Owners shape content to suit political/business interests	11
Civic Framing	Delegitimization	Protests labeled "misguided" or "foreign-funded"	6
Alternative Discourse	Digital Platforms	Use of social media to bypass traditional media	8

Recommendations

1. There is a need to provide security trainings and storytelling work shops especially designed to cater the needs of local journalists in Pakistan.
2. There is a need to make investments in independent community media to broaden the public discourse in Pakistan.
3. There is a need to enhance digital literacy among journalists and activists to ensure that they are able to interact safely online.

4. There is also a need to expand the scope of present research to the other underprivileged regions of Pakistan to have the complete media mapping of Pakistan.

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