

GUIDEBOOK ON

# ETHICAL JOURNALISM

ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS



## ABOUT US

Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) is an advocacy and research oriented org working on issues of online freedom of expression, digital privacy, accessibility and online violence. Founded in 2012, DRF envisions a free, open and inclusive internet in Pakistan, regionally and globally. Digital Rights Foundation is a feminist org and works towards making the internet a safer place for all, specially for women.



DigitalRightsFoundation  
"KNOW YOUR RIGHTS"

# CONTEXT

Since the Internet first became available in Pakistan in the early 1990s, the use of digital platforms in order to access and share information and opinions has constantly grown in the country. The interface of personal computers, smart phones and digital cameras with Internet technology and social media have redefined journalism and allowed a news dissemination role to Facebook, Twitter, blogs and websites. Many media experts worry that this technology-driven expansion of the news business canvas is blurring the boundaries between news reporting and advertising. It has also afforded rumors, hoaxes and other disinformation a much greater field than ever before. This has fueled calls for the need for a distinct set of ethics for online journalism.

A key aspect of Pakistan's media landscape is the fact that Pakistan has for decades been among the world's most dangerous countries for media practitioners. The many risks and curbs on the general freedom of expression of citizens further aggravate the job of media persons. Pakistan is also quite frankly a security state, where perceived national security considerations trump fundamental rights, including the freedom of expression.

With the growing use of digital platforms, more and more citizen journalists, bloggers and online activists have come to the fore. However, Pakistani journalist-representative organizations have generally been loath to expanding the traditional definition of the news gatherers to include them. There have been calls for a distinct set of ethics for digital platforms, both for citizen journalists/bloggers as well as for conventional journalists using online spaces. It has been underlined that a higher proportion of the latter have some exposure to ethical journalism standards. Hence a greater expectation for them to be beholden to media ethics. However, international media support experts argue that the determining factors of who is counted as a journalist should not be whether someone carries a journalist card or union membership, but whether they engage in acts of journalism.

The overwhelming majority of Pakistan's journalists, numbering over 20,000, are men. In 2012, Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) estimated that about 5 per cent of Pakistani journalists were women. Besides being among the most dangerous countries in terms of journalists' safety, Pakistan is also considered one of the most unsafe countries for women.

In a conservative and patriarchal society, being a woman and a journalist might not generally seem like an ideal combination. In that respect, all women journalists in Pakistan face greater difficulties than their male counterparts.

Although there have been few violent attacks against women journalists in recent years, the nature of threats that women journalists face is no less intimidating. The form of harassment and surveillance faced by women journalists often tends to be gendered as they are subjected to sexualized threats and intimidation. Perpetrators attempt to tarnish the reputation of women journalists who complain of sexual harassment and raise questions about their moral character. Women journalists who use cyberspace for activism also face online harassment, including threats of murder, rape or violence, accusations of treason, sexually explicit messages or sexual advances. Despite the pervasiveness of such threats, many women journalists are not aware of safe digital practices.

Gender-based harassment in the workplace and outside has been cited as a challenge, and made more difficult by the fact that it largely remains a taboo. The issue is seldom raised and perpetrators rarely held to account. This general environment of misogyny, apathy and impunity translates into hostility for the women already in media by side-lining them into 'softer' reporting beats, and worse, harassment that discourages upward mobility and forward movement for women.

Women media practitioners also have to face discrimination in different forms. Their work is hampered by over-protective male colleagues, who often actively advise them to leave reporting from the field to male journalists. In some media houses, women reporters are paid less than their male counterparts. Despite these and other challenges, more and more women appear to be joining the media industry in Pakistan.

Against this general backdrop, this guidebook on ethical journalism on digital platforms focuses on the key ethical considerations that are relevant on digital platforms.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This guidebook draws upon some best journalism practices and a wide range of codes of ethics developed by media support and other civil society organization in both Pakistan and internationally. Principal among those is Ethical Journalism Network (<https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/>), an extensive repository of media codes of ethics from across the globe.

# NEWS MEDIA ETHICS

Journalism ethics is a set of principles of ethics and of good practice applicable to the specific functions of and challenges faced by journalists. Although there is no single 'universal' code of ethics, considerable agreement exists among numerous codes of ethics on the main canons of journalism.

## *Distinct or Same Ethical Standards*

The new digital forms of media are more interactive, immediate and always on. Professional journalists today share the same online space with tweeters, bloggers and social media users.

The growing use of digital platforms for the creation and dissemination of news and information and spread of hoaxes, rumors and disinformation through this medium has led to demands for consistent ethical standards for online spaces.

A key question has been whether the existing conventional media ethics is suitable for the evolving digital media landscape or new and distinct standards are needed. It has been argued that journalism ethics for digital platforms deal with the distinct issues, practices and norms of digital news media, which include online journalism, blogging and advocacy on social media. Therefore, distinct ethical standards should apply.



The principal arguments for a separate set of ethical standards for online spaces revolve around digital platforms' mechanics and reach being different as well as some dissimilarity of the sources of information.

Both sides can be argued, and have been argued at some length, but a sensible evolving approach has been not to reinvent the wheel. There has been emphasis on coaching journalists on appropriately using new platforms as a source and online information verification standards, keeping in view the best practices and conventional journalistic canons, which have been around at least for nearly a century.

The bottom line is to be mindful of how to apply the same balance and principles across different platforms.



# CODE OF ETHICS FOR DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Across hundreds of codes of ethics devised globally, the constant or core principles of journalism might be largely condensed into the following, which can strengthen the profession and guide and benefit those who rely on user-generated content (UGC) on digital platforms.



Getting the facts right is the main expectation from any journalist. It is also one of the core principles of journalism. That is a constant across all mediums. In an age when the journalists getting their 'facts' from digital formats is no longer a rarity, how rigorously media practitioners check and verify the information has a direct impact on the credibility of both the journalists and their institutions.

Being known as someone who does not get their facts right is a killer blow to the reputation of any media organization and the journalist in question. The 'fake news'<sup>2</sup> disseminated on Facebook and Twitter ahead of the US presidential elections in 2016 led to greater attention being paid to organized disinformation and propaganda through digital platforms, especially ahead of elections. Media practitioners in Pakistan will do well to rigorously check their information from digital platform sources before relying on it or sharing it.

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<sup>2</sup>According to Ethical Journalism Network, fake news is information deliberately fabricated and published with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts. Fake news conflates three notions: mis-information, disinformation and mal-information, which are defined below:

- Dis-information: information that is false and deliberately created to harm a person, social group, organization or country.
- Mis-information: information that is false, but not created with the intention of causing harm.
- Mal-information: information that is based on reality, used to inflict harm on a person, organization or country.

Among numerous examples of fake news amid a very tense pre-election political climate in Pakistan this year, a recent one of disinformation, further strengthened through repetition on both social and mainstream media, related to the circumstances surrounding former premier Nawaz Sharif's interview to Dawn newspaper by journalist Cyril Almeida. Completely inaccurate information was circulated on digital platforms regarding how the latter reached the former, who had reached out to whom and where the interview was conducted.

Verification of information in this instance would only have taken one phone call either to the reporter or the newspaper in question.

Then there are instances like an initial Express Tribune report on the horrific Mastung blast on July 13, 2018. The report included a tweet apparently by journalist Hamid Mir holding India responsible (screenshot 1). A closer look showed it to be a fake account. The reporter probably picked it up without noticing it is a fake ID. Later, a journalist tweeted to the newspaper, giving it a heads up. The fake tweet was not included in the updated report. However, there was no apology or acknowledgement that the tweet had been deleted after the Tribune's attention was drawn to the faux pas.





In a bid to ensure accuracy, ethical journalism demands that all the relevant facts should be given and all available resources used to verify online user-generated content. Whenever any information cannot be corroborated, that should be expressly stated.

Online resources can help journalists verify user-generated information. One such resource is the Verification Handbook.<sup>3</sup> It provides to journalists and aid providers the tools, techniques and step-by-step guidelines on how to deal with and verify user-generated content during emergencies.

## **VERIFYING SOURCE AND CONTENT**

User-generated content (UGC) can alert a journalist to big news. But what if the UGC is an innocent or malicious misinformation?

The medium for gathering information may change, but the principles of verification always apply. Challenging what you see and hear, seeking out and verifying the source, and talking to official and primary sources remain the best methods for accurate reporting.

Quite a few resources today offer detailed guidelines to sound out UGC. One such resource is The Verification Handbook.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>The Verification Handbook, Ed, Craig Silverman. Last accessed on July 10, 2018, <https://verificationhandbook.com/downloads/verification.handbook.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://verificationhandbook.com/downloads/verification.handbook.pdf>

# VERIFYING SOURCE AND CONTENT

THE VERIFICATION HANDBOOK, PRESCRIBES BEST PRACTICE ADVICE ON HOW TO VERIFY AND USE INFORMATION PROVIDED BY THE CROWD OR AN UNKNOWN WITNESS. THE QUESTION AT THE HEART OF VERIFICATION IS:

**"HOW DO YOU (OR THEY) KNOW THAT? OR HOW ELSE DO YOU KNOW THAT?"**

- Be skeptical when something looks, sounds or seems too good to be true.
- Triangulate information with credible sources.
  - Use primary sources.
- Don't blindly trust even honest witnesses.
  - Seek documentation.
  - Consult credible sources.
- Develop human sources. Contact people, talk to them.
- Communicate and work together with other professionals.

**AND WHEN IT COMES TO VERIFYING PICTURES**

**WHILE EVALUATING INFORMATION, VERIFY BOTH THE SOURCE AND THE CONTENT**

- *Is this the original piece of content?*
- *Who uploaded the content?*
- *When was the content created?*
- *Where was the content created?*

- Establish the author/originator of the image.
- Corroborate the location, date and approximate time the image was taken.
- Confirm the image is what it is labeled/suggested to be showing.
- Obtain permission from the author/originator to use the image.



# PARTING TIPS

## BE TRANSPARENT

about what you know  
and don't know.

## HOLD BACK

until you can confirm  
with primary sources

## THE VERIFICATION HANDBOOK

also lists a ton of tools for verifying both  
the source of any information as well  
as the content itself.

**USE THEM!**



## *Independence (& Transparency)*

Ethical journalism demands that journalists are independent voices. This means that their work must be free from formal or informal influence of political, corporate or any other special interest.

A journalist's work must not be influenced by political affiliation, financial considerations or any personal information that might constitute a conflict of interest.

Special interests can, and often do, determine not only what media organisations report but also what they do not report on.

Corporate entities, political parties, advertisers and others might want journalists to engage in propaganda either to promote them or to disparage their opponents. There are journalists who stop being independent for immediate or eventual financial considerations, or for their fear of personal safety or career. The practice is as old as the news industry itself. The pressure to tow the line becomes greater for some journalists when many months of unpaid salary is on the line.



In a country where businesses establish news channels and newspapers to protect and promote their business interests, a journalist working for such organisations might not have the independence to decide what to report on, when and how.

Independent journalism is challenged further in Pakistan when individuals agree to work as correspondents for print and TV news channels without any salary. Many then use their position as journalists to get privileges for themselves through favourable reporting and also resorting to blackmail. The ethics of the craft demand that any special interests or past links of the journalist with the subject of the reporting should forthrightly be revealed to the audience, and also the editors.

For any journalist who distinguishes herself as being independent despite this context will reap the reward of credibility, professionalism and an enhanced reputation in addition to the obvious satisfaction of engaging in ethical journalism.




## ETHICS AROUND HANDLING SOURCES

Ethical Journalism Network, among others, offers rather detailed rules on journalists' conduct towards their sources. Some food for thought here.<sup>5</sup>

- *Be as transparent as possible in your relations with sources. Do not use tricks, deception or false promises in dealing with sources.*
- *Assess the vulnerability of sources as well as their value as providers of information.*
- *Take care to protect the source – for instance if they are a young person or someone in vulnerable circumstances – to ensure they are aware of the potential consequences of publication of the information they give.*
- *Make sure the source fully understands the conditions of the interview and what is meant by off-the-record, on background, not-for attribution, or other labels. Keep your word.*
- *Anonymity is a right which should be enjoyed by those who need it and should never be granted routinely to anyone who asks for it. People who may lose their job for whistleblowing; or young children; or women who are the victims of violence and abuse and others who are vulnerable and at risk from exposure are obviously entitled to it, but anonymity is not a privilege for those who benefit by personal gain through keeping their identity secret.*
- *In today's digital environment, rumour and speculation circulate freely and knowing what is real and how to verify news and information is essential. Reporters must be alert to the danger of falling for bad information from online sources whether it is user-generated content or social media.*
- *Make an effort to verify digital-age/UGC info/text/image and its sources. Be mindful of copyright or legal issues around using the content.*
- *Before reporting or retweeting a development reported elsewhere, be confident of its accuracy. Question first-hand accounts that can be inaccurate and manipulative, emotional or shaped by faulty memory.*

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<sup>5</sup> <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/resources/publications/ethics-in-the-news/handling-sources>



# ETHICS AROUND HANDLING SOURCES

BE TRANSPARENT

ASSESS VULNERABILITY  
AND VALUE

PROTECT THE SOURCE

ENSURE COMPLETE  
UNDERSTANDING

GRANTING RIGHTFUL  
ANONYMITY

DISTINGUISH BETWEEN  
FACTS AND SLANDER

VERIFY NEWS AND  
INFORMATION

ONLY REPORT ACCURATE NEWS

## *Impartiality & Fair Play*

Impartial reporting builds trust and confidence and biased reporting erodes it. This principle requires that journalists report everything free from bias or opinion of any kind. Everyone has an opinion, but as a journalist it is improper to express one's opinion in a news story. In fact, each statement in a story other than well-known facts, immediate context and background should clearly be attributed to a source.

Also linked to impartiality is the obligation to be fair. There are at least two sides to every story. It is the job of a journalist to publish the full story, with both sides, so the public can read it and make a fair opinion for themselves. While there is no obligation to present every side in every piece, stories should be balanced and important perspectives must be presented.

A journalist reporting anything critical about anyone must give that person a chance to state their side as well. It is not enough to merely contact such person or persons but also to put to them the precise critical statement so they have a chance to respond to the claim or insinuation. Condemning anyone unheard is the very opposite of fairness. It would also be fair to the public to hear and convey to them both sides or all of the key sides of the story.





## *Do no harm*

Countless books and quotes on the influence of the media testify to the significant role of the news media, which can be both positive and negative. The role of the media in starting and sustaining genocides, for instance in the 1990s in Rwanda is well documented.

With such potent power at their disposal, media practitioners have the obligation to do no harm. The journalists must always be mindful of the impact that their words and images can have on the lives of others. In an environment where blasphemy accusations and issues around religious minority rights can and do lead to 'mob justice', media must not, in the name of reporting, provide a platform to anyone to spew hatred.

The following infographic from Ethical Journalism Network helps journalists determine what is hate speech and the potential impact of offensive, inflammatory content.<sup>6</sup>

The harm limitation principle is concerned with whether everything learned during the course of an assignment should be reported and, if so, how. This principle draws attention of the media to the potential adverse consequences of reporting all the information gathered.



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<sup>6</sup> Five-point test for hate speech, Ethical Journalism Network. Last assessed on July 7, 2018. <https://ethicaljournalismnetwork.org/re-sources/infographics/5-point-test-for-hate-speech-english>

# HATE SPEECH

TURNING THE PAGE OF HATE:  
A MEDIA CAMPAIGN FOR  
TOLERANCE IN JOURNALISM

When it comes to hate speech, journalists and editors must pause and take the time to judge the **potential impact** of offensive, inflammatory content.

The following test, developed by the EJN and based on international standards, highlights questions in the **gathering, preparation** and **dissemination** of news and helps place what is said and who is saying it in an **ethical context**.

2

## REACH OF THE SPEECH

How far is the speech traveling?

Is there a **pattern** of behaviour?

3

## GOALS OF THE SPEECH

How does it benefit the **speaker** and their **interests**?

Is it **deliberately intended** to **cause harm** to others?

## A 5 POINT TEST FOR JOURNALISTS

### 4 THE CONTENT

Is the speech **dangerous**? **ITSELF**  
Could it incite **violence** towards others?

5

## SURROUNDING CLIMATE

**SOCIAL / ECONOMIC / POLITICAL**

Who might be **negatively affected**?

Is there a history of **conflict** or **discrimination**?

1

## STATUS OF THE SPEAKER

How might their **position** influence their **motives**?

Should they even be **listened to** or just **ignored**?

DON'T **SENSATIONALISE!**

AVOID THE **RUSH** TO PUBLISH

TAKE A **MOMENT OF REFLECTION**

EthicalJournalismNetwork.org



SHARE IT!



The code of ethics of Society of Professional Journalists, the oldest organization representing journalists in the United States, has the following do-no-harm advice. Much of the advice resonates with the practical ideas of most professional journalists and is being reproduced here as an example of the issues to consider under the do-no-harm rubric:

- *Show compassion for those who may be affected adversely by news coverage. Use special sensitivity when dealing with children and inexperienced sources or subjects.*
- *Be sensitive when seeking or using interviews or photographs of those affected by tragedy or grief.*
- *Recognise that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance.*
- *Recognise that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy.*
- *Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity.*
- *Be cautious about identifying juvenile suspects or victims of sex crimes.*
- *Be judicious about naming criminal suspects before the formal filing of charges.*
- *Balance a criminal suspect's fair trial rights with the public's right to be informed*

Following relevant canons of ethics is vital to ensure that the media does not become party to disseminating hate speech or offensive or outrageous statements that can have a negative impact on others.

## *Accountability*

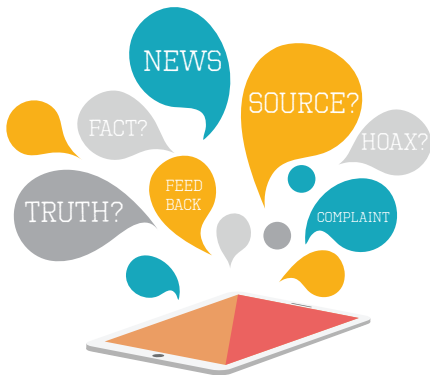
Responsible journalism and journalists are not only mindful of the influence at their disposal but also the need to hold themselves accountable. That is the case even where the media has not evolved sufficiently to enforce self-imposed accountability, or voluntarily standards of behaviour.

There will always be some mistakes in the business of news gathering and dissemination, sometimes because of time constraints and deadlines or for other reasons. All mistakes must be acknowledged and corrected at the earliest. The effort should be accompanied by genuine regret and should lead to improved processes to prevent or reduce possibilities of similar things happening in the future.

A sure sign of commitment to accountability is a news media organisation's eagerness both to listen to the concerns of their audience and to provide remedies when mistakes have been made in reporting.

If there is a will to hold oneself accountable, media organisations would find different ways to institute internal accountability. For instance, Dawn newspaper has for a couple of years now created an internal ombudsman position. The ombudsperson is the investigating authority to whom all complaints are referred, and who takes notice of any alleged violations of Dawn's code of ethics.

Details can differ but some mechanism to offer accountability and provide remedies is the basic demand of professional media ethics.



# AN EYE ON ELECTIONS

As underlined at the outset, the ethical journalism principles do not mutate with changes in circumstances or for any special dates or events. However, at times it becomes all the more vital for journalists to remind themselves of the ethical standards and why they are important.

In view of the 2016 US presidential elections and 'fake news' and disinformation originating on digital platforms, reliance on information on digital platforms around elections calls for particular caution. Facebook had drawn much criticism in that respect.

Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg recently spoke of his company's focus to protect the integrity of upcoming elections in several countries, including Pakistan. Facebook now has in excess of 20,000 people working on security and content review and plans to have 35,000 doing that by the end of this year.

He also mentioned how artificial intelligence (AI) tools were employed to keep Macedonian trolls from spreading misinformation during the US Senate Alabama special election last year.

He earlier mentioned that Facebook's AI tools had taken down 30,000 fake accounts during the last French presidential elections.

To revert to the original discussion, however, consistent adherence to ethical journalism principles in online spaces can guard against the journalists and news organisations inadvertently repeating and reinforcing disinformation and falsehoods.



# INTIMIDATION OF JOURNALISTS ON NEW AVENUES OR PLATFORMS

Growing use of digital platforms has certainly brought benefits and instant access to extensive user-generated content. It has also opened the door to online bullying and trolls who resort to slandering and downright threats and intimidation on digital platforms. The recognition has only slowly emerged that the threats and harassment faced by journalists offline are clearly present, and at times are more vicious, online as well. Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) recently conducted a nationwide survey of working journalists to ascertain their level of digital insecurity and potential remedies.<sup>7</sup>

As many as 66% respondents of the survey reported to have suffered online insecurity, including blackmail, hacking, threats, sexual harassment, data theft, stalking, and attacks through malware or phishing emails. A part of the survey only addressed to journalists who had experienced online threats or harassment found that 68% of the total respondents had faced online threats or harassment.

Another part of the survey focused on the gendered nature of digital insecurity found that 72% of female journalists and 61% of male journalists experienced digital insecurity. When female journalists were asked how the harassment of female and male journalists differs, 71% reported that female journalists were more likely to be attacked for their appearance. As many as 68% of them also believed that female journalists were attacked more than male journalists on their personal lives.

Nearly half of the respondents (45.5%) said that online insecurity resulted in self-censorship. The survey learnt that 92% of the respondents believe that online harassment in journalism was either “extremely common” or “common”.

The Coalition for Women In Journalism (CFWIJ), the global network of support for women journalists, voiced its ‘grave concern’ in July 2018 over the online threats and harassment women journalists in Pakistan faced while doing their jobs. It stated that with the 2018 national election approaching (on July 25), the online attacks were intensifying.

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<sup>7</sup> Digital (in)security of journalists in Pakistan, Digital Rights Foundation, Digital Rights Foundation. Last access on July 14, 2018, <https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Report-Digi-Insecurity-of-Journos.pdf>

CFWIJ noted that while both male and female journalists faced harassment online, women journalists were particular targets of sexually explicit comments and threats of rape. Trolls called them names that were psychologically traumatizing. Some common and disturbing terminologies that CFWIJ identified included words like 'prostitute,' 'slut,' and 'whore'. Some instances of trolls copy pasting faces of female journalists on sexually explicit or pornographic images were also documented. It highlighted several threats of 'murder' and 'rape', specifically targeting women

journalists and noticed that women journalists were being "demonized and humiliated with great intensity."



In the most recent example, female journalist Asma Shirazi was the target of severe harassment online after she interviewed Pakistan's ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif who is now in jail for corruption. The interview was part of her regular journalistic work, as she was on the airplane, along with other journalists, when Nawaz Sharif was making the journey from London to Pakistan. "The trolls that are continuing to target Asma, as we speak, with disturbing commentary that revolves around her gender, and includes threats of murder and rape," a CFWIJ statement added.

CFWIJ stated that in June it identified an array of online trolls against BBC Urdu journalist Iram Abbasi as well, that were vitriolic, graphic and targeted her gender. CFWIJ said it was able to have these taken down with the help of allies in Facebook and Twitter.

It observed that the majority of the trolls were supporters of political parties or political leaders. CFWIJ reiterated that targeting of journalists for doing their job during an election campaign was an obstruction to public access to information at a critical time in the democratic process. It concluded that no journalist should have to face harassment for doing their job and urged all stakeholders to join efforts to make reporting a safe endeavour for women journalists.

In the pursuit of ethical journalism, it is crucial to help journalists of all genders deal with online insecurity, including taking every threat seriously and trying to avoid falling into the self-censorship trap and in doing so sustain the freedom of expression.



## **DIGITAL RIGHTS FOUNDATION'S CYBER HARASSMENT HELPLINE**

Digital Rights Foundation's Cyber Harassment Helpline is Pakistan's first dedicated, toll-free Helpline for victims of online harassment and violence. The Helpline will provide a free, safe and confidential service. The Helpline aims to provide legal advice, digital security support, psychological counselling and a referral system to victims of online harassment. The Helpline will provide a judgment-free, private and gender-sensitive environment for all its callers. Journalists across the country can reach out to our Helpline in case they are facing online harassment and violence

**CYBER HARASSMENT HELPLINE: 0800-39393**

[www.digitalrightsfoundation.pk](http://www.digitalrightsfoundation.pk)  
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