



## RESEARCH PAPER

### Government Surveillance and Freedom of Expression: Measuring Perception of University Students in Pakistan

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
<b>Received:</b> January 11, 2020 <b>Accepted:</b> March 24, 2020 <b>Online:</b> March 31, 2020 <b>Keywords:</b> Freedom of Expression (FoE), Online Government Surveillance, Users' Perceptions <b>*Corresponding Author:</b> imran@gu.edu.pk	<p>In recent times, the issue of online government surveillance became significant due to use of technologies by governments to monitor online activities of its citizens. This monitoring and surveillance raised questions about the safeguard of basic human right of freedom of expression, particularly in online spaces. This research study attempts to understand the relationships between users' perceptions about online government surveillance and freedom of expression. The data was collected through a closed-ended questionnaire from 800 students of six leading university in KPK (Pakistan). Results revealed that the government surveillance have no effect on student's online freedom of expression while using it for different purposes. These results suggest that students in Pakistan do not consider government surveillance as an issue for their online freedom of expression</p>

## Introduction

On June 6, 2013 one of the U.S.A National Security Agency employee Edward Snowden for the first time revealed about U.S.A government secret surveillance of government official, foreign state officials and online individuals (Greenwald, MacAskill, & Poitras, 2013). No doubt it was the biggest story for the world in 2013 (Foundation, 2014). These revelations created exceptional attention around the globe on digital security and privacy intrusions, leading to a worldwide debate on the issue (Foundation, 2014). But monitoring and curtailing freedom of expression (FoE) through online surveillance is not unique to USA. Many governments, often curtail FoE to silence critical voices which are not in favour of the government (Parliament, 2015). For example, Article 19 of the constitution of Pakistan 1973 states that "every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression and there shall be freedom of the press, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law (Pakistan, Mahmood, & Shaukat, 2006). This allows government to check expression of views about various topics in online spaces.

In modern societies surveillance is pervasive, and in fact it is more intense than it is realized (Yilmaz, Doğru, & Bahçeci, 2017). The Internet surveillance is being used by some of the governments to control and suppress individuals and it is considered as a most

important problem in the way of sharing their opinion and communicating their views with others (Yilmaz et al., 2017). The intensity of the government's surveillance and level of exposure to this surveillance moulds the individual's attitude towards self-expression (Wood & Webster, 2009). It has a social cost (Rosen, 2000) and inhibiting effects on spontaneity, productivity, creativity and other psychological effects.

Online surveillance refers to online activities being monitored by government agencies, Internet service providers, and potentially by cybercriminals (Mocan, 2018), but historically, the concept of surveillance is often linked with activities carried out by government agencies (Lyon, 2001). In particular, it is related to the negative perceptions that individuals have about being monitored and scrutinized by the government (Dinev et al. (2005). Today pervasive surveillance have become significant issues for all users of the Internet everywhere, even in democratic countries the case is same (Bitso, Fourie, & Bothma, 2013; Wright & Breindl, 2013).

Due to this significance of the issue, this study aim to explore the perception of internet users about effects of government surveillance on their freedom of expression while using internet for different purposes.

### **Literature Review**

Some countries in the world such as China, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan have long been criticized due to severe control and surveillance practices on the Internet (Akgul & Kirlidog, 2015; Arsan, 2013; Chu, 2017; Köse & Özen, 2010; Liang & Lu, 2010; Taneja & Wu, 2014; D. Wang & Mark, 2015; Wojcieszak & Smith, 2014; Xu, Mao, & Halderman, 2011; Yilmaz et al., 2017). A leading Pakistani English newspaper, Dawn in 2015 reported that mass network surveillance has been taking place in Pakistan since 2005 (Dawn, 2015). When we are kept under surveillance, it limits our speech and shrinks both the size and diversity of our ideas (Lamont, 2016). Similarly, in April 2013, Indian government consumed a seventy five million dollar for "Central Monitoring System" that allowed the government to have an access to all online communications and contents including online activities, text messages, social media conversations and phone calls (Nandakumar, 2013). A study conducted by Smith, Carayon, Sanders, Lim, and LeGrande (1992) revealed that digitally monitored workers experienced higher levels of anxiety, depression, tension and lower levels of productivity than those who are not monitored, even when the monitored activities do not constitute private affairs.

However, governments justify their actions by quoting national security measures, and promote online surveillance as an essential tool in monitoring unlawful behaviours (S. Wang & Hong, 2010). Human rights activists are worried, as the governments may abuse these powers to monitor or apprehend political critics rather than to improve national security as planned (Kaul, 2013). Cynthia Wong, senior online scholar at Human Rights Watch, states: "The Indian government's centralized monitoring is frightening its users by its careless and irresponsible use of the surveillance and by implementation of cyber laws (Patry, 2013). The modern surveillance techniques have been introduced around the world to target human right activists, common user, critics, and journalists (Patry, 2013)." Such surveillance techniques potentially violate the international human rights standards which relate to Freedom of Expression (Patry, 2013).

In November 2013, PEN America published a study of over five hundred writers, which suggests that most of the writers were engaged in self-censorship due to concerns over government surveillance (Dutton, Law, Bolsover, & Dutta, 2013). Twenty eight percent had shortened their online activities, while more than twenty percent had intentionally avoided specific topics on phone and in their email conversations (Group, 2013; Kaminski & Witnov, 2014). In 2012 survey conducted before the Snowden disclosures also revealed noteworthy worldwide concern over online government surveillance activities, with more than sixty percent of the users concerned about government surveillance and almost seventy percent of the respondents expressed that they were careful about what they did or said online (Dutton et al., 2013). On the other hand, more than half of the respondents stated that the online communication tools are safe and secure for expressing their views (Dutton et al., 2013).

The cyber law of Pakistan empowered government agency to monitor any online content that is deemed to be unlawful (Authority, 2018). A private organization Internet Freedom House in its report on FoE says that online freedom in Pakistan is confronting many challenges such as online surveillance, slowdown of internet speed and ban of various websites ("Freedom of expression," 2014). Online surveillance is thought as a major obstacle restricting individuals' freedom from getting information and news, hinders the sharing of their opinions and experiences, and retards their communications with others (Mossberger, Tolbert, & McNeal, 2008). One of the most stressed issues by participants was the disruption of their daily lives due to various surveillance implementations, especially controlling of the Internet connection by authorities (Yilmaz et al., 2017). Yilmaz et al. (2017) Claimed that some of the internet users apply various programs or techniques such as using VPN, changing DNS settings, entering through proxy websites in order to overcome Internet surveillance, the majority thinks that it is a waste of time and prefers to wait until surveillance is removed.

### **Material and Methods**

This study adopted cross-sectional survey research method to collect data from six highest ranking universities students of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as ranked by Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (UniRank, 2017). The total number of students enrolled at the time was 51887. Survey data were collected from 800 individuals using stratified sampling method. A close-ended questionnaire measuring the concepts of the study was distributed among the selected sample. To ensure that respondents fill the questionnaire appropriately, each questionnaire was administered separately and the respondent was requested to fill the questionnaire at spot so that if any problem they face during the process, the researcher will help them to sort it out.

### **Measurement of the Concepts**

Purpose of internet use is one the variable in this study which includes; using internet for information, entertainment, education or passing time purposes. The question has Likert scale options for answer. The questions were answered through six response options of ordinal categories, where 1 means never, 2 means rarely, 3 means sometimes, 4 means frequently, 5 means very frequently and 6 means don't know.

Another important variable is perceived Freedom of Expression if government monitor their online activities. This study used five statements to measure the perceptions of the students. It included statements such as; I would willing to express political opinions online if the government began surveillance of the internet, I would be able to access independent news and information online if the government began surveillance of the internet activity, if the government began surveillance of the internet activity the amount of political disinformation would be reduced, if the government began surveillance of the internet activity my electronic data would be safer and for the eradication of social evils from the society the government should monitor internet activity. All the statements are provided with ordinal measurement scale with response categories from 1 to 4. Where 1 means strongly disagree, 2 means somewhat disagree, 3 means somewhat agree and 4 means strongly agree. The mean score of all these five questions are treated as the score of an individual's perceived FoE in of case government surveillance.

**Hypothesis:** It is more likely that student's use of internet for different purposes will have significant relationship with how they perceive their online freedom of expression if government began surveillance of internet.

### Results and Discussion

Multiple regression is used to test the research hypothesis of this study. The alpha level is .05. No multicollinearity was found between the independent variables. The results are presented in a single table.

**Table 1**  
**Multiple regression analysis for various purposes of internet use and effects on their perception of online FoE if government began surveillance of the internet**

Frequency of using internet for	Mean	SD	SE	B
Information purpose	3.80	1.07	.03	.03
Entertainment purpose	3.54	1.04	.03	.11*
Education purpose	3.88	1.01	.03	.08
Passing time purpose	3.11	1.26	.03	.06
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup> = .007				
F= 2.374				
p= .051				

n=790; \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* $p < .001$

Multiple regression was performed to predict the effects of internet use for various purposes on online government surveillance and freedom of expression.  $F(10,772) = 2.374$ ,  $p = .051$  shows insignificant relationship between the variables. Though the variable of using internet for entertaining purposes is significant in the model but the overall adjusted  $R^2 = .007$  is very low due to which the overall model is not significant in explaining the changes in the level of freedom of expression. The research hypothesis is not supported state that: "It is more likely that student's use of internet for different purposes will have significant relationship with how they perceive their online freedom of expression if government began surveillance of the internet".

Previous literature mostly reported negative relationship between government surveillance of internet and perceived online freedom of expression (FoE). Like Yilmaz et al. (2017) reported that government surveillance of internet is perceived as a major obstacle restricting individuals' freedom of getting information and news, sharing their opinions and experiences and communicating with others. Another study by King, Richardson, and Nash (2015) indicated conflicting feelings regarding internet surveillance. They reported that strong majority said they did not believe they would be able to access independent news and information online, also they disagree that their electronic data would be safer, but they on the other hand believe that surveillance of online activity would help to reduce the amount of political disinformation. However, the current study finding revealed no effects of government surveillance on FoE. The possible reasons for the differences in the findings of the current study and the previous studies could be due to the definition and limits of FoE among the people of the societies in which these studies were conducted and the methods and manners in which governments monitor internet activities in their respective countries. For example the countries with weak democracies, government may be more harsh and insensitive towards the fundamental rights of its people compared to the countries where governments are more accountable to the public. Another possible reason is the religious and cultural factor. In many liberal societies, topics like religion, sex, and criticism of major institutions may not be considered as problem by the general public, hence, any kind of limitation on expression of views regarding these topics will be considered as reduction in the limit of FoE. But in countries like Pakistan, contrary to the beliefs of liberal schools of thoughts inside and outside the country, the general population consider it necessary to have limitation on the topics of religion, sex and certain sacred institutions like army and judiciary. In such societies if the government implement such laws which aim at limiting FoE regarding to these topics may be a matter of concern for the human right activists but not for the general population. It is analysed that whether surveillance of government on internet have any effect on student's online FoE. Multiple regression showed that the government surveillance have no effect on student's online FoE. The respondents used online platforms for information, entertainment, education and passing time purposes without perceiving the threat of government surveillance.

### **Policy implications and research suggestions**

From the knowledge gained through this study, hopefully more effective policies and programs can be introduced to educate internet user about FoE while online. It would be ineffective to attempt to develop prevention programs that encouraged adolescence to decrease their use of the Internet. Use of the Internet is often vital for educational, information, entertainment purposes, and many young people use the Internet to socialize and connect with others, rather than encouraging adolescence to discontinue socializing on the Internet. It would be more effective to educate adolescence on the threats present online so they are aware of the potential for victimization. There is a need for more discussion and education about Internet rights, surveillance, privacy, and other issues commonly addressed in Internet law. For future researchers, it is suggested that instead of relying on measuring perceptions of the victims, future research should focus on measuring the effects directly through recording the instances where online government surveillance have affected people's online FoE. In order to establish causal relationship between various independent variables used in this study, it is suggested that future researchers should adopt longitudinal methods of research. As this study was limited to few universities of

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan, studies with same variables can be carried out in other areas of the country. There is a sufficient opportunities for future study in this area. Surveying a wider age range of young people, also those in different geographical areas, would add to the knowledge base. Particularly, study about younger generation studying in schools and colleges could add new information in our knowledge of the phenomenon that how this age group is impacted by government surveillance.

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