RESEARCH PAPER

Social Media as a Threat to National Security: A Case Study of Twitter in Pakistan

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Abstract

Social media has evolved significantly over the years while providing strategic platforms for voices to reach billions of people within no time. Accordingly, it has advantages and disadvantages (threats). The nature of threats emanating from social media, especially Twitter, in the context of Pakistan, are mainly in the form of radicalization, glorification of terrorist groups, propagation of violent sub-nationalism and hybrid warfare. Though Pakistan has been relatively active after 2020 in responding to social media challenges, implementing social media regulations remains an issue, especially when most social media platforms are foreign in origin. This paper evaluates the interlinkage of social media and national security in the context of Pakistan while exploring how agents of insecurity and instability exploit social media and what response mechanism the state has placed to mitigate these threats. The paper is a qualitative inquiry using primary and secondary sources to answer these questions. The research findings suggest marginal securitization of social media, albeit without significant implementation.

Keywords: National Security, Securitization, Twitter, Hybrid War, Framing.

Introduction

Social media, especially Twitter, has significantly evolved over the last decade, altering propaganda dynamics. From the perspective of national security, internal and external hostile elements continue to exploit the platform. Notably, from the political elite to media persons, civil society activists to the general public, different segments of society are now interlinked on the platform while sharing information in near real-time, thus shaping the political discourse at a brisk pace. Interestingly, social media is the reverse of traditional media, where information sharing takes place without following any vetting or confirmatory protocols. By exploring challenges to Pakistan's national security posed by social media, this research answers two interlinked questions: How does social media contribute towards insecurity and political instability in Pakistan, and what actions have been taken by the state to mitigate these threats?

According to Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), internet penetration has reached 56% of the population.[1] Hypothetically, most people now rely on digital media to consume socio-political information. As far as the specific social media networks (SMNs) are concerned, Facebook is the most famous SMN in Pakistan,

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which is used by 46% of the population, followed by YouTube (42%), WhatsApp (23.5%), and TikTok (17.3%). Though only 2.3% of Pakistanis use Twitter, as per estimates,[2] Twitter is still the most significant social media network in the context of national security as it acts as a source of information that is subsequently disseminated on other platforms and relayed on traditional media as well. It is pertinent to mention here that most Twitter users are highly educated individuals who are instrumental in opinion-making and narrative formulation.

Given the context, the scope of this paper is limited to an analysis of Twitter posing a challenge to national security in the context of Pakistan. This paper holistically examines how the Government of Pakistan has securitized social media in Pakistan and what are the specific implications to Pakistan's national security by the content posted on Twitter. These threats have been explicitly examined in an environment of hybrid war unleashed against Pakistan by its adversaries. Unfortunately, the study highlights that Pakistan has securitized only a few selected aspects of social media, mainly terrorism and, most recently, hybrid war to some extent. However, this securitization is not holistic and lacks any structured implementation mechanism. On the other hand, Twitter is extensively used for propaganda by extremists, terrorists and sub-nationalists, thus causing fractions in society. Additionally, the disinformation launched as part of a hybrid war is widespread through online proxies of external powers, thus creating a gulf between the state and society.

Accordingly, this research paper has inducted theories of securitization, framing, and hybrid warfare to interpret threats emanating from social media and their use for targeting Pakistan's national security. As far as securitization theory is concerned, it postulates that any phenomenon is securitized by a speech act of a leader who informs the people regarding threats associated with it. Therefore, it must be securitized as a policy to secure both the state and public interests.[3] For Ole Weaver, securitization is a dynamic social construction as it securitizes issues that pose instant threats. More importantly, securitization needs to be done by keeping spoken words into account, as it is now clear that social security is causing instability in Pakistan.[4]

Framing, on the other hand, is "a process in which some aspects of reality are selected and given greater emphasis or importance so that the problem is defined, its causes are diagnosed, moral judgments are suggested, and appropriate solutions and actions are proposed."[5] In framing, some reality features are clubbed together with a propaganda narrative to make a greater impact on public discourse.[6] These features of frames are thematic, episodic, public opinion, sources and issues. The thematic frames are related to policy issues and are of public interest; the episodic frames are one-time occurrences; public opinion frames are normally propaganda; source-based frames are utilised for slanting; and issues are also for the public good. In this study, framing theory has been applied in connection with securitization theory to evaluate the nature of threats on social media. This approach is inspired by Scott Watson,[7] Stephen D. Reese,[8] and Vania Carvalho Pinto.[9]

As far as hybrid war is concerned, it is a combination of political, cultural, diplomatic, economic and media actions synchronised with military objectives.[10] Social media further boosts the application of hybrid war as diplomatic and political goals are achieved through wise use of framing.[11] In this context, Frank Hoffman has stated that "hybrid wars incorporate a range of different modes of warfare including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder."[12] In the hybrid war scenario, Twitter is largely exploited, while prominent accounts of adversaries are simultaneously targeted. Their passwords are hacked, and fake posts are made on their behalf. This activity aims to deny digital space to adversaries.[13] Such warfare is launched to exploit fault lines of any state based on ethnicity, religious divide, and core values to win over the population at the stage of violent conflict.[14]

National Security Paradigm and Identification of Social Media as a Threat

Pakistan officially started making public its security policies in 2014. The first such policy, i.e., National Internal Security Policy (NISP) 2014, was introduced mainly to tackle the challenges of terrorism. The second NISP was promulgated in 2018 and predominantly focused on countering extremism and terrorism. Meanwhile, the third one, the National Security Policy (NSP), was recently introduced in 2022 and has been dubbed as a holistic policy framework.

a)   National Internal Security Policy (NISP) 2014

To counter online threats to national security, an Intelligence Analysis Centre (IAC) under the Directorate of Internal Security (DIS) was proposed in NISP-2014. However, no guidelines about the functioning of these bodies were appended. Also, both of these departments could not get operationalized in true essence.[15] Right after NISP-2014, the Government of Pakistan introduced the National Action Plan (NAP) in the wake of a terrorist attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar. Though the 14th point of NAP did mention regulating social media, no swift law-making was witnessed subsequently. It was only in 2016 that the Government introduced the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA). Nevertheless, even that law was more related to the issues of public concern like online harassment, sexual content, intellectual property stealing, financial scam and hacking.[16]

It is important to mention here that Article 9 of PECA-2016 contains punishment for glorifying terrorism and extremism in the following words: "Whoever prepares or disseminates information, through any information system or device, with the intent to glorify an offence relating to terrorism, or any person convicted of a crime relating to terrorism, or activities of proscribed organizations or individuals or groups shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to seven years or with fine which may extend to ten million rupees or with both."[17] Nonetheless, the implementation of the article mentioned above has not been witnessed, and suspected

criminals have not been tried under the law. Likewise, Article 10 of the said Act calls for 14 years of imprisonment and a 50 million rupees fine for causing instability and insecurity through social media networks (SMNs). However, this clause is also yet to be implemented. More significantly, PECA-2016 is silent on hybrid war and its utilisation of social media in Pakistan.

b)   National Internal Security Policy (NISP) 2018

In NISP-2018, it was found that TTP and ISIS use SMNs to supplement their agenda. These organizations post their literature on SMNs as well as recruit individuals online.[18] Therefore, to tackle these challenges, NISP-2018 proposed a national cyber security strategy to be implemented through civil-military collaboration. This joint body was mandated to oversee the regulations of SMNs with the aid of the PTA. The document also stated that restricting hate speech and disinformation on SMNs was the responsibility of the PTA.[19]

Nevertheless, from 2018 to 2022, SMNs have almost enjoyed complete freedom and have not been answerable to the state authority in Pakistan. Moreover, during this period, FIA's focus has also not been on national security issues. On the other hand, sensational and agenda-driven frames by external proxies on the Pakistani social media landscape could also not be included in NISP-2018. Even PECA-2016 was not amended to include framing as a threat to national security. Therefore, while NISP-2018 can be considered an improvement with respect to NISP-2014, it also had implementation issues. For instance, the joint civil-military cyber force could never get operationalized. In an interview, Chairman PTA dilated on impediments and challenges faced by the government in curbing disinformation while highlighting that "the major challenge in regulating social media is the foreign origin of SMNs. There are countless platforms, and none are based in Pakistan; therefore, Pakistani laws do not apply to them. Furthermore, they are not as sensitive to problems in Pakistan as we are because they do not connect to them."[20]

For developing an improved response mechanism on sectarianism, hate speech, blasphemy and anti-state propaganda, Chairman PTA opined that "we are a regulator only within Pakistan and not internationally; therefore, we can only write to the respective social media service providers individually to block such (objectionable) content. We are already doing this and frequently approach Facebook and Twitter – but they respond to our requests only when they feel like it. Thereby, whatever we block within Pakistan is through our own technical expertise. For more effective regulation of social media, SMNs must cooperate with Pakistani authorities and respect individual states' cultural sensitivities and national security protocols."[21] While disclosing rubrics initiated for social media usage in Pakistan, he further stated that "we formulated rules according to which service providers of social media had to establish an office in Pakistan so that we can reach out to them for complaints regarding objectionable content online. It was done keeping in view PECA-2016, which entrusted us with making rules for social media regulation. However, civil society activists, journalists and some

politicians took the matter to Islamabad High Court, and it stopped us from implanting them until the agreement of all stakeholders."[22]

c)   **National Security Policy (NSP) 2022**

NSP-2022 is Pakistan's first-ever security policy that has identified hybrid war as a threat to national security, specifically that which is launched through SMNs. NSP-2022 defines it: "Hybrid warfare is an evolving concept with expanding and blurring boundaries. It has found salience in the contemporary era due to technological and information evolution. Apart from information and cyber warfare, disinformation, influence operations, lawfare, and economic coercion, among other hybrid warfare tools, are increasingly being applied. Hybrid threats against Pakistan originate from states and their proxies as well as from non-state actors. Pakistan will adopt a holistic, interconnected whole-of-nation approach to neutralise attempts to undermine Pakistan's security and stability through hybrid warfare."[23]

Given this perspective, India has invested heavily in hybrid warfare to malign Pakistan and hurt it both economically and diplomatically. It has been done by establishing fake news and think-tank websites and subsequently promulgating the disinformation published on these sources via Twitter.[24] This method adopted by India has primarily been witnessed, at a surge, on junctures when the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) has to meet in the context of Pakistan. In sum, NSP-2022 is more detailed regarding social media when compared to both its predecessors, i.e., NISP-2014 and NISP-2018, while it also covers the aspect of hybrid war. However, like the previous security policies, NSP-2022 is also limited to identifying threats rather than providing solutions.

Implications of Social Media for the National Security of Pakistan

Social media has a significant role in the spread of political instability in Pakistan, thus creating an atmosphere of insecurity. Nevertheless, with a specific focus on Twitter, it has been ascertained that the platform has been influential in shaping public discourse. Twitter has also been acting as a source of information for traditional media owing to the presence of political parties, politicians, journalists, and civil society activists on this social media network. Accordingly, this platform has been manipulated to propagate extremism, terrorism, ethnonationalism, hybrid warfare, etc.

a)   **Extremism**

In Pakistan, religion for politics has traditionally been used for a long, thus leading to extremism. Extremist groups often hijack political discourse while promoting an atmosphere of intolerance and instability. For instance, TLP has thematized religion for its political frames on Twitter.[25] It successfully campaigned online on Twitter as well as in the streets against the electoral amendment bill.[26] Over the last five years, TLP has risen as a formidable religious pressure group in Pakistani politics.[27] It choreographs trends, where thousands of users post on Twitter, which are retweeted from fake

accounts subsequently. Such action is labelled as 'artificial amplification' or 'platform manipulation' because it "aims to drive traffic or attention from a conversation."[28] The TLP activists have been applying the frame of blasphemy in their campaigns, aided by disinformation, to play with the religious sentiments of the public.[29] *Associated Press of Pakistan* has also revealed that TLP had used illegal software to manipulate Twitter trends. These digital campaigns, followed by street protests, have resulted in political instability in Pakistan.[30]

b) Terrorism

Twitter is manipulated by terrorist groups, such as Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and different Baloch terrorist groups, to target their desired audience for propaganda purposes. TTP systematically uses Twitter to frame its objectives and employs propaganda frames to promote its movement against the state of Pakistan. Though TTP activists are continuously debarred from Twitter; however, they keep creating new accounts to promulgate their viewpoints. TTP's frames can be mainly described as thematic, where it tries to present itself as a problem solver. Therefore, key themes in its framing against the state of Pakistan include: Pakistan is a hired gun of the US; TTP is the real supporter of Islam who would liberate Pakistan; and its struggle is for the Muslim Ummah.[31] As far as the target audience of TTP is concerned, Pashtuns are the main target of its propaganda frames, with 39% of its posts being in Pashto, followed by 28% in Arabic, 24% in Urdu, 8% in English, and only 1% in Balochi language. Almost 15% of the posts are related to threats issued to the state of Pakistan, followed by 28% courtesy videos, 21% on arms training, 20% concerning combat achievements, and 16% of the content is related to frames for ordinary folks.[32]

On the other hand, online Baloch terrorist organizations, such as BLA, BLF and BNA, also regularly post content on Twitter. Interestingly, this content is not as rigorously monitored by Twitter as that of TTP. Twitter in Baloch terrorists' landscape is also a weapon of Indian intelligence. In an interview, DG ISPR asserted that "we have handed over several dossiers of Indian involvement to concerned international organizations such as the UN; however, the diplomatic response is low paced. The Indian hand is involved in physical and online spaces and is done cohesively."[33] BLA, acting as a proxy of Indian intelligence, has thematized the violent terrorist campaign in the dialect of resistance for freedom. It has framed the Pakistani state for enforced disappearances and, in some instances, blamed Pakistan Army for the genocide of the Baloch masses. On Twitter, its frames are meant to acquire legitimacy, potentially boost its recruitment drive and secure foreign funding. Therefore, its activists subtly apply geopolitical frames, such as targeting China to gain western support.[34] The exaltation of Baloch terrorists is a regular sight on Twitter by Indian trolls, who present Brahmdagh Bughti, Mehran Marri and Dr. Allah Nazar as heroes of Baloch resistance.[35] Allah Nazar Baloch consistently emerges on Twitter with new profiles even after being de-platformed by Twitter several times at the request of Pakistan.[36]

c) Ethnic Nationalism and Separatism

Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM) has employed Twitter to further its anti-state agenda. The organisation initially claimed that it was created for the rights of Pashtuns; however, recent research has highlighted that almost 75% of PTM social media followers are not even Pashtuns. Interestingly, 56% of Pakistanis have come to know about PTM through social media, especially Twitter and Facebook.[37] PTM alleges that it took the help of social media because traditional media did not present its case.[38] The group concentrates on Pashtun nationalism for exploiting innocent tribal Pashtuns. However, PTM ignores the fact that Pashtuns dominate an entire province in Pakistan and are more in number than Pashtuns in Afghanistan. Dawn newspaper, while quoting former Information Minister Fawad Chaudhry in August 2021, reported that "It has transpired that India led the top trends against Pakistan and the biggest player which helped India was PTM and its activists."[39] Consequently, the security establishment decided to unveil the group in front of the people of Pakistan so that it could not continue spreading its vile propaganda. PTM's external connections were also exposed by former DG ISPR, who cautioned PTM that "those playing in others' hands, their time is up. Their time is up."[40]

On the other hand, Baloch sub-nationalism is inspired by separatist elements and is steered mainly by student politics at both provincial and national levels. The agenda of student politics is to present the narrative of terrorists in sugar-coated frames and so as to gain more recruits. Aligned journalists and academicians also support these frames on Twitter, which are generally based on issues such as violations of human rights and enforced disappearances.[41] Baloch Student Organization Azad (BSO-A) is the precursor of such Baloch student politics.[42] The organisation has an account on Twitter with almost 34.8 thousand followers. Most of the content shared on its profile is about disappeared Baloch cadre, who BSO-A alleges have been picked up by the state's intelligence agencies.

Jeaye Sindh Mutahhida Mahaz (JSMM), i.e., a Sindhi sub-nationalist outfit, has an agenda of separation from Pakistan. It was declared a terrorist organisation by Pakistan in 2013, whereas Pakistani intelligence agencies have also established JSMM's links with RAW. Like BSO-A, JSMM focuses on student politics as well to brainwash minds at an earlier stage.[43] JSMM is also efficient on Twitter, with its leader Shafi Burfat having more than 26 thousand followers. Burfat openly calls for joining with India, whereas he regularly asks Indian and Afghan officials to declare Pakistan a terrorist state.[44] JSMM is also against Chinese investment in Sindh and thus condemns CPEC.[45]

The employment of Twitter for promoting sub-nationalism is diverse in Pakistan. Various sub-nationalist groups use the platform to disseminate their respective ideological discourses. Also, it is extensively used by various ethnic movements to encourage their respective followers to join them in any role. For the larger reach of propaganda, Twitter posts are shared both in Urdu and local languages.[46]

d) **Hybrid Warfare through Social Media**

Hybrid war, launched by Pakistan's adversaries, especially India, has polarized the society in Pakistan, thus resulting in an atmosphere of insecurity and instability, where people are made to believe that the state is unable to protect their interests. It, in turn, is exploited by religious and political pressure groups who challenge the writ of the state on a host of issues, ranging from sectarianism, ethnic injustices, gender inequality and corruption. In addition, the hybrid war also creates a gulf between state institutions and the public. It was verified after the exposé of the European Union Disinformation Lab, i.e., a project sponsored by the Indian intelligence agencies. The objective of this project was to isolate Pakistan diplomatically. The disinformation was carefully framed on the model of western values systems, such as democracy, human rights, and inequality, to paint Pakistan as an intolerant society. The agenda of this disinformation campaign was also meant to hurt Pakistan's trade relations with the European Union.[47] Meanwhile, the campaign aimed to showcase India as a progressive democracy.

The EU Disinformation Lab worked systematically. Firstly, it created fake organizations and newspapers online. Secondly, these fake entities collaborated amongst themselves online in disseminating anti-Pakistan content. Thirdly, the information was then fed to Indian media, from where it landed on Twitter through troll accounts. Interestingly, this disinformation network had a total of 750 different media networks with reach in over 90 states. This way, a well-thought-out narrative was developed against Pakistan, which was also presented in the European Parliament.[48] After Indian intelligence was exposed, it changed its strategy and pushed forward other disinformation themes. Those were related to state terrorism in Pashtun tribal areas and Balochistan forced conversions of Hindus in Pakistan, and criticism of CPEC.[49] After the Taliban came into power in Afghanistan in August 2021, Indian Twitter handles also spread fake news that the Pakistan Air Force had assisted them in taking over Panjshir Valley from the militia of Ahmed Masood.[50]

The hybrid war against Pakistan is an official policy of the Modi regime in India. Social media pundits have argued that "while the government in India denies any link to the spread of misinformation about Pakistan, all Internet Protocol addresses can be traced back to New Delhi."[51] Indian Twitter accounts were also seen spreading fake news after the Balakot misadventure by the Indian Air Force on February 26, 2019, when it falsely claimed that it had killed 300 militants inside Pakistan. These accounts also lied about shooting down two of Pakistan's F-16 jets in the subsequent dogfight with Pakistan Air Force on February 27. To counter Indian disinformation, ISPR presented Pakistan's stance eloquently on Twitter and termed Indian fake news as hybrid warfare.

Within Pakistan, Indian lobbies hire media professionals and civil society activists to exploit fault lines and spread discord. They develop frames, engage their followers in debate, share it widely to make it a narrative, and mostly keep it organic to reflect a genuine dissent. Most of these individuals have blue-ticked verified profiles, while some have also formed their association known as South Asians Against Terrorism

and for Human Rights (SAATH). Therefore, threats like extremism, sub-nationalism, and hybrid war are increasingly being witnessed on Twitter, but Twitter has not been seen countering these threats.

Regulatory Framework for SMNs in Pakistan

Though some form of content regulation is in place in PECA-2016, Pakistan's response to threats emanating from digital media is still evolving. The Ministry of Information Technology and Telecommunication (MoITT) launched Citizen Protection Rules (CPR) in January 2020, directed explicitly at SMNs working within Pakistan. As per CPR, all SMNs must open an office in Islamabad and appoint a focal person within three months of the date of coming into force of these rules. The job description of the focal person is to rectify complaints of citizens and state institutions. SMNs are also directed in CPR to delete anti-Pakistan content within six hours if authorities wish so, failing which they could face a penalty of 500 million rupees or blocking of SMN inside the country.[52] Nevertheless, the compliance by SMNs to these rules is yet to be seen.

Subsequent to CPR-2020, MoITT enacted follow-up regulations known as Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Online Content (Procedure, Oversight, Safeguards) Rules, 2021. The new rules amended CPR-2020 to some extent. Accordingly, the deletion time for the post has been extended to forty-eight hours from six hours. Meanwhile, the condition of three months for opening an office was also removed. Significantly, the rules of 2021 explicitly state that any post against the security interests of Pakistan must immediately be taken down, failing to which the platform's services could be degraded, in addition to the imposition of fines of 500 million rupees. Likewise, SMN must also provide Pakistani authorities with required user data for investigation purposes. Nevertheless, in line with the predecessor, the rules of 2021 asked SMNs to appoint grievance redressal officers in Pakistan.[53]

The absence of grievance redressal officers in Pakistan continuously creates problems for the national regulator, i.e., PTA, as there is no representative of these SMNs to appear in Pakistani courts. Therefore, in their place, PTA has to answer the queries. It often creates confusion as PTA has no authority over SMNs, while courts want to get their orders implemented.[54] It was witnessed in a ruling which ordered PTA to remove blasphemous content from SMNs. However, platforms did not fall under the jurisdiction of PTA.[55]

Before the rules enacted by MoITT for platform regulation, PECA-2016 was criticized on human rights grounds, and a court also struck down the later amendments to it for being undemocratic. The issue regarding an amendment to PECA-2016 related to the nature of threats, as it was not aligned with national security but was meant for political goals, with defamation of the political elite considered a crime under Section 20.[56] The content regulation in PECA-2016 was also not holistic and only highlighted extremism and terrorism as national security threats. Though these are real threats, PECA-2016 ignored several other grave threats, such as sub-nationalism and the hybrid

war, as discussed above. More significantly, by not outlining the holistic picture of threats in PECA-2016, law enforcement authorities are left with little room to prosecute the culprits.

Conclusion

Pakistan is yet to securitize social media as a serious threat to national security. In security policies formulated to date, as discussed in this paper, the mention of social media has mainly been made on the side-lines of traditional threats. Therefore, less weightage has been accorded to this mushrooming threat. On the other hand, implications for not holistically securitizing social media are already being witnessed in the form of increased religious extremism, mainly by TLP on Twitter, employing Twitter as a weapon for spreading militancy by TTP, and rise of sub-nationalism on the platform by PTM, BSO-A, and JSMM. Furthermore, Twitter is also being used for disinformation purposes as part of a hybrid war by adversaries of Pakistan. While Pakistan introduced content regulation as early as PECA-2016, the primary concern has remained to be electronic media than social media. Though serious efforts towards platform regulation have only been witnessed in 2020 (and 2021), when MoITT enacted rules related to SMNs, implementation of these rules in letter and spirit is yet to be seen.

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