The Role of Social Media in Peace Building: An Analytical Case Study on Online Radicalization during Covid-19 and Options for Pakistan

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Abstract

The recent COVID 19 pandemic has increased importance of social media in peace building efforts. The pandemic has pushed global society towards the social networking and communication sites to continue their daily routines. At the same time the potential extremist groups have also realized the importance of these forums and are now more active than ever before. Now this is the time when Pakistani authorities should also gauge the seriousness of the threat in order to avoid the spread of violent narratives amongst the young segment of the societies especially the ones who are already vulnerable due to exposure to such platforms for educational as well as business purposes. This study aims to explore different kinds of role social media can play in peace building efforts during this recent COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of the study is not only to prevent the trends of radicalization from emerging in Pakistani society but also to develop community resilience in it.

Keywords: Social Media, Media System Dependency, Radicalization, Peace Building, COVID 19, Pakistan and Community Resilience.

Introduction

Pakistani society is an ideal example of multifaceted differences where population is divided on the fault lines of ethnicity, political cleavages, sectarianism, class, caste, customs, creed etc. This heterogeneity of Pakistani society has always posed a great challenge to the security of the state. It also make it very difficult to keep in check the influence of various internal and external factors that may possess capabilities to destabilize the internal security environment of the country. Soon after the launch of global war on terror a new influx of radicalization and extremism was introduced in the Pakistani community which has not only disturbed the very social fabric of the society but has also provided opportunity to various terrorist-extremist groups in finding recruits and sympathizers within its population. However, with successful military operations and establishment of various de-radicalization programs across the country the Pakistan government has controlled the influence of local terrorist groups within the state but the threat in the form of narrative building for the radicalization and violent extremism from international terrorist-extremist groups is still highly significant. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, also known as (ISIS) pose serious challenges to Pakistani society in that regard. The group has already claimed the establishment of the

Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham-Khorasan (ISIS-K) as its *wilaya* (province) in Afghanistan-Pakistan and other parts of Central Asia (Khattak, 2019). Their ambition is to establish an Islamic state under the Sharia law, and compel Muslims around the globe to declare their loyalties to the head of organization in fight against infidels for the protection of *ummah* (BBC, 2015). ISIS is a relatively new but structurally differentiated and well-equipped organization with modern tactics at its disposal to radicalize and recruit people. One such tactic at its disposal to influence people is through Social media.

Social media is a medium through which any information (irrespective of its positive or negative impact) flow from one part of the world to another within matter of few seconds. It's all due to rapid progress in the domain of information technology and widespread use of mobile phones and other smart gadgets. Pakistan being one of the top twenty countries in the highest use of Internet (Internet live stats, 2016) is under continuous threat of radical narratives produced by the extremist groups. A number of terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda, ISIS, ISIS-K are using social media as a source to spread propaganda and numerous people in Pakistan may become victim to their propaganda due to frequent exposure to unchecked social media channels, lack of awareness of religion, complications in and absence of peace education in curriculum, limited use of technology to counter online threat and absence of strong counter narrative building by the government etc. The terrorist organizations now have sizeable virtual presence and are radicalizing, recruiting and training people through their online publications and channels.

The recent circumstances of COVID-19 pandemic the entire world now relaying on the use of Internet to run day-to-day affairs. This include many schools, colleges and universities which are using open communication sites such as Google Classroom, Google Meet, Google Drive, Zoom, Microsoft and Skype for educational purposes. On one hand the students (youth) are spending more time on internet, at the other hand these extremists groups are also using same social media sites over most of the social platforms in order to evade easy detection by the security channels and to spread conspiracy theories and disseminate their extremist ideologies across the world (Counter Extremism Project, 2020). This has put Pakistani society in a more complex security situation due to its vulnerable and limited cyber security capabilities. Particularly more in the recent times when most of the educational institutions as well as local businesses have adopted these open accessed social sites and apps for daily communication and work purposes. This tactical shift from these extremist groups has raised serious questions on utility of Global Internet forms established by counter extremism forces to prevent extremism and engage population in peace building efforts through social media.

Research Objectives and Methodology

This study aims to highlight the social media dependency and its role in peace building efforts during COVID-19 pandemic. Further, this research aims to define that how Internet media may use to protect Pakistani society from emerging radicalization trends and to develop community resilience. The experts of peace and security studies believe that the establishment of community resilience through peace building efforts would be the only solution to deal with such complexity in the country. However, there is lack of literature on the role of social media in peace building mainly in context of Pakistan. To address this vacuum in the existing literature an analytical research design has been used. Therefore, open-ended interview technique has also been adopted to search an appropriate peace-building model for Pakistani society to deal with the growing threats of radicalization during Covid 19 pandemic. The respondents belonged to three different domains of the subject and had spent enough time in the field with ample observations to reveal the truth on the mentioned subject. The interviews were held on Whatsapp and Facebook call options. All interviews were done on June 4, 2020.

Theoretical Framework

This research has followed two-layered theoretical understanding to achieve the aims of the research. Primarily the media system dependency theory is followed to define the importance of Media or social

media at the time of crisis. In crisis, the governments use mass media sources such as electronic and print media for official information. However, since the rise of Internet, social media has in particularly changed the information settings significantly. Now people are using social media forums like never before as it is the most convenient source of information collection. Though both types of media are highly significant in any society but in today's digital world the role of social media sites and forums cannot be ignored. It is especially more important now when both governmental and non-governmental institutions are using these forums for communication as well as for running everyday errands at the times of crisis.

Secondly, the paper followed the Conflict Prevention framework to define the situation where the online radicalization or extremism from radical and extremist groups may introduce new tactics of violence in the country by unfolding classical indicators of violent extremism in the Pakistani society. This theoretical understanding may help in two ways. Firstly, it may help to define the stages of situation in which particular problem is taking place or has started emerging as a reason of violence in near future such as introduction of new radical/extremist narrative from ISIS, ISIS-K and Taliban during COVID 19. Secondly, it can provide close understanding that how these contributing factors can be addressed for the achievement of successful prevention (Lund, 2009). This theoretical framework explains the prevention process in three ways: Firstly through creating awareness, Secondly by launching successful campaign and lastly through activism by Policy Implementation (Lund, 2009). The process may also assist in defining a possible model for Pakistan to adopt as preventive measures against the emerging radical trends.

Media system dependency theory was presented by Sandra Ball Rockeach and Melvin DeFluer in 1976 (Rockeach & Defluer, 1976). This theoretical understanding suggests that in time of crisis, dependency on media increases. This dependency on media or social media in time of crisis lead people to not only use different digital media channels for information but also enhance the possibilities of its use by the authorities to maintain social stability and peace. As at time of predicament the chances of gaining firsthand information is limited so people use social media as the only reliable source to get information and fulfill their requirements, for example in the 2009 N1H1 outbreak in China and in the 2011 Earthquake in Japan, media was used by the authorities as well as by people to get true information (Cheng and Mitomo, 2015). However, in recent times of COVID 19, the entire world was using Internet, not only for getting information but also to perform daily life activities. Especially, in context of Pakistan, the COVID 19 pandemic has pushed the country towards digital Pakistan policy. The government encouraged educational institutions, academics and other organizations to continue work through online forums. This had not only helped the academic institutions but various private businesses to resume their functions by using online forums. So the maximum number of Pakistani population started relying more upon Internet.

According to the media system dependency theory the dependence on Internet generates two main conditions among the population. First, ambiguity and second threat (Ball-Rokeach, 1985). At the time of crisis (COVID 19) when social environment became uncertain and people started relaying on Internet to find answers to their questions regarding causes and impacts of COVID 19 and how to run daily activities. The available information on the pandemic was not enough which aroused the feelings of ambiguity among the people. People knew that a situation was there but were unable to comprehend how to deal with it. So in order to deal with this ambiguity they started relaying more on the Internet which increased their dependence. However, this ambiguity and search for information has made people more vulnerable to the radical groups who are using COVID 19 as an opportunity to get sympathizers and recruiters.

The media system dependency was previously also established in 1970s when mass media was considered as a significant tool of information but as time has passed the various forms of media have emerged such as social media along with social networking forums. These social media groups and forums are considered as a significant source of information gathering in recent times. In the context of COVID 19 especially when individuals are advised to adopt social distancing and isolating themselves, this has all led to them relaying more and more on social media and social networking apps. However the dependency of the people on media is not always same.

According to the gratification theory of communication the media attracts users as per their needs of understanding, information and entertainment (David, 2016). What users chooses to watch depends upon their interaction with the outside world; their behavior in turn is defined by these interactions along with what they watch on media. There are three levels of user's dependency on media: Cognitive, Affective and Behavioral (Lin, 2014). The cognitive level motivates individuals to maintain the level of attention and affection to achieve satisfaction. Both Affective and Cognitive levels assist individuals in creating emotional affiliations with certain things based on likes and dislikes to take certain actions and inactions (Lin, 2014). Media maintains individual's dependency by providing them with the new and relevant information (Lin, 2014). Cognitive and Affective levels aggravate people's emotions on certain issues and maintain their dependency over the media forums (Lin, 2014). Especially in the context of COVID 19 pandemic the emotional narrative from the extremist groups gets high trends, like Afghan Talibans are using social media to aggravate people's sentiments over COVID 19 and to exploit the current situation to develop public relations.

Social media follows exactly the same dependency levels as of mass media. In social media forums the users themselves decide who to add, follow or like according to their interests, social system and cultural similarities. Contrary to mass media, in social media, there is concept of "Sponsored Ad" which is not under the control of user; the users see those ads which may contain such ideology which is not based on the liking and disliking of the person. However, these ads or unwanted information creates a vacuum that can be used by radical and extremist groups to create users dependency on radical ideologies. As the media dependency affects users thinking pattern the users of that radical ads on these social media sites starts behaving accordingly. In May 2019, a "whistleblower complaint" to the Securities and Exchange Commission suspected that the auto-generation algorithm setting at Facebook has provided branding space for extremist groups, such as Al Qaeda, ISIS, Al-Shabab. Similarly, another report by Counter Extremism Project indicated that the ISIS followers used Facebook for extremist purposes by exploiting the "suggested friends" feature or the auto generation of videos and pages settings (Counter Extremism Project, 2020). This illustrates that as compare to mass media the social media dependency enhance the element of vulnerability in their users who can easily be accessed by these extremist or radical groups through these forums with a single click. These radical groups use such forums to harvest information and maintain people's dependence through sentimental news and stories.

In order to define media dependency and its effects on behavior, it is pertinent to understand that user's cognitive and affective stimulation results in higher media dependency and that defines user's behavior too. Such is the case study of Noureen Laghari, the girl who got radicalized through social media and was ready to join ISIS-Afghanistan chapter in year 2017 (Hussain & Imran, 2017). Laghari, responded to a random post on Facebook. These random comments on a Facebook post enhanced her curiosity to explore more about religion and her interest on religious information motivated her to get involved in a religious conversation with a recruiter and ideologue of the ISIS group. Her dependency on social media to collect religious information led her towards a strong cognitive and affective arousal on ISIS ideology. She developed higher dependency on ISIS for information and got emotionally affiliated to the organization. As religion is a sensitive and emotional subject she started thinking more emotionally rather than logically which ultimately resulted in a behavior/action which she thought to be right (92 News HDPlus, 2017). According to Mr. Abdul Basit, the same notion of this theoretical framework may also be used by the peacemakers to not only define the role of social media against such extremist groups but also to tap media dependency to spread rebuttals or at least start using it for peace building purposes. He mentioned that proactive use of social media could assist law enforcement agencies in early deduction of the threat and in later use to address the gaps (Basit, Personal Communication, June 4, 2020).

Online Radicalization during COVID 19 possible threats for Pakistan

In recent circumstance when world has to deal with the COVID 19 pandemic the terrorist groups have come up with new extremist narratives on social media and other free communication applications. These violent extremist groups are using such platforms for propaganda, financing, training and planning purposes

and in order to conduct various surveillance activities. These terrorist groups are using this time as an opportunity to spread conspiracies, fear and uncertainty amongst the people. However, in case of Pakistan the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic has provided opportunity to connect maximum people mainly young segment of the society through social media messaging apps and forums. The ISIS-K and Taliban have adopted different narratives against this pandemic and are using this as an opportunity to enhance recruitment of their foot soldiers, sympathizers and to establish public relations. Especially, in case of Taliban it has been noted that the group is using it as an opportunity for improving public relations. This could be due to the ongoing Afghan peace process between Taliban and the US. So far the group has released three statements. In the first statement the group has advocated for the release of Taliban prisoners to avoid increase in number of COVID 19 cases within the premises of the prisons. In second statement the group has encouraged health related national and international organizations to send health works in Taliban controlled areas and promised them security. In the last statement Taliban has offered ceasefire in areas where the COVID 19 has affected the most (Basit, 2020).

Taliban are also using social media to disseminate awareness about the COVID 19 and have distributed pamphlets about the corona virus spread. Abdul Basit mentioned that Taliban has realized that with the withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan the phenomenon of international jihad and supporting narrative will no longer serve the purpose of Taliban and they would not be able to recruit more people as they were able to before. Taliban had always criticized the US presence in the region and exploited the US centric hatred amongst the population, this will no longer be an option for them (Basit, Personal Communication, June 4, 2020). Mr. Moazzam Hashmi, explained that communication via any medium of media has remained a significant component of terrorist groups in this region and these terrorist groups utilize all possible options in that regard so the use of social media in COVID 19 is not an exceptional strategy by Taliban or any other terrorist groups. Media has always remained part of terrorist campaign. They have used it for multiple purposes in the past and are doing the same in the recent circumstances. However, he stressed upon the role of media in peace building in its true letter and spirit (Hashmi, Personal Communication, June 4, 2020).

The Role of Social Media in Peace Building and Options for Pakistan

Media can be considered as one of the strongest communication tool in terms of information sharing to deal with the crisis like situation. Media plays a significant role between the leaders and groups in any political settings. It provides required information to both society and the decision making body, that's why it is considered as the fourth pillar of state after Executive, Legislature and the Judiciary. However, in terms of role of social media and peace building the scholars are divided and have different opinions. A significant majority of the peace-building studies scholars explain it as contestation between its role in escalation or de-escalation simultaneously during a crisis like situation. However we can still discuss the role of social media in peace building with help of three layers of conflict prevention (Awareness, Campaign and Activism-Policy Implementation).

The Toda Peace Institute has explained that social media plays a significant role in peace building efforts in following ways (Toda Peace Institute, 2020):

1. It provides channels of awareness among the masses on any particular crisis situation and highlights such contents that may lead towards the lapse of any peace efforts in future.
2. Social media provides a strong and effective platform to launch a rigorous campaign to support social cohesion, community resilience, democratic norms, peace process and justice.
3. Social media also helps in addressing conflict dynamics in various communities and countries simultaneously.
4. It provides creative options to address the crisis like situation with early deduction or proactive thinking and can activate/induce civil society, governments, technology relevant organizations and motivational actors to perform their roles.

5. Provide excellent communication facilities by addressing the vacuum in policy makers, implementing bodies and the practitioners.

Public sphere- Use this social space with new ways. (Awareness)

A very important thing to understand is that social media creates a public sphere where people can interact, share their opinions, create common understanding and mutual judgment on any social, political or even religious issue from individual to group level. It becomes more critical when terrorist-extremist or radical groups are using it with more touching narratives. The strong content available on social media and other communication apps from such groups can cause serious security issues for a society like Pakistan.

The situation becomes more alarming with US planning to withdrawal from Afghanistan and groups like Al-Qaeda congratulating their associated groups on their win and the loss of yet another super power. Whereas, ISIS-K is rejecting this notion while declaring Taliban and Al-Qaeda as apostates, the ISIS claims that both the Al-Qaeda and Taliban have only fooled people in the name of jihad in order to gain their political interests in the country (Basit, Personal Communication, June 4, 2020). The dependency theory also explain that when people use this medium for daily communication purposes it becomes very important as it starts shaping up the opinions of it users. In current circumstances of COVID 19 it is important for the state of Pakistan to not only understand the threat but also start using this public sphere to create awareness among its population. The Terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and ISIS have associated this COVID 19 pandemic with religious reasons and declared it as God's punishment for China due to its unjust policies against Uighur Muslims and God's revenge against all other infidels (Basit, 2020). The definition of infidel is very vast for these groups they consider every non-Muslim as well as such Muslims as infidels who have supported, followed and assisted non Muslim governments in the global war on terror.

Social Media possess the potential of reaching maximum numbers of people. State of Pakistan should utilize this potential of social media to create awareness amongst the masses not only regarding COVID 19 pandemic but also in assisting them to stay vigilant. As the conflict prevention model defines that early deduction of any conflict may be dealt with the establishment of right awareness. Dr. Maria Effendi mentioned that right now majority of Pakistanis are confused and have very little true knowledge regarding this pandemic. Most people are already associating it as "*Khuda ka Azab*" (punishment from God) and are uncertain about their future. Many people are worried about jobs and looking for financial opportunities to earn bread and butter during this pandemic. This makes Pakistani population more vulnerable towards the extremist content. As a person facing various types of anxieties is more prone to adopt violent means to achieve personal interests (Effendi, Personal Communication, June 4, 2020). True awareness programs on COVID 19 pandemic and its impacts should be launched at multiple levels of social media to address the confusions, anxieties and frustration of both educated and uneducated segments of the Pakistani society. If extremist groups are using these channels for propaganda Pakistani state and civil society should also develop anti thesis of such propaganda.

Use the power of networks: (Campaigning)

"Power does not reside in institutions, but is rather located in the networks that structure society." (Castells, 2004) According to M. Castells, networks need to be created to counter opposite networks. He says to counter the campaign of the opponent side counter networks are required that can penetrate at the same level (Castells, 2004). In that regards the role of social media in peace building during ongoing radicalization threats from various extremist and terrorist groups to Pakistani society in COVID 19 pandemic shall be used to establish relationship between citizens and the peace making organizations such as civil society working on community resilience, National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) and others to enhance collective actions and collaboration in all spheres of life. Dr. Effendi, mentioned that we need to use social media in a more organized and rigorous manner for peace building campaign in Pakistani society to deal with such threats. She said that any effort at individual's level may not result in the similar way as if launched by the state machinery. However, the implementation of this campaign should follow

bottom up approach rather than top down as highlighted by J.P Ladrach in conflict transformation model and conflict prevention approach (Effendi, Personal Communication, June 4, 2020). Similarly, Mr. Moazzam Hashmi, also stressed upon an organized peace building campaign in response to spreading radicalization and extremism in the country. He explained that in the context of Pakistan, social media has played quite a negative role in the peace building efforts, while there are serious strategic flaws in use of social media for peace building purposes. He said that Pakistan's peace building efforts are not working in an organized flow as far as social media is concerned. He emphasized on the need to adopt strong narrative in response to the extremist discourses and to disseminate this verbatim in true spirit. Furthermore, he highlighted the importance of an effective narrative that should directly deal with the perceptions of the locals (Hashmi, Personal Communication, June 4, 2020). Pakistani population is very much confused when it comes to religious matters. Even most of local youngsters have education on religion from their parents and rely on their parents when need any explanation (Noor & Hussein, 2010). So in that condition when people are vulnerable on religious concepts extremist groups may exploit young minds in the name of religion. In the recent context of COVID 19, maximum number of our youth and children are spending most of their time on Internet and social communication sites. Therefore, a strong peace building campaign should be launched by the peace building organizations.

Similarly, it is also very important that cyber security institutions should remain vigilant when it comes to the social networking sites and apps. It has been noted that various networking websites are not only hosting but also promoting extremist content through algorithm recommendations. In May 2019, the Security and Exchange Commission accused Facebook for using auto-generation algorithm that promoting extremist groups like ISIS-AQ and Al-Shabab. Later the allegation was confirmed by the counter extremism project report that reveals that ISIS followers are misusing this auto-algorithm (Counter Extremism Project, 2020). So it would be responsibility of cyber security branch that rather than just deleting the extremist contents auto-algorithm options should also be avoided especially during this COVID 19 time period.

Activism

Social Media is a significant tool for citizens who may use it in defiance to authorities or to bring truth in front of them. With the help of online networks various activists can launch local as well as global campaigns and can drive the ideas, organizations and coordination among the population. This was recently noted in case of Katija Saddiqui, when courts had to re-convict the accused due to immense pressure of people activated by the various human rights activists on social media. The same spirit may also be used by the peace building practitioners to create community resilience among the Pakistani population against the extremist narratives and hate speeches.

This time can be used by Pakistan government to re-visit its peace process programs. Pakistan may device its peace program in combination of Kinetic and non-Kinetic approaches. Under non-kinetic approach the government may use the stories of those militants who have asked for forgiveness and can also trace the extremism process to generate a successful rebuttal of those narratives. The recent BBC report claimed that some 9,000 Pakistani Taliban are willing to return to their homes in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa after seeking forgiveness and assuring that they will not become part of any kind of violence in future (Rana, 2020).

According to Abdul Basit, COVID 19 has provided opportunity to extremist groups to re-define their narratives and come up with more strong and well trained foot soldiers in the region. This could also provide an option for Pakistan to start dialogues with the Pakistani Taliban based in Afghanistan who are looking towards the Pakistani government for forgiveness (Basit, Personal Communication, June 4, 2020). In case the government do not pay attention towards these Pakistani militants in Afghanistan and fail to engage them in any peace making efforts, there are fair chances that they may join hands with ISIS-K and continue to be a security threat to Pakistani society. The ISIS is spending a lot of its efforts on such militants those are in lacuna that has been created due to the current Afghan Peace Process between Afghan

Taliban and the US. At activism level Pakistani government needs to take strategic preventions and use social media as a platform for counter arguments or agenda setting purposes.

The findings of this research indicate that COVID 19 pandemic has widened the scope of radicalization among the educated youth in Pakistan. As most of the radical and extremist groups are active on social media and using various social networking apps to approach the young minds with their radical and extremist narratives. It is need of the time that security departments may also pay some special attentions towards this issue. In that context as highlighted by Toda Peace Institute the social Media can be used for peace building and enhancing community reliance against the radical agendas and narratives. During this spike of COVID 19 the social media is a big source of information collection by common people the authorities should also use it for awareness purposes by utilizing it all channels as an effective platform.

Conclusion

Since the start of the COVID 19 pandemic the extremist groups are using social media communication forums and apps to spread their re-defined narratives and to launch various propaganda activities against the governments. Mainly, in that regard the role of Al-Qaeda, Taliban, ISIS and ISIS-K cannot be ignored. These groups are trying to take advantage of the government's over-occupation with the health issues to seek recruitment and get sympathizers. Pakistani youth is the most vulnerable group to these extremist groups. However, social media is providing opportunities to both sides: extremist as well as the peace building authorities to launch their deep proactive programs. It is need of an hour that we take maximum advantage of social media to establish community resilience against any upcoming threat from these extremist groups among our population and to define prevention based peace building efforts. Furthermore, cyber security branch of Pakistan needs to tailor state centric cyber security program to deal with the local threats. The significant number of developed countries has requested social media forums to avoid using auto-algorithm programming in their apps. We should also take such actions to deal with the current threats.

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