

Youth, Counter Violent Extremism and (Social) Media: A Case of Pakistan

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Abstract

The paper explores the role of social media on positive youth development and engagement towards peacebuilding in Pakistan. In particular, it recognizes the role of youth *within* the liberal peace process, hence, sustainably aiding peacebuilding efforts. The paper argues that within developing democracies, media and youth can create an environment to promote dialogue and collaborative problem-solving techniques. Furthermore, it explicates how extreme ideologists exploit social media; hence, negatively influencing the youth. With regards, the paper discusses several aspects of social media that can significantly contribute towards countering violent extremism and related narratives. Such an understanding enables us to classify the potential role of social media in involving youth in contextualized peacebuilding efforts.

Keywords

Youth, Pakistan, social media, counter violent extremism, democracy

Introduction

The active mobilization of youth in political participation is framed by a range of theoretical perspectives on democracy and corresponding views on the rights and responsibilities of citizens (Evans & Prilleltensky, 2007; Sloam, 2007; Yohalem & Martin, 2007; Print, 2007; Bessant, 2016; Kymlicka & Norman, 1994). With regards, the role of media (TV, social media, print media, and radio) is pivotal in shaping inclusive and accountable institutions and governance (Terrill, 2018). However, countries having struggling or developing democratic institutions, marked by ethno-religious extremism and/or identity-based violence, need to utilize the significant constructive role the media can play towards ensuring a just and peaceful society (e.g., Kadayifci-Orellana, 2009). Therefore, it is important to address the structural

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determinants that provide a conducive environment within which the youth (as a vulnerable segment of the society) becomes highly influenced by the narratives of violent extremist and terrorist organization (including political violence) (Onuoha, 2014; Vergani et al., 2020; Weber, 2019).

Similarly, there is a greater need to understand that the youth, as a major portion of Pakistan's total population (i.e., six per cent), is in the continuous process of re-positioning itself within the weak or developing democratic culture (Saud, 2020; Saud, Ida, & Mashud, 2020; Masiha et al., 2018; Mahmood et al., 2014). More importantly, media directly defines (both positively and negatively) youth participation and mobilization in the broader public realm. The argument emanates from the fact that media as a source of information (including social media) shape and situate the youth with regards to the state's political affairs (Sloam, 2018; Salman & Saad, 2015; Price, 2013). Several studies have analyzed such interaction of youth with media, more importantly, how such interface contributes towards the manifestation of violence.

In view of the above, this article aims to examine the role of underutilized potential of media in developing democracies for positive engagement of youth towards sustainable peacebuilding. In particular, the role of youth must be recognized within the liberal peace process, aiding peacebuilding efforts in a sustainable manner (Bickham, 2017; Richmond, 2009). It argues that within weak democracies, media and youth can create an environment promoting dialogue and collaborative problem-solving techniques (Coleman, 2011; Lasker & Weiss, 2003). In doing so, the article explicates how extreme ideologists exploit media; hence, negatively influencing the youth. Such an understanding will help us identify the potential role of media in involving youth in contextualized peacebuilding efforts.

Developing Democracy, Youth, and Social Media: A Case of Pakistan

In the contemporary world, social media is the primary source of engaging and attracting youth in political discussion (Kamau, 2017). Media is a platform that facilitates the outlook of diverse political opinions, including the marginalized sector. Social media users tend to process the information parallel with other media sources like news bulletins, headlines, newspaper editorials or documentaries. Thus, youth learn to interpret and assess political information by focusing on a particular matter. Furthermore, social media provides them with an opportunity to reflect their opinion on the assessed information. Overall, the virtual associations and mobilization are more efficient, as they are accessible to a larger audience and deliver their messages promptly. Such mobilization also acts as a pressure group, ensuring the government, related institutions and security actors to remain accountable. As a result, social media serves the youth people to develop political knowledge, political interests and political efficacy. These aspects are important features of liberal strong democracies (Rhoden, 2015; Brest, 1985). In view, social media is also acting to deliver an organized message to the government and public. This is why it is considered a bridge between government and citizens, influencing their relationship.

Similarly, in Pakistan, the recent mobilization of youth and its interests in the political sphere has been widely observed through social media activism (Ida, Saud, & Mehsud, 2020). Besides, concerning youth take part in trending hashtag stories on Twitter and making viral the important issues or societal concerns. This flow of information and civic engagement enhances the voice of youth and creates a sense of empowerment. As a result, it brings youth organizations at the forefront — as a resisting force — against the exploited democratic culture (corruption, violence and

crime); thus, influencing the decision-making authorities (Wilkinson et al., 2009). In this way, youth activism through social media helps to promote the structural stability of society, helping youth themselves to be resilient first toward the expected threats in developing democracies.

Consequently, such mobilization and activism have played a pivotal role in identifying identified social and political structural failures in developing democracies; hence, benefitting the states in improving its legislative structure through new reforms. For instance, the growing rape incidences in Pakistan became a significant concern for several youth organizations, civil society, and other human rights organizations (e.g., Majid, 2016). With regards, they demanded essential (legislative) reforms to address the issue (Maria, 2020). Likewise, social media is capable of further identifying the loopholes in democratic system/institutions) while suggesting possible recommendations. It is important to recognize that such public interventions are indeed critical in nature, nevertheless peaceful, constructive, and dialogic in nature. Therefore, there are certain ethical orientations which are also expected from (social) media. For instance, the critiques argue that the media has the responsibility to promote content that stimulates peaceful narrative in society; thus, strengthening the conditions necessary for sustainable peace and coexistence.

Understanding the Relationship between Social Media and Violent Extremism

The devastating effect of the exploitation of media by extremist groups is evident in modern war-torn areas (Archetti, 2015; Bertram, 2016; Qin et al., 2006). The economical access to internet data, including in developing countries, has increased the number of social media users on mobile. According to worldwide mobile data pricing, the rate of 1 GB of mobile data costs an average of 1.85\$ in Pakistan, which is the 33rd lowest data price in the world (Khalid et al., 2021). Indeed, such access to the internet has resulted in a wide array of positive societal implications (including those mentioned above) (Cheshire & Cook, 2016; Matusitz, 2007). However, the development has also exposed us to the changing nature and dynamics of extremist organizations, in terms of their operational and functional capabilities. Scholars have widely observed that the availability of the internet (and/or social media) has equally offered extremist organizations an opportunity to reach the wider public and vulnerable segments of society (such as youth). Therefore, the self-edited and controlled horizontal media has served the organizations very well regarding disseminating extremist narratives, hate speech, and disinformation (Lieberman, 2017; Tate, 2019). The apparent challenge is that hate speech, and extremist content identification is not easy to trace or decode, as it is written or recorded in local languages (such as Urdu, Arabic, Hindi, Pashto, Bangla or Tamil). Besides, there is less information about the planning and maneuvering tactics of extremists in carrying out violent activities because they have the essential expertise in using the safest and secret channels of social media platforms.

In Pakistan, violent extremist or terrorist organizations can be broadly categorized as sectarianism-based groups, national and transnational terrorist organizations, and ethno-nationalist terrorist organizations. Considering the complex composition of terrorist organizations and their *source* of extremist narratives (ideological and identity-based), the extremist 'content' is highly diverse. Several extremist groups such as Daesh, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Baloch Liberation Army (BLA) took responsibility for violent attacks through the safest media platforms such as telegram, Umer Media Wing and Al Naba Newsletter. For

instance, the Korangi attack in 2015) was claimed by Daesh through Twitter (“Terrorist Attacks in Pakistan”, 2016). Later in 2016, Daesh claimed another attack on a hospital in Quetta through its Amaq News Agency via telegram (“Quetta Attack”, 2016).

Similarly, the 2019 attack on Pearl Continental Hotel in Quetta was allegedly claimed by the BLA through telegram (Pakistan attack, 2019). In the context of South Asia, the terrorist attacks in Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka were confirmed by the elements through telegram via ‘threema’. Furthermore, the extremist and terrorist associations in the past were able to diffuse fear and terror through violent videos of disfiguring the bodies of the security agents and the civilians resisting their ideology.

Telegram and chat rooms are the most efficient media tools of terrorist organizations and other militant groups in secretly planning and recruiting militants (Iqbal, 2021). On the other hand, the state anti-terrorism agencies can ban Facebook and Twitter accounts belonging to the terrorist organizations after tracing the concerning activity/contents. Similarly, in 2017, the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) under Facebook organized an image and linguistic footprinting project with the help of Artificial Intelligence to remove and disrupt terrorists and extremists abilities to exploit digital platforms in disseminating terror and propaganda (Saltman, 2020). Thus, currently, similar violent videos are not available on Media particularly YouTube.

Nevertheless, we must recognize how social media *itself* has changed the dynamics of violent extremism and terrorism – often termed as ‘new terrorism’ (Weimann, 2014). In particular, several studies have advanced our understanding of how social media serves extremist organizations to recruit (vulnerable) youth (Spurk, 2020; Bickham, 2017; Weimann, 2014; Wilkinson et al., 2009). Glorification of several terrorists (as virtual characters and fighters on social media have already inspired many young individuals to join their extremist kinetic agendas.

Countering Violent Extremism and Social Media

In Pakistan, under the National Action Plan (NAP, 2014 — a comprehensive plan to counter the menace of terrorism) banned glorifying individuals and their actions in association with any terrorist organizations. Furthermore, serious attention was paid to dismantling the communication networks of terrorist organizations, including the spread of hate speech. Indeed, such realization at the policy level is highly commendable. Nevertheless, the counter-measures did not translate into effective results. For instance, recently, the ongoing ‘anti-Shia’ campaign under the banner of ‘Azmat e Sahaba’ rallies in Karachi and Islamabad strokes once again the embers of hate (Batoool, 2021; Minority Rights Group International, 2020). Besides such on-ground activities, it is concerning to observe that the extremist groups are equally charged on social media. On the other hand, cyber-related anti-terrorism agencies have not effectively dealt with the issue. Retrospectively, 2019 Easter day Sri Lankan bombings were carried out because communal tensions rose due to growing hate speech throughout the country (Aditya, 2019; “Sri Lanka Indicts ISIS Mastermind”, 2021).

To counter the aforementioned challenges related to extremists’ social media penetration in countries like Pakistan, the government must introduce several reforms within the ambit of technology corresponding with the operational dynamics of social media. Firstly, necessary technology and expertise are required to decode the local contents (i.e., in local languages) and easily identify them as ‘hate speech’. In the

recent past, the National Counter Terrorism Authority Pakistan (NACTA)⁴ launched an App, under its Tat'heer Surf safe program (a counter-terrorism drive), titled 'Chaukas'. The objective of 'Chaukas' is to make it easy for the public to report any hate content anonymously so that the content (and content producer) shall be reported to the relevant Law enforcement agencies. Many people criticized that the 'Chaukas' did not ensure the privacy of the reporters. Moreover, it is more likely that the complaint might be sensitive to the 'national security', and the reporter/complainer might be caught for unnecessary interrogation since the NACTA does not clearly define the 'hate content' (Masood, 2018).

Relatedly, a project led by 'Pakistan Peace Initiative' aims to promote sustainable peace in reducing the probability of post-conflict violence in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) and post-conflict erstwhile FATA, tribal areas that are most affected areas of Pakistan under the project titled 'Promotion of dialogue for peacebuilding through media and youth mobilization in Pakistan' which aims to divert the societal behavior and outlook of society toward proactive action-oriented peacebuilding efforts through non-violent means (Zaidi, 2014). Moreover, it aimed to support Pakistani media to promote peace and tolerance through coexistence and social integration. A consortium approach was adopted for this project, and the institute worked with five local partners, each designated with specific tasks. The broad intention and purpose of the project were to seek to increase the promotion of dialogue, peacebuilding through media and youth mobilization in Pakistan, and conflict transformation capacity of the youth and local leaders and provide platforms for intergenerational collaboration as well as community engagement and mobilization. The trained participants and consortium have the potential to be utilized for long-term advocacy and awareness for a sustainable peace process in Pakistan.

Therefore, the governments and the related authority (i.e., NACTA) must initiate proper legislation defining the 'hate content' while ensuring the privacy and safety of complainants. Lastly, the government needs to consult civil society and technology firms while regulating cyber-terrorism. In this way, the ambiguities in the policies and regulations could be identified and addressed. Thus, the growing capacity of extremists' groups in propagating extremism could be attended by enhancing cyber security facilities and related infrastructure. Even though the policy related to Pakistan's counter-terrorism and counter violent extremism apparatus (NISP, 2014; NISP, 2018 ; NCEPG, 2018; for detailed review, see Makki & Yamin, 2021; Makki & Akash, 2021) were responsive measures to address the structural determinants of violent extremism and terrorism, the effective and practical implementation framework of the policy and its efficacy is yet to be determined (Holmer, 2013; Mandaville & Nozell, 2017).

Similarly, the cooperation between religious clerics, civic society and government authorities is essential to overcome future violent escalation. Along with that, the promotion of moderate voices countering extremist narratives through media is equally significant. Many countering violent extremism related-efforts look to engage, and partner with what is termed moderate voices within specific vulnerable communities, and religious leaders are frequently cited as a critical constituency of such work. Too often, moderate voices end up being code for religious figures who articulate views aligned with official government policy or refrain from directly criticizing the political elite.

⁴ National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA): <https://nacta.gov.pk/>

Role Traditional Media

In addition to the above-mentioned dynamics of social media, the role of traditional media must not be discounted. In particular, television programs need to develop and air content(s) that promote peace and-related capacity building for youth mobilization towards the construct of sustainable peace (e.g., Ozerdem, 2016; Weimann, 2015; Zaidi, 2014). We also need to recognize the potential role of media, particularly in conflict-ridden societies, towards developing and disseminating the counter-narrative to violent extremism and terrorism. Furthermore, the robust traditional media *itself* symbolizes the democratic value, freedom of expression and fundamental rights (Carlsson, 2016; Voorhoof & Cannie, 2010). It offers analysis and constructive criticism, which then translate into well-informed ‘perceptions or opinions’; ultimately enabling the conflict-ridden, transitional, or post-conflict societies to identify the structural determinants of violence and conflict (Makki & Yamin, 2021) and develop a sustainable environment for peace (Kuusik, 2010). Nevertheless, the mentioned arguments must not be limited to conventional media such as newspapers, TV or radio. Arguably, the traditional media takes primacy in this; however, new technologies, the internet, and digital content should also be considered in this context.

Yet, there are cases of media sponsoring sensation by over-reporting or erroneously reporting events that escalated conflict or violence. With regards, Iqbal and Hussain (2017) argue that the problem or issue does not lie in what media reports, but how it gets reported. Therefore, media could propagate erroneous content for political or ideological purposes or objectives. Hence, it is important to establish an effective ‘watchdog’ (i.e., regulatory authority) over media, as PEMRA⁵ in the case of Pakistan. Sensationalism or dramatization of events on media showcases unpredictability. Often, we have observed highly antagonistic and argumentative dialogue between the conflict stakeholders (s). Consequently, sensationalism does not just infuse unpredictability of the conflict situation, but it also contributes towards the manifestation of violence and threat (Iqbal & Hussain, 2017; Jusić, 2009; Smith, Bond, & Jeffries, 2019).

In particular, the media contents highly influence the youth’s opinion regarding the socio-political dimensions of any conflict situation; hence, they are structurally positioned. In other words, the innovative content expected from youth in conflict situations to build peace and resilience remains limited to what they are informed through media. In the case of Pakistan, there have been major tilts in media content from the beginning of the Afghan invasion policy to the War on Terror. The ‘sensationalized’ media is more concerned about its growing ratings and its biased political goals (Vraga & Tully, 2015; Flanagan & Metzger, 2017).

The major national media channels and newspapers in Pakistan like GEO, Dunya News, Bol News, Express News, ARY News, Dawn, The Express Tribune and Jang have a major influence over public opinion. Although, a few of them, like GEO were banned several times for reporting anti-government content, which led to a discourse of restrictive media (“PEMRA slaps 5-day ban”, 2017). Nevertheless, there are criticisms that many media platforms in Pakistan adopt biased political perspectives (International Media Support, 2009). More often, news channels in Pakistan resort to selective censorship, causing the opposite views to disappear. The majority of the news channels push an extremist right-wing agenda compared to a small section that promotes liberal agenda. For instance, in the Salman Taseer

⁵ Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA): <https://pemra.gov.pk/>

(governor Punjab) assassination case, this right-wing agenda of media was apparent (Husain, 2011). It was observed that several news channels interviewed the killer, establishing him as a hero. Media also covered and projected the mobilization and protests carried out by the organization legitimizing the assassination of the late-governor — the protests were spearheaded by TLP. Such a role of media is against the idea and principles of peace journalism. In fact, it has been argued that the projection of such events contributes to the polarization of society. Therefore, media (including print media) should promote content that stimulates peace and positivity amongst the youth and the broader society.

Discussion & Conclusion

The role of social media-led exposure can be well observed in Pakistan, which indeed provided the youth with a platform for political activism and/or mobilization. The paper argued that such mobilization (though online) could be considered as youth reclaiming the political space or participation within the broader political realm. The article further argued that awareness could be spread by using (social) media as an effective tool, highlighting the important issues that the state is facing to bring positive social change in society. Policy-making must acknowledge and respond to the highly heterogeneous socio-economic contexts of the country to promote social inclusivity and tolerance among the youth.

With regards to the issue of violent extremism, the paper discussed several aspects of social media which can significantly contribute towards countering violent extremism and related narratives. In doing so, a possible way forward is to follow the model of UNESCO where youth is imparted adequate awareness and coordination skills and assigned responsibilities to spread the same to the rest of the youth through various youth organizations. A well thought out plan needs to be initially implemented in a limited area and evaluated for further improvement and expansion. Schools, colleges and universities are the most suitable places to impart such training. Fresh graduates can be provided with the opportunity to engage in positive narrative building through social media, engaging in discussion on constructive criticism and suggestions for improvement of society without directly engaging in discussion on terrorism/religious violence as this leads to extreme views on both sides with no result.

Furthermore, mainstream electronic media, drama, talk shows and documentaries shall considerably focus on various social issues through the lens of youth or youth as a target audience. Such a reorientation must be developed around the 'peace' narrative while focusing on the constructive engagement of youth in the political discourse; thus, strengthening democratic system of governance and investing youth's potential in sustaining the conditions for peace and just society. Similarly, engaging young scholars of Islam and comparative religions to write Op-ed in print media will help students in colleges and universities to comprehend different perspectives rather than depending on traditional or 'controlled' views about structural issues influencing violent extremism in the society. The most important step to be taken is to be forthcoming with policies that help avoid the issue of socio-economic class-based discourse. While low-income youth remain entangled in deeply conservative/ultraorthodox teachings, upper middle and upper-class youth find multiple avenues to access knowledge and expression. Hence society continues to remain engulfed in the class divide instead of channelizing the potential of the youth across the board.

The media and youth are vital assets for peace and democracy. In weak democracies, youth are often excluded from the major discourse on peacebuilding and decision making. While the liberal peacemaking approach demonstrates that inclusive societies show more positive input in conflict resolution efforts. Meanwhile, media has its own significant output in accelerating peace processes through youth mobilization, developing constructive dialogue and informing people. By contrast, media sensation, youth radicalization, corrupt local leadership and civil society decelerate the peace projects. This paper has thoroughly discussed the prospect of media and youth in peacebuilding in weak democracies with specific examples from experiences and events in Pakistan that promote or demote the conflict resolution process. The finding in this paper suggests that the inclusion of youth and utilization of media in a constructive manner can ensure sustainable peace and also facilitate social and political discourses on important societal challenges — as a prerequisite for a strong democratic process and institutions. The negative influence of media on youth in weak democracies could be resolved through neutral regulation of media content and the collective response of the general public until a systemic societal transformation evolves for sustainable democracy and peace.

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