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Social Media, Fake News, and Political Polarization – Understanding the Impact of Digital Media on Pakistan's Political Landscape

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how social media amplified differences in Pakistan's politics, especially during the problems and changes of 2023–2024. Much of current political engagement happens through popular social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. Although these platforms help people engage politically, they often give rise to controversy and misinformation, which pulls people apart and makes debates less logical. Sensationalized news has increased how people are divided over issues like inflation and joining the IMF. This analysis uses social media dependency and partisan political polarization theories to examine the extent of separation between people due to their use of social media. The theory is that these sites contribute to the creation of communities that make strong party beliefs stronger. The study highlights that to boost democracy in Pakistan, schools should focus on news literacy, the government needs better management of all media, and take steps to oppose false information.

Keywords

Social Media, Fake News, Political Polarization, Misinformation, Pakistan Politics, Media Dependency, Economic Crisis

Introduction

Political parties and citizens in Pakistan now use WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook as the top tools for local politics. Social Media has many advantages in Pakistan, but it is also becoming more common for people to see fake news and misleading information (Li et al., 2023). The easy availability of deceptive facts is invigorating updated political discussions in confined loops referred to as echo chambers, and expanding the disparity between different points of view (Bail et al., 2018^a). According to Saboor et al. (2022) During Pakistan's 2018 parliamentary elections, election campaigns on social media attained a record-breaking level. Social networking sites provide an avenue for participants to connect and interact with the politicians they support. Even though social media fosters civic involvement, it also acts as an arena for partisan content and misleading information (Zimmer et al., 2019). Such networks have since become extensively exploited for spreading prejudiced, politically motivated spam, even crushing the general public sphere. People have a greater tendency to search for evidence that agrees with their views than for accounts that take a different perspective (Scheufele & Krause, 2019).

The constant political disputes in Pakistan bring up serious concerns, mostly about social media usage. Insensitive content can increase political discussion and likely widen social divides. Due to this, political partisanship in Pakistan has intensified, and it is now very hard for ordinary people to understand or get along with those who disagree with them. The political situation has worsened because of political parties being predictable, activities on social media, the rising popularity of the internet and particular critiques. Studying the role of social networking sites, particularly how disinformation widens differences in Pakistan, is necessary. The study wants to discover how the way media and political models are applied helps form opinions and attitudes of the public in Pakistan. In addition, the research looks at how electronic means of communication have affected the presentation of economic arguments in political debates in Pakistan and their probable effect on democracy.

Theoretical Framework

To investigate the link between digital platforms and information spread, the research combines various theories about how media and public opinion influence the political process in Pakistan. Notable theories encompass Media Dependency Theory, Political Polarization Theory, and the Fake News and Misinformation Theory of the Digital Era.

Media Dependency Theory

Ball-Rokeach & DeFleur (1976) state that individuals acquire their knowledge from the media. In Pakistan, where conventional journalism confronts bias and restrictions, social media provides a

substitute medium for participation and data accessibility. Social media has an enormous effect on how many people vote and the general sentiment during election seasons. As citizens become more heavily reliant on these outlets for news about politics, the knowledge they receive, which is frequently intended to bolster their ideological views, influences their understanding of political problems. These types of situations increase the diffusion of disinformation as individuals are more inclined to trust inaccurate data that affirms their prior beliefs.

Political Polarization Theory

Iyengar & Westwood (2015) define the manner in which the consumption of political and controversial material has driven the political sphere within society to become more polarized. In countries like Pakistan, where affiliations tend to be politically catastrophic, social media has made these disparities more severe. Investigations indicate that by showing viewers uniform content, social networking sites may generate political echo chambers, reinforcing ideological customs. Polarization in politics rises as a consequence, and individuals are far less inclined to communicate with individuals who believe in opposing views (Bail et al., 2018^b). Since leaders and groups in Pakistani politics participate in online conflict, the urgency of political disputes there has increased.

Misinformation Theories

In addition, false news on social media helps explain why political polarization exists. Lewandowsky et al. (2017^a) claim that immediately sharing false news can heighten public misunderstanding and cause disagreements within a largely ignorant population. Politically biased or incorrect information being shared without control in Pakistan could tilt elections, affect people in politics and endanger democracy. They give a good basis for examining the connection between political polarization, the spread of fake news and social media in Pakistan.

Literature Review

During recent years, researchers have studied how social media works in political communication, mainly looking at the effects on divisiveness, wrong information and people's participation in society. During elections in Pakistan, political activity mostly takes place on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. Even so, this use of social media leads to the spread of misinformation, which promotes disagreement and increases the risk of politically motivated attacks. In Pakistan, this study examines research that discusses the link between political polarization, fake news and social media. According to Diaz Ruiz & Nilsson (2023), polarization in politics has risen because social media has formed isolated groups of people who agree on most topics. A study found that people who use social media often tend to have stronger, unchangeable political views since the content they see regularly backs their beliefs (Bail et al., 2018^c).

Pakistan experiences this phenomenon more often because people's regional and ethnic backgrounds often influence how they vote. Polarizing reports and strong rivalries increased a lot during the 2018 election in Pakistan, mainly among people linked to the ruling and opposition parties, thanks to social media. This split made parties foes on the political scene and also made people on each side mistrust and hate those in the other group. False information on social media has now become a challenge in Pakistan, too. Studies found that misinformation often has damaging effects and can change how people view different topics (Lewandowsky et al., 2017^b). Various political groups in Pakistan have intentionally made false news to change public opinion and judge competitors harshly. Political candidates experienced massive misinformation in the weeks leading up to the 2018 general elections. Officials charged that major parties as well as new ones had been involved in spreading untrue claims. Bennett & Livingston (2020) think that seeing conflicting messages and disinformation is now common, leaving voters nearly incapable of thinking logically about their choices.

Studies also focus on how social media helps people take part in politics. Young voters have often responded well to political discussions on social media. For example, a political party held rallies and managed a social media drive to call attention to human rights abuses suffered by locals in Pakistan's tribal areas. With social media, activists were for the first time able to break through the government's control of the stories of the oppressed. As the movement took on more challenges, false stories that hurt the party's leaders began to reach more people. Based on the literature, there are both upsides and downsides of social media in Pakistan's political life. Politics both benefits and suffers from having social media involved. People may use it to engage in politics, but it can

also cause extra division and help distribute false news. Most scholars think these matters are not receiving enough attention, and all agree that social media has a strong influence on politics these days.

Case Study: The Role of Social Media and Disinformation in Fractured Politics and Polarization During the 2023-2024 Economic Crisis in Pakistan

A long-lasting political and economic crisis was placed in Pakistan in 2023 and 2024. Pakistan experienced a crisis from debt, serious unemployment and big inflation, all made worse by conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). While everyone vented their anger on social media, the leaders were busy handling political matters, making existing political differences even bigger. The case study considers how the sharing of misinformation on social media impacted Pakistani public opinion during periods of economic trouble and increased social and political separation.

Social Media as a Tool for Political Communication During Times of Economic Distress

Because of financial instability in 2023, people were able to let their complaints be known on social media. People shared their disapproval of the IMF's requirements, perceived ineptitude in government and expenses every month on sites like Facebook, Twitter and TikTok. Social media made it possible for people to bypass traditional media, which is thought to be for a few rather than everyone. At that time, a lot of anti-government and anti-opposition media posts were shared, causing people to feel there was no hope for politics in the country. Talking about economics on different platforms showed that people are more annoyed. A lot of posts showed public officials as incapable of fixing the economic crisis they faced. Hemisphere leaders turned to social media to encourage people to back the government's decisions. Both sides used social media to drive their followers further apart, making the divide greater. Because many fake news stories were not stopped, the political situation grew more unstable and divided the public even wider.

The Impact of Misinformation on Society's Political Polarization

The biggest concern in Pakistan in recent years has been the economy, and fake news about the issue is deepening divisions. At a surprising speed, fake news about inflation, the economy and impeaching some members of government became popular. According to social media posts, many blamed the government for either giving different IMF promises to political supporters or creating misleading economic data. Anyone looking for reasons to talk negatively about the government was ready to pass on these ridiculous claims as real. Spreading false information influences political problems in the same way it does economic ones. Some opposing leaders in government shared false claims using social media that the country's economy was being handled poorly. The reason for those words was to shift the way people viewed things and gain influence. Because of the way social media highlights news that aligns with a user's preferences, research shows that the rise in fake news is helping to divide society politically (Bail et al., 2018^d). Because of these disinformation activities, people in Pakistan became even more divided politically, with nearly half blaming the government for a poor economy and the other half blaming the opposition. Conflicting views among politicians made it very hard to decide what to do about the country's economic matters.

Impact on Public Opinion and Political Movement

Social media has greatly supported actions taken during the economic crisis. People used social media regularly to arrange the inflation-driven protests happening throughout the country. Thanks to Facebook events and WhatsApp groups, protesters arranged the details of the strikes and demos, bringing in a large group of people to show their displeasure in person. The overly political situation became even worse when misinformation and fake news spread. Twitter and Facebook have played a part in increasing the distance between political groups in Pakistan. Voters usually stayed among themselves, choosing to talk with others from their side of the political spectrum, not the other. Political loyalties were strengthened by claims about the economic crisis, including those of government corruption and conspiracies accused by the opposition. As a result, political leaders struggled to talk productively or reach agreements. Social media and misinformation have had a big impact on the political and economic problems facing Pakistan today. As the country's economic policies upset people more, social media made it much simpler for them to express their concerns. Dividing society further happened because misinformation from both political parties and

unaffiliated people spread. The main place people get political information during the pandemic shows that those in democratic countries are finding it tough to safeguard that this technology is being put to good use. Pakistan should address political disinformation and division to improve its political stability, as the economy faces more difficulties.

Discussion

Questions about how social media affects political division are influenced by Pakistan's perspective, including its challenges in social media, politics and economy. Both this year and the following one have seen people in Pakistan angry about the country's high unemployment rate, increasing inflation and tough International Monetary Fund policies. Today, many political activists use social media to communicate, plan and demonstrate, particularly sharing their opinions online. Yet, social media has given more people a chance to participate in politics, though it has also caused more division and fake news, which has made Pakistan's political divide worse. A key learning from the case study is that social media helps spread false information and also encourages people to unite. Though Facebook and Twitter help people take part in politics, they also often share partisan information. Consider how Pakistan's current economic crisis came about. Due to the strong political nature of the issue, both sides use social media to push their views. The account concentrates heavily on the individuals who back the different parties.

According to opposition politicians, the government has failed to support the economy and lets foreigners dictate its decisions, but government supporters say the opposition caused the economic problems. Because of this politically divided conversation, people are only watching what agrees with what they believe. Trusting one's colleagues more really makes it harder to judge counterarguments. It's also important to remember that misinformation makes political disagreements even larger. Many voters are already struggling to tell the truth from falsehoods, given how much false information spreads on social media during elections. Due to stories about widespread corruption, manipulating numbers and the stories about the IMF, faith in Pakistan's political systems decreased as the economic crisis hit. Misinformation is widespread now, so people find it very hard to form informed opinions because they face stories from both opposing groups and the government. Many people in the electorate can't agree, and false stories go viral on the internet as these platforms use algorithms for sensational content.

Having looked at how interactions among these groups occur, it cannot be denied that social media makes participation in politics easier, even as it adds obstacles to healthy involvement. It is getting harder to trust anything on the internet, thanks to the high levels of misinformation. Social media platforms being divided in Pakistan increases the risks to the health of democracy there because political division is already a major issue. Because of the current political and economic situation in Pakistan, it is clear that media education is needed by more people and that social networking sites need tighter regulation. Even though social networking sites have certainly transformed political discussions, their major effect of creating polarity and distributing untrue information is very harmful. In this case, if we want democracy to last and people to be better informed, lawmakers must address fake news and division in politics on social networks.

Conclusion

Political communication has been influenced in unique and challenging ways due to social media during Pakistan's economic crises. Although social networking sites are now used for political purposes, digital platforms are known to share a lot of false information. Many people found it more difficult to have sensible discussions about politics after fake news spread so widely during the crisis. Furthermore, for people to use social media as a tool for democratic participation rather than to deepen already-existing political divisions, basic media education must be improved. To preserve Pakistan's democracy and advance its political development, these problems must be resolved right away. The unrestrained social aspect of political partisanship will further weaken the nation's democracy if it is not controlled.

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