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Ali Khan [*]   Imran Rafique [†]   Ameena Nasim [‡]

Social Media and Political Polarization in Pakistan

Abstract: *This research paper explores the relationship between social media usage and political polarization in Pakistan. The rapid expansion of social media platforms in recent years has revolutionized the way individuals engage with political content and ideologies. Pakistan, as a diverse and politically vibrant country, offers a compelling case study to investigate the impact of social media on political polarization(Aday et al., 2013). The study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of social media data with qualitative interviews and surveys. Firstly, an analysis of social media posts, tweets, and discussions was conducted to identify prevalent political narratives and patterns of polarization. Secondly, interviews and surveys were carried out to gain insights into users' experiences, attitudes, and behaviours concerning political discourse on social media. Furthermore, it explores the impact of echo chambers on fostering extreme viewpoints and the potential for misinformation to spread rapidly in these digital spaces*

Corresponding Author: Ali Khan (PhD Scholar, Department of Political Science, Qurtuba University, Peshawar, KP, Pakistan. Email: Alikhanmrd01@gmail.com)

Introduction

This is a true story anymore that social media impacts our thoughts and narratives about any current issue. In fact, now, several observers are worried about the many ideological implications stated on social media platforms having an increasingly harmful impact (Baum, 2011). Amongst various news platforms, social media on the internet gains much wider attention from readers which results in considerable participation leading to polarization in narratives and views creating a diverse web of shared beliefs and thoughts. The major reason for such polarization in ideologies is a fragmentation of ideologies at a number of societal levels which results in the creation of an echo chamber for a number of beliefs and theories potentially creating polarization in the public narrative (Kim & Hong, 2015). Another argument for such polarization of ideological fragmentation is that social media provides a platform for the

[*] Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Political Science, Qurtuba University, Peshawar, KP, Pakistan.
[†] Ph.D. Scholar, Center for South Asian Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.
[‡] Visiting Lecturer, Punjab University, Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan.

public to hear a number of opinions and a spectrum of different views that could not have been attainable without the use of the internet. This argument allows all the citizens to have an interaction based on the cross-sectional view which can also result in a decrease in the number of polar views. In this study, a number of factors are undertaken which contribute to the polarization created through social media. One of the studies which undertook the House of Representatives of the US Congress observed the ideological beliefs of the politicians and their interaction with their followers on social media(Aday et al., 2013). Now, from the perspective of the government, the creation of polarization due to social media is an evil activity as it is a wicked issue for the government as there are no specific or lawful solutions for this issue.

Social Media and its Role in Political Polarization

It has been noted that the political ideologies of citizens are fashioned by two contributing factors which one is the availability of a wealth of information on social media which is unreliable and fragmented and a small number of platforms which tend to provide limited but reliable information(Al Omoush et al., 2012). This lands the citizens in creating a polarized ideology which affects their political engagement and opinions regarding the decisions of government. Numerous studies on e-government have recognized that informed citizens lead their participation in public policy which proves to be beneficial for their sake, especially in the time of tech advancement (Bonsón, 2015). A proper system of check and balance in government can filter out any extremist ideologies that tend to harm the security of the nation or harms public policy however, governments are expected to create safe space which can provide a perfect balance for all the voices and participation of all kind of ideologies at the same time acting as a cover or shield from the harmful political ideologies(Bakshy et al., 2015). Any social media forum which is severely ungoverned can land the citizens in the space of extremist ideologies of political polarization. It has been

seen that those politicians or political activists that hold on to extreme ideologies and narratives tend to establish more audience on their social media platforms. This clears that communication on social media platforms two ways which create a cloud of homogenous mindset. If one scrutinizes any social media platforms of a particular country, he can be well informed about the particular mindset of the citizens of that state(Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007). It is also evidently clear that any extremist idea of a particular politician tends to make more popularize comparatively to his peaceful communication which as mentioned before gives a chance of the creation of an echo chamber. These activities prove to be affecting the policy-making process heavily as extremist behaviours are louder than peaceful participatory voices. This outweighs the sane voices in the crowd which can result to be dreadful for the public policy. In this study, a number of past research by scholars will be discussed which potentially discusses the same issue regarding it. In this research, an extension is employed to look at the relation of the use of social media platforms provided by information technology in the creation of polarization for public policy.

Commercialization of Social Media Leading to Growth of Political Polarization

Moreover, the rationale media organizations have provided more biased organizations to gain the market and political share based on the theory of selective exposure (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2006). The alignment inspired by social media has both ideological and commercial elements inculcated in it. The commercialism in the content on social media is generated with the profits in strategy with tailor-made content to target the audience for a political party with the purpose of mobilizing the citizens (Peake, 2007). This trend of commercializing the content generated on social media has become a norm in politics and Pakistan is also catching on the same tools, especially on Facebook. The reason it is active more on Facebook is that the polarization in the comment section easily

shows the polarization of the users which is used to analyze the behaviour to generate more relatable content to cater for it. As mentioned before, the use of mass media had been gaining excessive attention across the world. Newer technology gets introduced in the market and in that way, a new method of communication is used around the world. Social media has made it easy for powerful individuals to receive immediate feedback. According to many empirical studies, social media does influence the citizens of a state, especially the youth. As claimed by Kugelman (2012), social media in Pakistan is utilized in five ways which are as follows:

1. To break important news this helps in seeking immediate and definite attention.
2. Preparation of civil masses for different social and political causes.
3. To post disagreement with the happenings in society and politics.
4. Advancing humanitarian causes and problems in Pakistan.
5. To connect government officials and citizens for quick responses and connection.

Online networking in Pakistan is used to mingle consequentially with its users in the state. An overview of the developing importance of social media in the global dissent phenomena that began to emerge in 2009 and onwards is given in Rita Safranek's (2012) essay. Social media has long been used to mobilize the protests that people hold on a variety of significant and popular issues, such as the need for social advancement, governmental corruption, and the conviction of austerity measures implemented by various governments that increased the cost of providing social services(Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007).

It is now a way for individuals to communicate politically and socially with one another in order to win over new supporters and influence opinion-makers in real-time. This knowledge is then used to strategize in policy-making and election campaigns to sway the mood of people toward politics accordingly. According to Chadwick (2009),

the Internet's influence stems from its capacity to transmit information through a free-standing communication channel. With this, citizens can independently participate in more conversations about social injustice that has an impact on their daily lives from the state's regulatory authority and other sizable media organizations.

The breadth of internet accessibility in remote Third World country regions, including Pakistan, is noticeably expanding. There will be a significant improvement in the public once the trial stage is over. In Pakistan's tolerant and understanding society, it will enhance the democratic process. In 2007, the society of political resistance paved the path for Pakistani society's advancement, growth, and political stability(Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007).

Online activist organizations have also emerged in another interpretation as a crucial creative arena in Pakistani politics and culture, where various groups and people have made use of the latest technologies to present political potential. (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). Therefore, political activists should be aware of the importance of new public spheres and should mediate accordingly, while critical cultural philosophers are concerned with educating students about the cultural or subcultural frameworks that ultimately add up to the skills that will enable them to participate in the ongoing conflict that is necessary for politics.

The social media environment has influenced government policies about linked topics and media, and as a result, it has had an impact on society. Social media in Pakistan has facilitated a wide range of social and economic changes, such as the transition from advanced to post-advanced societies and the acceleration of globalization and democracy. The industrial era in Western culture gave rise to a diversified postindustrial information era. Pakistan's Election Commission has also regularly confirmed its list of voters. The arrangements for gaining information are more flexible. Politics-related comments and responses constantly appear in social settings(Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007). Pakistan is a country with

both horizontal and vertical cultural cleavages. Social media has served as a platform for interactions between people with diverse backgrounds and opposing ideas, but these exchanges have grown acrimonious as the dominant side criticizes the minority side. Users of social media have begun to promote social and political movements for a variety of reasons since social media has contributed to an increase in communication between politicians and their constituents. Together, users are using social media to launch movements, bring people together to expand the movement and increase its influence. The Restoration of the Judiciary in Pakistan in 2009 is a clear illustration of this activation. Social media has supported and helped the democratic and accountability processes(Barberá et al., 2015).

The channels of mainstream media are also involved in political polarization on social media. For instance, the two famous channels of Pakistan, Geo News and ARY Digital have a starkly politically polarized generation of content as well. The content generated during the election of 2018 by the social media accounts of the mentioned channels was starkly different and each account was in a state of digital war to counter each other to mobilize the masses. Both parties were supporting different parties. The use of social media increased especially during the election time and in fact, the masses appealed to social media to gain quick and reliable updates from the accounts of both channels.

The influence of social media in the 2018 election in Pakistan was greater than in the 2013 election. The three mainstream political parties of Pakistan used social media for engineering their election campaigns in 2018. The language used in the election campaigns on social media was also pervasively strong. MIL and hate speech were used as well in the interviews and political posts. The hate speech was promoted for electoral purposes. The election commission of Pakistan was called out on many occasions to create a Performa where politicians are called out for using the speech for electoral purposes.

Furthermore, in the recent elections in Pakistan of 2018, a report by Pakistan Telecommunication Authority published that 58 million users of the internet exist in Pakistan. The old traditions of pamphlets and door-to-door engagement between politicians and citizens have changed entirely and the engagement has turned the platform of the internet, especially Facebook. Even the conservative parties of Pakistan also opted for social media campaigns and took the help of spreading their political agendas through the Urdu language on these mediums.

Academic work to understand the political behaviour of the citizens in European countries has been studied. As those countries are economically stable and socially engaged already, the political behaviour of such countries is not new and the change in their behaviour is hard to implement (Aday et al., 2013). Such changes are hard it implement in developing democracies as these countries are not economically stable nor are socially engaged.

This is why, understanding the medium of social media and comprehending the mechanism of social media is a challenge for citizens of Pakistan. As the knowledge and awareness are less about the mechanism, this is why such countries easier to e fallen victim to political polarization through social media.

For instance, Facebook lets its user connect to any blogger and politician however, due to the mass crowd on Facebook, it is tough to engage with each user from these bloggers or politicians. However, the dynamics of Twitter are different. Twitter. Twitter lets its users engage one on one with powerful personalities (Rizoiu, et al., 2018) nevertheless, as mentioned before, the dynamics of hate speech and its normalization is present on both applications(Bakshy et al., 2015). Morozov (2001) asserts that social media users are aware but ignorant of its negative impacts as well because it plays a significant role in propagating hate speech oppression, and propaganda instead of promoting and growing democracy(Aday et al., 2013).

In Pakistan, social media is utilized to influence the preexisting political ideologies of the citizens and impact social and psychological aspects which will promote hate speech instead of political engagement that will resultantly create political polarization and marginalization in Pakistan's society. According to the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, 2011, the political extremism promoted through social media is giving a tough time to legislatures to keep the peace intact. In recent developments, internet space has been used against minority groups in developing democracies. Traditional media and social media vary in that the former has a check and balance system where hate speech and hateful content against any ethnic group are kept under control(Baldassarri & Bearman, 2007). However, on social media, the system of checks and balances is not assured. A fake account can be made to in sew hate speech which has a long-lasting impact on society.

In Pakistan, the citizens are unaware of their laws about hate speech and inciting violence against minorities. In fact, they are also unaware of the concept and limits of hate speech in cyberspace. A report by a non-government institution called BARGAD asserted that the pictorial presentation of political parties and party leaders such as pictures and videos incited more violence, hate, polarization, intolerance, and religious marginalization in the citizens of Pakistan. Twitter was used more for hate speech compared to Facebook despite the fact that Pakistani users on Twitter are 3.5 million whereas Facebook users are 32 million(Barberá, 2015).

Media literacy in Pakistan has not been an epicenter of research nor has it been evaluated for a long time. Media literacy is defined as an ability of an individual to analyze and evaluate media content in all its forms. It also includes the production and generation of content. it would not be wrong to conclude that media literacy in Pakistan is in its nascent stages. It should not be an element of surprise as the literacy rate of Pakistan is 58% according to the economic survey of Pakistan (2017-2018). The federal ministry of Education claimed that the literacy rate has dropped from 60% to 58%. In light of the above-mentioned statistics, it would not be difficult to assert that media literacy in Pakistan is low.

The election campaign of 2018 proved to be the strongest campaign which witnessed political polarization in Pakistan at its peak. According to an anchor of 92 News, a private television channel in Pakistan; social media has proved to be a double-edged sword as it was used with the idea of spreading democracy and political engagement however, it has now been used as a forum of hate speech and marginalization.

The use of strong language n social media is counterproductive in nature. It creates violence and polarization. Political parties use it to display their active behaviour however; it has proved to be lethal for Pakistan's society. Political parties are ignoring it for their political interests and gains(Bennett & Segerberg, 2013). The election campaigns have polluted the minds of young voters and their political behavior has likely been affected as well. The democratic nature of social media has turned into a battleground of anarchy. The battle to reach dominance and gain control has resulted in more acute marginalization than peaceful resolutions.

Social Media's Part in Pakistan's Gender-based Political Polarization

Likewise, politically active females are also facing hate comments and immoral perceptions from critics on social media(Barberá et al., 2015). Through the lens of feminists, if the comments underneath a post from a female politician are analyzed, it is extremely derogatory and objectifying. The younger female politicians are accused of immorality and senior female politicians are body shamed. They are analyzed critically for their dressing manners and the vocabulary used for female politically active females is extremely uncivilized on social media. This

has led to the creation of gender-based biases and disparity which affects voting behaviour as well.

Social media is a forum which brings social change as well as also adapts to the requirements of any social change in society as well (Mautner, 2005). Social media in Pakistan is used to voice one's opinions however; it is used with the power of command and authority while communicating those concerns and opinions. Twitter has especially escalated political polarization where one tweets from the comfort of his home in an authoritative tone where personal attacks on rivals are quite common (Zheng & Shahin, 2020).

Magsi, Agha and Magsi (2017) observed that cyberbullying in Pakistan is majorly targeted toward females especially those who have authority and power in male dominant areas (Boxell et al., 2017). Social media has inculcated these ideas that the focus on appearance and sexuality further paves the path towards trolling, bullying, stalking and harassment. Sen (2018), declared in a meeting of United Nations Women that the range of experiences in the political life of females have been the stories of abuse, and fear of violence that have impeded the participation of women in its full capacity.

The essence of democracy cannot be achieved anywhere without the safe and equal participation of women in state politics. Pakistan had been a country which elected a female prime minister and has been the only Muslim country to do so. However, with time, the perceptions of females in politics have not changed much. The question of how gender-based biases is affecting the political and social aspects of Pakistan has often been raised (Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016). The answer to this query is simple as gender-based biases on social media lead to an impartial role and participation in politics by females. It has affected the women-related laws in Pakistan greatly. Women in Pakistan fear their political participation due to the notion of shame attached to it.

Democracy cannot evolve in Pakistan in such circumstances. Female politicians are regularly shamed on social media which resultantly places the male in a dominant position. Such biases create not only ideologically based polarization in Pakistan, but they in fact also created gender-based political polarization in Pakistan as well. The number of female politicians in Pakistan is less and the number of female voters in Pakistan is great. This concludes that female-based laws are required and society requires a social change where females are accepted as politicians without any gender-based biases.

The major aspect which most internet users throw on female politicians is the religious angle. Women politicians are declared non-Muslim or immoral by extremists whereas other users abuse them over their body type and fashion sense. This is done to arouse a religious sentiment and to remove female politicians from politics. It declares their dressing un-Islamic and the personal habits of female politicians are scrutinized under the Islamic lens(Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2011). The religious attachment of a female politician matters more than her political opinion, and political actions.

Female politicians are also labelled as foreign and destabilizing agents by most Twitter users. Internet users not only utilize politically polarized comments in fact, they also use misogynist and degrading comments when it comes to female internet users and politicians. In return, female politicians also resort to uncivilized language to counter personal attacks.

If a female politician is found a supporter of an unpopular political ideology, her acts are regarded as promiscuous and biased. They are accused of being less smart and their behaviour is considered s reason for the downfall of the state(Correa et al., 2010). The dress of female politicians is also considered a reason for natural disasters in Pakistan. Pakistani society is heavily dominated by males and a powerful female is seen as a threat to male authority and is degraded both on

social media and among male politicians so that females stay demotivated toward joining politics.

This mindset is not unusual in a conservative Asian country. The politically active women are considered indecent and have been even termed 'the drinking aunties". According to Saner (2016), Bowles (2016) and Carter and Sneesby (2017), females are trolled and religion itself is exploited in the case of women politicians. Participation is considered against the culture of Pakistan as well(Crossman, 2017). There are citizens in Pakistan that consider that the participation of women in Pakistan is harmless and religion should not be exploited for this reason. However, the number of masses of such citizens is less.

This division is getting increased as the middle class is growing out of their comfort zones and the youth is taking charge of political decisions as well. The youth of Pakistan do consider that females should participate in politics. However, the polarization on this issue is increasing with time on social media. The number of users of social media is increasing with time as well in Pakistan and it will take time for the youth of Pakistan to take over and change their mindset regarding it. This is why, the polarization and divide over the concern of female participation in Pakistan is still a considerable issue.

The female politicians in Pakistan are labelled as westernized liberals on social media especially on Twitter which are threatening the core concepts and orders of Islam. This behaviour is only intact toward female politicians(Hart & Nisbet, 2012). If a male politician wears a Western outfit, he is not bashed neither he is labelled as liberal or a threat to Islam. This way, the comments are passed and negativity is inculcated in young minds toward the participation of females politically in Pakistan.

Even a posture of a female politician in Pakistan is mocked on national television channels. Some of the terms used for female politicians on social media are "angry bird, trolley, and other lists of names". This revealed that Pakistan is a male dominant society due to which it has led the males to discuss the female politicians in a derogatory manner on social media. Male dominancy is the reason why females are discouraged from politically participating (Lee, Shin & Hong, 2018). The sexualization of female politicians is a norm around the world, however, in Pakistan, due to male dominancy; the culture of sexualizing female politicians has become a mandatory aspect before analyzing their political opinions. Due to the less control of censorship on social media, the trolls on social media get away with it. As mentioned, this has created a huge space for marginalization in Pakistan merely on the basis of derogatory terms for females. Society is polluted not only in social aspects but legal aspects as well. Justice is denied and law processes are slowed down. Females are asked to compromise and male politicians do not consider female rights as human rights.

Scandalizing female politicians lead to the disempowerment of females both legally and socially. The polar opposite concept of politics in youth and senior citizens of Pakistan has played a major role in deciding the social conditioning of female politicians in Pakistani politics(LaRose et al., 2014). Albeit the fact that Pakistan was once ruled by a female politician, the female members present in her party had been ridiculed and shamed for unIslamic behaviour and westernization by extremist groups in Pakistan.

Role of Social Media in Creating Partisan Politics

This is widely relevant in the case of elections in Pakistan. The major social media platform, Facebook acknowledged the fact that social media does play a role in creating discourse before the major elections.

Figure 1

Relationship of Social Media with Political Polarization and its Impact on the Rights and Duties of Citizens of a State
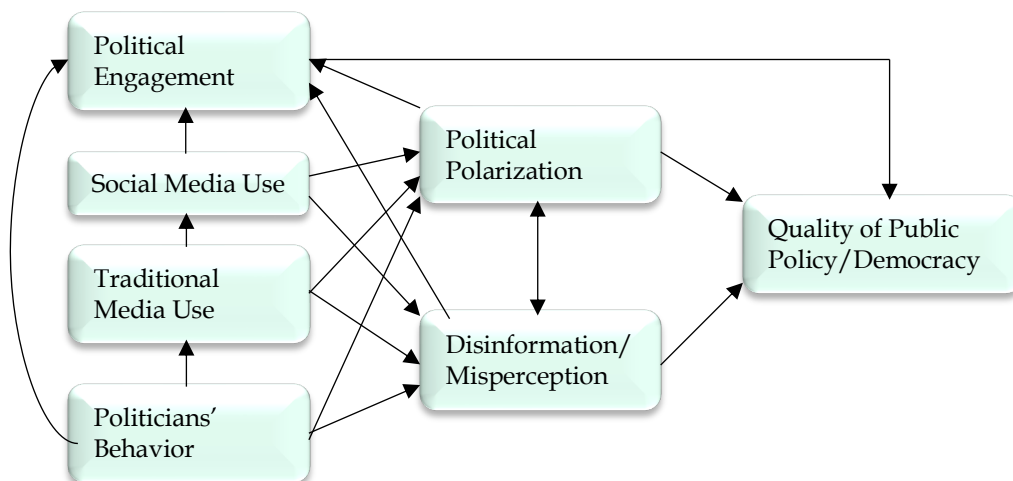
Fast forwarding to the year 2012, both the popular leaders of Pakistan Pervaiz Musharaf and Imran Khan established their presence on social media. It brought a sense of reassurance to Musharaf as he experienced a major following on his internet presence which made him confident in returning to Pakistan. However, the strategy of Imran Khan to use the Internet for challenging the political interests and political role of Pakistanis, especially the youth is unprecedented. He used the platform to invoke a sense of political realization instead of using it for clout like Pervaiz Musharaf (The Dawn, 2012).

Imran Khan used the platform and organized multiple protests and movements which questioned the opposition and put the governing leaders in hot waters. In the wake of this, another strong party in Pakistan, PML-N also established their presence on social media nevertheless; their presence could not have been proved as successful as Imran Khan's as it failed to organize major movements during its election campaigns.

With that being stated, there is an issue which persists in both developing and developed worlds. The issue is regarding the illiteracy rate of the countries when it comes to the concern of the Internet (Lassen & Brown, 2011). In the developing world, the concern of illiteracy is overall high due to which the use of the internet proves to be rather negative than positive. In an article posted in The Jakarta Post (2016), the illiteracy of developing countries is proving to be a hindrance in the growth of the state as the consumers of the internet are not able to distinguish between accurate and inaccurate content presented on the internet. The intentions behind following such news are not motivated in fact, lack of school literacy as well as internet literacy both plays a role in it.
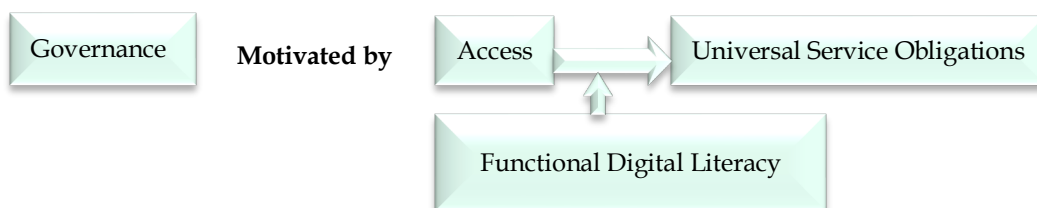
Digital Literacy

It is important to mention that social media literacy became such a crucial problem in the United States that a major newspaper started publishing "news literacy lessons" from December 2019 till date. It teaches its readers methods to observe and pick on fake news regarding major state events such as the pandemic of COVID-19 and recent US election campaigns. It also pays attention to the brimming conspiracy theories and caters for the need of students and youth to learn to counter new tactics of fake content creators. In the year 2019, Pakistan introduced a "Digital Pakistan Vision" in which e-governance was

heavily focused. Nevertheless, the policymakers are well aware of the fact that Pakistani citizens are not well equipped with digital knowledge to assess these new programs powered by social media and technology (Dawn, 2019). Many social media-related policies have been designed to reengage citizens in healthy debates. Regular removal of bots from the internet and digital yellow journalism has caught the attention of the government.

Figure 2

Relationship of Digital Literacy Imposed by Government with Responsible Behavior of Civilians


The focus of the government on the access of the citizens to gain digital experience has mostly been down the drain due to a lack of sense of ownership and accessibility due to the low digital literacy level in Pakistan. Constant critical messages and warnings on digital laws are sent via SMS all across Pakistan from the government to ease education and filter inaccurate content posted on the internet (Dawn, 2019).

Social media is the platform, as stated in the study's second chapter where the youth is mostly engaged and uses it to understand politics. On this platform, the chances of false information are higher than in the mainstream media. It lets them discuss the incidents in the country and organize protests and events which can trigger and gain the attention of the government. The political parties and government in return also give access to civilians to engage with them in a number of ways such as by posting photos, videos, and private messages(Lelkes & Westwood, 2017). It is albeit necessary to acknowledge the fact that it did bring political engagement in the youth. However, the political engagement turned fervently upside down when the political debates became a reason for societal partisan in terms of politics.

Figure 3

Impact of Social Media on the Quality of Democracy
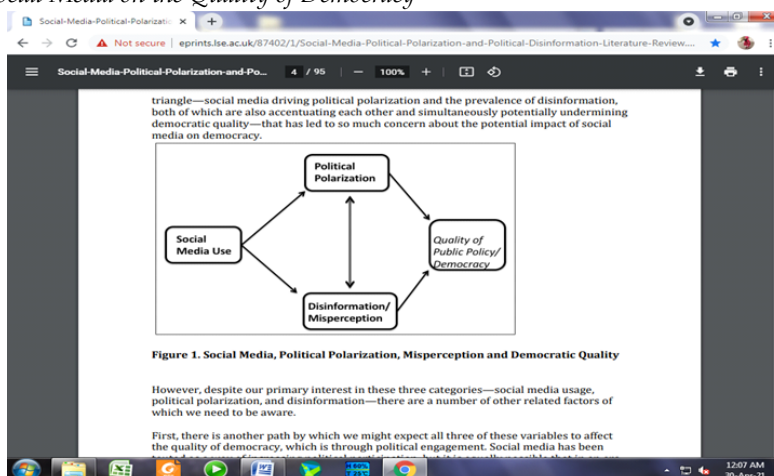
The easier the access to political information on the internet, the easier it is for society to be impacted and divided over political stances and issues resultantly hampering the growth of healthy political participation (Chadwick, Dennis, & Smith, 2015). Moreover, the concept of echo chambers created by social media has also increased with time. The concept of echo chambers is not starkly different from filter bubbles. In echo chambers, the content of one's own interest is repeatedly presented on social media feeds which exacerbates the partisans on the basis of politics in society. These echo chambers halt the process of accessing information which is contradictory to existing beliefs and interests. The dilemma created by echo chambers and filter bubbles impacts society in a number of ways however, the conclusive result of the combined effects is the poor quality of democracy.

Conclusion

In Pakistan there are dramatic increases in biased polarization since the mid-20th century, both at the mainstream and elite levels, producing fundamentally unexpected and important challenges for Pakistani democracy(Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). At the mass level, political parties on social media platforms are producing excessive hostility towards the adversary that promotes extreme tactics, impairs politeness, and discourages compromise. Intense, powerful partisanship is severely straining political institutions' standards. These changes appear to have made the political system more susceptible to partisan disinformation, which is frequently spread to partisan audiences by polarized parties. The use of social media on a large scale and media scepticism provide threats to accelerate these developments. However, future learning about which types of strategies, messages, or issue positions are most likely to create negative effects is required for attempts to reduce political polarization on social media and whether political information delivered in offline settings might be a more effective vehicle to improve political understanding despite the fact that substantial evidence has been produced by recent studies that intergroup discussions produce mutual understanding in other contexts.

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