

Analyzing Digital Propaganda in the Indian Sub-continent

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Abstract: *Regional This article examines the existing response strategies of Pakistan to Indian digital propaganda. By analyzing selected hashtags over the past five years, media reports, policy matters and academic scholarship, the researcher has identified a number of deficiencies in the prevalent approach and offers policy recommendations for better practices. Overall, this article recommends that Pakistan should articulate a response strategy that has clear objectives, is powered by algorithms, should include news actors and utilize the void created by Modi's ideological populism in India.*

Key Words: Indian Digital Propaganda, Pakistan Response, Algorithms, Visuals, Conflicts, Populism

A Brief Introduction

A voluminous scholarship is available on the importance of the role of media in conflicts and how media have been used for propaganda purposes in the past century (Fahmy, 2020; Allan and Zelizer, 2004; Hoskins, and O'Loughlin, 2015; Carruthers, 2011; Welch, 2013). In these and many other studies, researchers have systematically investigated media reporting of wars and found that media overwhelmingly supported the nationalistic agendas of their own countries. In the case of the India and Pakistan conflicts, studies have highlighted the jingoistic posturing of the media of the two sides (Iqbal and Hussain, 2017; Seth,

2016; Joshi, 2016). Compared to Pakistan, Indian media, however, is better able to communicate to national and international audiences due to its bigger size, accessibility and technological infrastructure (Hussain et al, 2021). Moreover, most of the globally influential media outlets have bureaus and dedicated correspondents in India. Through various strategies like information leaks and subsidies, representatives of international media in India are used to promote the country's stance on critical regional issues (Jorgic and Pal, 2019; Joshi, 2016).

The growth of social media presents an opportunity to Pakistan to bring some parity to its competition with India in information

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warfare. While a robust digital propaganda strategy can immensely help Pakistan to put India on a back foot; lacking such a strategy would further widen the existing disparity. India certainly has the advantage of being a favourite of the global tech giants. With about 600 million people having access to the internet and a huge English-speaking population (Statista, [2021](#)), India is in a good position to influence the policies of tech companies. Alongside celebrities and common people, Indian politicians and military strategists increasingly use social media platforms to engage with audiences. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has 60 million followers on Twitter Narendra Modi and the Defense Ministry has about 7 million followers with a substantial number of fake followers (Twitteraudit.com). Alarming for Pakistan, India is using its clout and expertise in the field. During the confrontation in 2019, India was able to influence Twitter to suspend more than 200 active accounts belonging to Pakistanis. With a cheap labour force well trained in information technology, it is in a good position to launch a complex online warfare campaign. The case in point is in the Indian Chronicle and dozens of other small-range operations against Pakistan. While the effects of the most sophisticated Indian Chronicles need an empirical investigation before reaching some clear conclusion, studies show such campaigns have some influence on the policymaking process. For example, researchers attribute the success of pro-Trump and pro-Brexit campaigns to the powers of social media (Bastos & Mercea, [2017](#); Freelon & Wells, [2020](#)).

This study has two main objectives. First, to analyze Pakistan's response strategies on Twitter as a result of Indian propaganda in the past five years. Second, to propose more constructive policy recommendations. This article is arranged in the following way. First, a critical analysis of the major studies on digital propaganda is presented. Then, based on the best practices

in the field, some of the major response campaigns launched by Pakistan are examined. Policy recommendations are presented at the end. These recommendations should be seen in light of the limitations of this study which are given in the conclusion part.

Digital Propaganda

Digital propaganda signifies all those manipulative uses of digital technology to achieve particular military and political goals by producing untruthful and half-truthful information to instil fear among the population of the enemy state and wean away more friends in the international arena (Jowett and O'Donnell, [2015](#)). Due to the low cost of content production and distribution at a global level, social media platforms have emerged as important battlefields where war narratives are produced and countered almost on a daily basis. In recent history, the Russian propaganda campaign during the Crimean Invasion in 2014 is considered to be a classic example of deflecting global public opinion from the events happening on the battlefield. Despite access to information and geographic proximity, most of the Europeans did not know what exactly was happening in Ukraine. The Russians were able to puzzle the global community on the happenings in the region and thus no substantive policy could be taken against them (Golovchenko et al., [2018](#)). A top military general of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Europe called the Russian operation "the most amazing information warfare blitzkrieg we have ever seen in the history of information warfare" (Frolova, [2015](#): p, 7).

Digital Propaganda Campaigns by Russia, the West and India

Many researchers have examined the strategies of online propaganda conducted by various countries. During the US elections in 2016, the Russian trolls

produced ultra-partisan content to forge division and disorder in the US (Freelon & Wells, 2020). The online sphere was vitiated by discord and hate that helped in paving the way for Donald Trump. Interestingly, Russian propaganda played on both levels of the political spectrum, though the tactical advantage was given to the conservatives (Freelon & Wells, 2020). In another study, Bastos and Mercea (2017) investigated the Brexit campaign on Twittersphere. As a hallmark of Russian propaganda, thousands of bot accounts were produced that spun millions of tweets of a highly divisive nature. The relative advantage of the Brexit campaign may have contributed to the marginal victory of the movement (Bastos and Mercea, 2017).

Compared to Russian propaganda, Western propaganda against Russia is still couched in the cold war era (Boyd-Barrett, 2015). It is direct and minces no words in depicting Russia as an authoritarian regime that possesses threats to world peace. The Western propaganda is aimed to isolate Russia and considers it a collective enemy of the West. According to propaganda scholar Boyd-Barrett (2015), the Western media negatively frame Russia even during normal times and it becomes difficult to separate journalism from propaganda. Other scholars argued that the Western media have been successful in producing a negative image of Russia in most Western countries. This was empirically demonstrated in a study by Golovchenko and colleagues (2018) where they found the common people in the West vociferously defended the Ukrainian cause by countering the Russian trolls. While researchers fear that common people are most vulnerable to the enemy's propaganda, Golovchenko et al, (2018) study found that common people not only resisted it but also took an active part to counter it.

India has aggressively resorted to digital campaigns in the past one and a half

decades to achieve its strategic goals. These goals vary from achieving particular policy goals like in the case of the Indian Chronicle to smear Pakistan to more general objectives like hosting Rohingya refugees to create a positive image for herself (Neyazi, 2019; Hussain et al, 2021).

The most organized propaganda campaign against Pakistan was orchestrated through the Indian Chronicle. The campaign applied a wide range of means including public diplomacy, findings of research think tanks, public opinion surveys and mobilization of traditional and social media. During the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, another wave of propaganda was started against Pakistan to defame Pakistan's military and its stance against the global war on terror. Researchers at IPRI analyzed online Indian propaganda from 2018 to 2021 and found the campaign mainly related to bringing disrepute to the military institutions, fueling civil unrest, weakening Pakistan's position on the Kashmir issue and sabotaging the CPEC project.

Some academic literature is available on the techniques of Indian propaganda. For example, during the confrontation with Pakistan in 2019, Neyazi (2019) found that a great deal of online public opinion manipulation was conducted by a handful of sources with the help of trolls and bots. More than one-third of tweets were generated by using heavy automation during the Uri attack. Similarly, on the alleged surgical strike, just 52 Twitter handles generated one-third of all tweets celebrating the strikes (Neyazi, 2019). In a related study, Hussain et al (2021) found that Indian trolls were very active in defaming Pakistan. Also, Indian showbiz personalities took part in the anti-Pakistan online campaigns to foment ultra-patriotic emotions in their own country and create a negative image of Pakistan (Jawad, 2022).

Examining Pakistan's Response to Indian Digital Propaganda

To counter Indian propaganda, ISPR is at the forefront. During the Pulwama attack and the alleged Indian surgical strikes in 2019, Pakistan's propaganda strategies got praise even from the Indian security personnel (Express Tribune, 2019; The Indian Express, 2020). They advised their own government to better strategize for countering the online onslaught.

In this article, the researcher has applied a pragmatic approach by combining the findings of media reports, research works and examining selected hashtags launched by Pakistan in the past five years to analyze Pakistan's response to the Indian propaganda. The advantage of a pragmatic approach is that it supports borrowing from a diverse range of sources for conducting a coherent academic inquiry.

An interesting aspect of this inquiry is that the researcher found a gradual and exponential growth in online campaigns by Pakistan in the recent past. As a response to India, ISPR launched an equal number of hashtags and trends that got momentum in a very short time. One added advantage was that the social media teams of the PTI government joined these online campaigns—thus helping it to gain more visibility both at national and international levels. The expat Pakistani community also joined these trends. The astute handling of these hashtags resulted in extensive coverage. Apart from discussions on social media, mainstream international media like BBC and Al Jazeera also noticed it and produced reports on it. Despite the sheer volume, this study found certain shortcomings in the existing response strategies. Below follows a detailed discussion of these.

1. In contrast with the scholarly debates on best practices in the field, the existing response strategies show that Pakistan conducts a straightforward

anti-Indian online campaign. The audiences can easily decipher the intentions of propagandists. The existing strategies will reinforce the pro-Pakistan biases but these will deter the neutral (largely the international community and critical citizens) or pro-Indian audiences. This leads to question the objectives of this whole campaign. If the objective was to supplement the perspectives of pro-Pakistan audiences, these are well served by the existing approach. However, propaganda is more than that. The objective should be to win over the support of the neutral population as well as dilute the pro-Indian perspectives. To do this, three different campaigns should have been designed. For the local population, straightforward patriot content should be produced, for the international community logical propaganda is more effective and for the Indian audience, a more confused and chaotic propaganda is required. The third type of propaganda required more sophistication and expertise. By creating an artificial balance between two competitive perspectives, seemingly a neutral opinion is created that eventually leads to more confusion. Much in line with the Russian propaganda, the final edge should be given to Pakistan but the campaign should be asking more questions and offering fewer answers. Scholarship suggests if people are alerted that their own country or interests are endangered, they will resist media content and hence a greater likelihood that the whole propaganda campaign will go futile.

2. Apart from the content, the Twitter handles that spearheaded these campaigns were easily decipherable. The profile information of these

accounts showed they were affiliated with the Pakistan military and carried pictures of the army chief, DG ISPR, flag of Pakistan. Similarly, those affiliated with PTI contained pictures of the head of the party or clearly mentioned support for him in the profile. An important aspect of a propaganda campaign is that the sources of information are kept confidential. If audiences know about them, they become careful in believing in the messages and are more likely to reject information that challenges their nationalistic perspectives. In such a scenario, the chances of confusing enemy audiences or getting their support are minimized or even backfire. In the case of the recent Russian incursion into Ukraine, the common people are less affected by Russia's disinformation campaign because they were told in advance about the propaganda. Moreover, the Ukrainian government is able to able to garner the support of its citizens in launching an effective anti-Russian online campaign.

3. Another important deficiency is the lack of visual resources. The Pakistani tweets contained very few pictures and videos. Though this researcher saw some improvement in the use of visuals in the campaigns in the past few years, overall the power of visuals is underutilized. Research shows visuals have changed popular opinions about wars like Vietnam, the Abu Ghraib scandal and the image of young Elan Kurdi on a beach. Even when visuals are used by the Pakistani campaigners, these are repeated hundreds of times as if only a few images are available against India. Such an approach is not feasible in the visuals-driven world. A separate visual narrative should be

created in which a complete story is told. The visual story should not be steered by the text rather it should tell a parallel story.

4. It is essential to understand the science behind the use of social media platforms. To make a real difference, significant online visibility is the most important aspect. For an aggressive online propaganda campaign, it is important to generate a lot of momentum with the help of likes, retweets and comments. While analyzing the existing strategies, this researcher found that most of the tweets generated very low activity and hence most likely went unnoticed. As discussed earlier, Indian propaganda relies more on bots that not only produce tweets but also gear up the likes and mentions. Pakistan should do the same. Through algorithms, the tweeted content should be resorted again for a more impactful campaign. In this way, computerized propaganda can be very helpful.
5. Probably, the most serious deficiency in the existing propaganda strategies is that Pakistan was running parallel hashtags to counter the Indian campaign instead of penetrating into the enemy's Twittersphere. A careful analysis by this researcher found that the Indian hashtags that produced massive tweets were not contaminated by the Pakistani Twitterati. While highlighting the best strategies for propaganda, researchers who have analyzed the Russia-West propaganda warfare have argued that the enemy information line should be disturbed. The most active handles should be targeted. One often used strategy in this regard is to engage them in meaningless and lengthy discussions. Such discussions are also useful in detecting the drivers of

enemy propaganda. In the case of troll activity, the propagandists can be disturbed when faced with extensive annoying arguments. On the other hand, in case of bot activity, the sources can be reported to regulatory organizations to stop them.

6. Another important deficiency in the existing strategies is the incomplete nature of the content. While this is ultimately linked with the objectives of particular campaigns and their execution, well-researched and thought-over content always has some effects on audiences. Tweets produced by Pakistan after the alleged surgical strikes were merely angry, revengeful and repetitive. While it makes sense keeping in view the particular context of the campaign to please the local audience, the content could have been diversified on the second and third days. As discussed earlier, keeping in view the target audience, propaganda content should contain emotional, logical and confusing traits. Since most of the conflicting situations involving the two countries revolve around Kashmir, the Pakistani campaign should have linked it to its ethical stance on the issue. The US resolution, Indian atrocities in the region and violations of human rights etc. should be highlighted. The padding technique in which the past is linked with the present is commonly used in conflict communication and can be usefully applied to produce quality propaganda.
7. Another important weakness in the response strategy is the lack of identification of the key international stakeholders and involving them online. In most of the hashtags produced by Pakistan in the past five years, the tweets tagged the DG ISPR, prime minister or ministers for local consumption. This is not a good strategy and even compromises the objectives of the campaign. As a better practice, they could have tagged the UN officials, diplomats in Islamabad and the Indian dissidents and human rights activists. To make the tweets relevant for them, some important documents could be attached or their government stance on human rights could be highlighted. At this point, it seems the campaigners have no objectives regarding getting the involvement of the international community.
8. Regarding the critical issue of Kashmir, the existing response strategy is flawed as it was couched in the past. A more realistic understanding of the conflict is required at least among the policymakers. It has become an unsellable conflict due to various reasons. Pakistan telling stories of Indian terrorism against Muslims is not appreciated internationally rather the Indian story is well received. There is a need for a fresh perspective on this strategy. One key issue with this strategy is that the Kashmir story is told as a grand narrative. This could be divided into pieces and told to separate audiences as per their interests. More on this comes in the policy recommendation section.
9. With the rise of Modi populism, hate crimes and renewed Islamophobia and the global public showing concerns over it, there is greater scope for Pakistan to use it to its advantage. The popularity of India is at stake at present. However, this opportunity is still not fully utilized. Many international organizations and critics of the Modi government in India have resorted to social media to highlight these issues. Campaigners from Pakistan can embark on new

initiatives to tell these stories to the world.

10. Last, but not the least, there is lesser participation of celebrities, politicians and common people in the counter-propaganda strategy of Pakistan. This appears to be mainly an ISPR-driven endeavour. These findings are supported by Khalil and Pratt (2020) who found that strategic campaigns in Pakistan disengaged common people. As compared to Pakistan, Indian information warfare campaigns include showbiz and sports celebrities to get wider support in the region (Jawad, 2022). While an academic investigation into the effectiveness of a celebrities-led campaign is required, based on the scholarship, it is safe to argue that such a campaign would have strong effects on local audiences (particularly when they resort to bland nationalism) and some effects on the cross border population due to the fandom phenomenon.

Policy Recommendations for a better Propaganda Strategy

1. First and foremost, the objectives of propaganda should be clearly stated. Different campaigns may have different objectives. It is imperative, however, to differentiate between the core propaganda against an enemy state and an angry response to please the local population. Best practices in the field show propaganda are mainly designed to instil insecurity, confusion and disorder in the population of an enemy country. This is usually achieved by producing a huge amount of information that contains selected facts, fabrications and outright lies. As discussed in the analysis part, the existing propaganda practices conducted by Pakistan are less strategic, merely revengeful, easily discernible and at best PR stunts to please the local population. These are likely to be readily accepted by the supporters and rejected by adversaries. While it is important to garner the support of the local population by keeping them in an angry mood and showing that they are winning, at the time, the same messages will not serve the objective when presented to foreign audiences or to the population of an enemy state. The one-size-fits-all approach is fundamentally flawed in this case. As discussed earlier, it is recommended to produce separate content for the local population, the enemy country and international audiences. Local audiences require an emotional boost, international audiences should be provided with logical and factual information and the population of the enemy country should be bamboozled with fabrications and half-truths.
2. Once the objectives of a propaganda campaign for social media are set, the next strategy is the execution. In this multi-pronged process, the key element is to come up with a huge bang not just creeping into the platform. The campaign should be supported by bots, trolls, common citizens, politicians and celebrities. While the bots would be helpful in increasing the likes and views of the posted content, trolls can help by asking wise questions and giving new directions to online debates. Similarly, important people like celebrities and politicians having wider followers would help increase the volume of the campaign.
3. During this time, the enemy country or group is likely to launch or have launched a campaign. Don't allow its free functioning in the online sphere. An experienced team of trolls should be ready to penetrate these groups

and engage them in lengthy and meaningless discussions. Likewise, the citizens can be motivated to counter them. Researchers have found the common Ukrainians were more successful in countering the Russian propaganda as compared to the US and UK who resorted to technical solutions. Additionally, in case of bot activity from the enemy side, the social media platforms be informed and make the correspondence public. Studies show bots' activities came to an abrupt ending when these were exposed and widely discussed in the social and mainstream media.

4. An important strategy for the wider circulation of online propaganda is the skilful use of pictures, videos and animated content. Visual narratives are very useful in producing the desired effects among the targeted audiences especially among those who are less acquainted with the context.
5. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi is regarded as a populist ideologue who is intolerant towards Muslims and involved in hate crimes. With the rising antipathy of Western elites towards populists, this is a godsend opportunity for Pakistan to share this aspect of India with the international community to disrupt its remarkably good image in the West. A number of prominent human rights organizations have criticized India for the rising power of Hindutva and its persecution of Muslims and other minorities. Academicians, advocacy groups, influential individuals in the West and progressive people in India are talking about the weakening of democratic values in the country. Pakistan should plan a comprehensive social media campaign to highlight these issues. An important aspect in this regard is

to engage the UN, embassy officials, rights groups and Indian and international intelligentsia.

6. The Kashmir issue should be linked with these negative developments to show how the populist ideology is affecting the lives of the Kashmiri population. Data, figures and statistics are required. These can be visually arranged. Bring new actors to the conflict. Voices of Kashmiri expats, international peacemakers and progressive groups should be included in the strategy. More importantly, new vistas for peace should be proposed. Based on these peace proposals, pure media events can be generated to keep the Kashmir issue in the limelight. Another important area is to engage academicians in the Western world. In this regard, studies can be funded and conferences conducted to encourage them to bring this issue into the academic field.
7. Last, but not the least, there is an urgent need to analyze the effectiveness of each propaganda campaign by neutral experts. The findings could be compared with the opponent's campaign to identify loopholes. The propaganda strategies are evolving and best practices are increasingly discussed by academia and military strategists. A scientific approach should be used for improvement. The media analysis done by ISPR in which complex issues are superficially categorized either into favourable or unfavourable points is not very helpful. The review process needs a complete overhaul.

Conclusion

In this article, the researcher has analyzed the existing practices of digital propaganda conducted by Pakistan. Based on this

analysis, policy recommendations are offered. While the prevalent practices have few merits, there is a need for improvement. At present, these seem to be PR activities directed at the local population to keep them entertained and feel safe. However, the existing strategies are not helping in winning the sympathies of the international community or producing division and discord among the population of the enemy country. In this article, the researcher advised avoiding the one-size-fit approach and recommends devising separate propaganda strategies for various audiences. For the international community, the propaganda technique of the Soviet model should be followed in which information is supported by proper context, facts and data. Similarly, the population of an adversary country should be targeted with selective facts and disinformation to produce division and confusion on policy issues. For the local population, on the other hand, more emotional and patriotic appeals are effective. The study also recommends that the propaganda strategy should be steered by algorithms. However, it should be properly monitored and trolls, politicians and celebrities should be there to give it a further boost. Likewise, visual narratives should be produced and new actors like the expat community, peace makers and dissenters living in the enemy country should be engaged.

The prevalent situation in India provides an amicable opportunity for Pakistan to utilize it to its advantage. Through a well-coordinated campaign, the common Indians can be sensitized about the damage being done by the Modi government. Similarly, the international

community should be alerted to the menace of ideological populism. Instead of the traditional approach, the story of Kashmir could be differently told by linking it with Modi's Hindutva populism and bringing new actors and audiences. One important strategy to keep it alive in the agenda is to produce more media events supported by an innovative approach like proposing a new peace formula for this conflict.

Since there is no perfect propaganda, it needs to be revised and improved after each attempt. This task should be performed by an independent team of experts.

While the researcher believes the findings and policy recommendations are supported by academic scholarship best practices in the field, however, there are certain limitations of this study that should be considered. First, due to the particular demand of this call for papers, this study is not an empirical investigation. The researcher did not scientifically analyze the whole content to make definitive arguments. Second, due to time and word limit constraints, some related but useful content could not be included in this article. Third, due to very scant academically accepted relevant literature on Pakistan, it is challenging to thoroughly analyze this issue. More quality work should be produced and reviewed to examine the prospects and challenges to Pakistan in the strategic communication domain. Despite these limitations, the researcher believes this write-up would help researchers and policymakers to see the problem from a different perspective and push the arguments further for more meaningful enquiries in the future.

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