



Digital Propaganda in South Asia: An Analytical Perspective



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Abstract: *This article examines the existing response strategies of Pakistan to Indian digital propaganda on the Kashmir Issue. By analyzing key propaganda strategies on X (formerly Twitter), state-sponsored X accounts, media reports, 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 and computational techniques, should include news actors, and utilize the void created by India's state-backed digital propaganda machinery.*

Key Words: Information Warfare, Digital Propaganda, India, Pakistan, Computational, Strategies, Conflicts, State-sponsored campaign, Algorithms

Introduction

History of Mediated Warfare

The origin of propaganda can be traced back to the early 17th century when the term first appeared in the context of the "Congregatio de propaganda fide," a mission organized by Pope Gregory XV to preach the Catholic faith (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2018). Initially, propaganda was associated with religious indoctrination. However, as power transferred from the Church to the State (Fellows, 1959) the notion of propaganda, particularly during the First World War era, emerged to encompass political indoctrination (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2018).

Historically, propaganda served as an instrument of control and conformity for those in power, exercising persuasion, and manipulation, and often concealing its true origin (Dilley,

Welna, & Foster, 2022). In order to avoid negative meanings, governments employed euphemisms like "national self-advertisement" or "publicity" to cover up their propaganda campaigns (Dilley et al, 2022). Despite efforts to disassociate ourselves, propaganda persisted in contemporary society and infiltrated our social and political institutions (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2018). Scholars from numerous disciplines, including history, journalism, political science, sociology, psychology, and interdisciplinary approaches, analyzed propaganda in diverse contexts, highlighting its role in framing historical events, journalistic practices, political ideologies, social movements, and dominant ideological connotations in mass media.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines propaganda: "the systematic communication of biased or misleading information to promote a

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political cause or viewpoint.” However, Propaganda remained a multifaceted phenomenon that resisted a precise definition. Propaganda, according to Anthony Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson (2001), represented a form of communication that applied symbols, psychology, and emotional appeals to shape public opinion and influence large groups of people. As stated by Coombs and Nimmo (1993), propaganda also served dual purposes: as a tool in the hands of the elite to manipulate public opinion and as a means of public discourse in politics, advertising, and marketing. It took various forms, including agitative propaganda, aiming to mobilize audiences to take action, and integrative propaganda, seeking to pacify and persuade audiences to accept a particular message or ideology (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2018).

The term propaganda was associated with negative connotations too, such as dishonesty and manipulation, and was considered synonymous with concepts like distortion and mind control. However, propaganda, defined as organized persuasion (DeVito, 1986; Jowett and O'Donnell, 2018) involves disseminating an ideology to an audience with a specific goal in mind, such as instilling patriotism, recruiting followers, or influencing public opinion. As the term propaganda carried negative meanings, euphemisms like "spin" and "news management" emerged to describe coordinated strategies for manipulating information and shaping public opinion (Kurtz, 1998; Jowett and O'Donnell, 2018). In a bid to achieve its objectives, propaganda, often utilizing prefabricated symbols and manipulation techniques, aimed to build attitudes and behaviors. Despite its negative connotations, propaganda was used to achieve various goals like promoting a corporate image or maligning a competitor.

In terms of defining propaganda, researchers held various perspectives, viewing propaganda through different lenses. A common relation among these perspectives was the association of propaganda with control since it was often used to influence or maintain a power dynamic that benefitted the propagandist. This deliberate attempt to influence public opinion or behavior was the key aspect of propaganda, regardless of

the specific definitions or approaches used to understand it.

Modern Mediated Warfare

The modern witnessed a great deal of transformation in the nature of warfare, driven by the rise of the internet and information technologies. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter), emerged as key players in this new landscape. These platforms became tools of fifth-generation warfare, enabling the spread of fake news, misleading reports, and falsified propaganda aimed at creating anarchy, chaos, and resentment (Guarino et al., 2020; Caldarelli et al., 2020).

Propaganda effectiveness often relied on centralized networks, revolving around individuals who served as ideological and informational authorities within their communities (Guarino et al., 2020). These "hubs" leveraged swarms of bots to disseminate their ideas to broader audiences. The strategy's functioning was amplified by X users' tendency to cluster into communities sharing similar ideas, enabling hubs to create viral propaganda trends that spread disinformation (Caldarelli et al., 2020).

During the 2013 Westgate Mall terror attack, Al-Shabaab, a terrorist organization, aimed to maintain public interest and claimed responsibility, leveraging continuous updates and leaving messages to keep the public focused on them (Mair, 2016). Sullivan's analysis of the tweets disclosed Al-Shabaab's performative behavior, aimed at persuading the local population to support their cause (Sullivan, 2014). Mair demonstrated the working of X (formerly Twitter) propaganda in controlling the narrative, despite its geographically targeted efforts (Mair, 2016). However, Al-Shabaab was not the only group to utilize X for propaganda purposes, stressing the platform's role in augmenting extremist messages.

Propaganda messages increased their influence beyond individuals aligned with ideological hubs. Even those outside these networks were affected, and they did not even necessarily subscribe to the underlying beliefs

supporting the narrative (Prier, [2017](#)). A remarkable example was the "astroturfing" method employed by Qanoon conspiracy theorists, who acted as hubs for the broader movement, and demonstrated how propaganda could reach and influence a wider audience (Dilley, Welna, & Foster, [2022](#)).

In the context of social media and geopolitical conflicts, several related concepts fostered propaganda, influence operations, perception management, and information warfare. Propaganda involves spreading biased or misleading information to support a political agenda. Influence operations aimed to persuade a target audience's emotions, motives, or behavior through the means of propaganda, as observed in the social media battle between India and Pakistan following the 2019 Pulwama attack (Kaur and Kaur, [2020](#)). Perception management includes shaping a target audience's perceptions and attitudes in order to achieve a desired effect, a crucial aspect of information warfare (Jowett and O'Donnell, [2018](#)). Information warfare encompassed miscellaneous tactics, including propaganda, influence operations, and perception management, with a view to gaining a competitive advantage over an adversary, as researched in the X (formerly Twitter) battles between India and Pakistan (Kaur, [2020](#)).

As influenced by shifting power dynamics and diverse academic frameworks, the theories of propaganda, perception management, influence operations, and information warfare retained a long and complex history. The emergence of social media significantly amplified state-sponsored propaganda, with a notable example being the approximated 150 million people shown Russian disinformation before the 2016 US presidential election (Lang, [2017](#)).

Mediated Warfare in South Asia

Since partition in 1947, the ingrained rivalry between India and Pakistan led to the current military and propaganda confrontations (Sumeera Imran and M. A. Zafar, 2021). With the advent of information and communication technologies, both nations created opportunities to engage in propaganda warfare, influencing

media to impair each other's international image. Evolving on the propaganda model established by Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky, scholars investigated the techniques employed by India in this context.

The role of social media in conflict and crisis situations has become increasingly significant, with platforms being utilized by warring parties to win support. In this regard, research on X (formerly Twitter) content related to the Jammu and Kashmir conflict shed light on different themes, including criticism and references to the conflict by intellectuals (Gabel et al, [2020](#)). However, awareness was lacking among the population regarding the motivations of the new generation of militancy in Kashmir.

Scholars examined the use of digital propaganda, political bots, and polarized politics in India, revealing the manipulation of online public opinion during crises and elections and emphasizing the need for computational techniques and critical analysis to identify and counter such propaganda efforts (Neyazi, [2019](#)). The concept of psychological warfare (Psych-War) in the context of the Indo-Pakistan conflict was explored, with scholars arguing that it became a non-violent weapon used by both sides to achieve military objectives (Iqbal and Hussain, [2018](#)).

The Indian media is generating false propaganda against Pakistan, portraying it as a failed state and a safe haven for terrorist organizations (Zafar, 2021). In response, Pakistan remained engaged in digital propaganda efforts to counter the Indian narrative, but these efforts had been largely reactive and lacked clear objectives (Rahman et al, [2023](#)). Researchers also stressed the need for Pakistan to develop a more proactive response strategy utilizing algorithms and engaging news actors.

The Indian-western nexus collaborated in conspiracies aimed at weakening Pakistan's global position. In this connection, India initiated false propaganda campaigns to foster negative perceptions against Pakistan's sponsoring militancy in the region. These maligning campaigns, coupled with diplomatic efforts, severely smeared Pakistan's global image, culminating in its placement on the FATF grey

list (Jaffery, [2020](#)). Propaganda warfare always paved the way for the dissemination of both accurate and inaccurate information, making it an operative tool for state adversaries. Indian lobbyists and media networks were constructive in spreading disinformation, disputing factual positions, and compromising media freedom (The Hindu, 2021).

India's propaganda warfare primarily targeted the Pakistan army and created a war hysteria atmosphere through media cells in TV programs, newspapers, and prominent journalists like Arnab Goswami (Chandrashekhar, [2019](#)). This propaganda, fostering a negative perception of Pakistan, reinforced sponsored information and promoted an anti-Pakistan narrative. India also declared Pakistan synonymous with insurgency, portraying it as a state supporting terrorism (Khan, [2016](#); Hussain et al, [2021](#)). Indian print media published articles promoting cross-border strikes, fueling the perception that war with Pakistan was inevitable (Raha, [2016](#)). India was accused of spreading negative propaganda, false information, and unwarranted criticism to construct illusions against Pakistan, thus weakening its international position (Maqbool, [2018](#)). Following the Pulwama attack, India promoted false news and disinformation and failed to provide evidence for its claims. Having been unsuccessful, India adopted a two-pronged strategy against Pakistan, diplomatically isolating it through a blame game centered on terrorism and strikingly interfering in its internal affairs.

Furthermore, Propaganda warfare required broader dynamics in order to understand it, including the use of conventional and unconventional tactics by state and non-state actors. The impact of these evolving warfare strategies on Pakistan's national security was a matter of great concern (Iqbal and Hussain, [2018](#); Hussain, [2021](#)). To counter-propaganda efforts, it was indispensable to bring media reforms, digital literacy, and strengthen journalistic ethics (Express Tribune, [2010](#)). On the other hand, the media's role in molding public opinion and heightening tensions could not have been ignored, with Indian media charged with supporting violent actions and disseminating xenophobic hate speech (Rasool, 2021).

Few representative case studies

It remained essential to comprehend the strategies and effects employed by these actors to counter propaganda effectively. Multiple research studies revealed the challenges posed by conflicts between nuclear-armed states like India and Pakistan, not only for regional stability but also for international peace. The growing reliance on information and communication technologies amplified the potential risks and vulnerabilities faced by both nations. Propaganda strategies and media narratives employed by India predominantly contributed to the escalation of tensions.

Research scholars identified an extensive role of media in wars and conflicts dating back to the Crimean War (Bratic, V. [2008](#)). Critical media researchers highlighted key factors in the war-media nexus, including media patriotism, self-censorship, government censorship, lobby influence, and commercial interests (Robinson, [2000](#)). In South Asia, researchers analyzed the worsening role of media in Indo-Pak wars (Seth, 2016; Thussu, [2003](#)). However, researchers limited these studies in two significant ways: they focused primarily on the 1999 war and neglected the other three wars between India and Pakistan, and most of the reports were discretely presented by NGOs and graduate students. In order to understand media's role in national conflicts and wars to facilitate comparisons and provide a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon, researchers did not adopt a holistic approach by analyzing the role of social media, particularly X (formerly Twitter) in the Kashmir conflict.

The Balakot strikes in 2019 exemplified India's disinformation campaign, with Indian media claiming the killing of 300 militants, which Reuters challenged (Scarr, [2019](#)). Indian media headlines emphasized the effectiveness of the airstrikes, diverting attention from any shortcomings in the Indian Air Force's performance. India also employed media maneuvers to build the narrative on Kashmir, executing the abrogation of Article 370 and 35A as a positive step (The Economic Times, [2019](#)). However, research revealed that the claims of

normalcy in Kashmir reinforced by Indian officials were part of pro-government propaganda and were not verified.

India effectively utilized information warfare to advance its narrative. A study investigated the state of information warfare on X between India and Pakistan following the Pulwama attack (Hussain, et al [2021](#); Hussain et al, [2022](#)). Both countries engaged in efforts to shape public opinion and gain support for their respective positions. Propaganda played a remarkable role in forming the narratives surrounding the Kashmir conflict. The conflict over Kashmir continued since 1947, with multiple wars and ongoing tensions.

Besides India's propaganda warfare strategy, a research study on Indo-Pak wars (1948, 1965, 1971, and 1999) examined the role of Pakistani print media in reporting on these conflicts (Shabir, et al. ([2023](#))). The study explored that Pakistani media applied a nationalistic and patriotic approach rather than professional and objective reporting. The authors gave an account of significant shifts in the media's discourse regarding the role of the UN and the invocation of religion since the 1965 war. The study presented a comprehensive analysis of the media's role in all four Indo-Pak wars and addressed a gap in the existing literature.

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The researcher investigated the propaganda strategies and discursive themes employed by leading state-backed X (formerly Twitter) accounts in India, in the context of their longstanding hostility and propaganda warfare. To achieve this, the researcher identified key propaganda strategies and discursive themes used by these accounts, analyzed how these strategies are produced, and evolve over time, and the role of influential actors in the campaign.

Despite the sheer volume of the campaign, this study found certain shortcomings in the existing response strategies. Below is a detailed discussion of these :

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.

2. Apart from the content, the X (former Twitter) handles that spearheaded these campaigns were easily decipherable. The profile information of these accounts showed they were affiliated with state officials, military spokespersons, diplomats, and media. 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.

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.

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 posts 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.

Probably, the most serious deficiency in the existing propaganda strategies is that Pakistan was relying predominantly on authority strategy to counter the Indian campaign instead of plain folks. A careful analysis by this researcher found that the Indian utilization of Propaganda techniques that produced massive tweets were not contaminated by the Pakistani techniques.

6 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.

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.

Another important weakness in the response strategy is the lack of identification of the key international stakeholders and involving them online.

Last, but not least, there is lesser participation of celebrities, politicians

, and common people in the counter-propaganda strategy of Pakistan. This appears to be mainly a state-driven endeavor. 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.

Recommendations

In this article, the researcher has analyzed the existing practices of digital propaganda conducted by India and 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 and computational techniques. 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, peacemakers, 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 see the problem from a different perspective and push the arguments further for more meaningful inquiries in the future.

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