



New Woes: Digitization and Polarization

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There was a time when mass media became the main source of information. It took the form of a bridge, between governments and people. Later on, it became increasingly independent from states themselves, and politics, although this is still arguable in many parts of the world. Gone is the time when politics was based solely on ideals, adopted from philosophy. In 2021, we are treading in dangerous waters; media logic is often pitched against political logic and ends up victorious. A lot of politics is centered on the media, and on what it says, how it shall react, both, traditional mass media as well as modern digital media.

Speaking, as a matter of fact, intolerance has seeped into every level of our society. On social media today, they have entered a realm that is setting an increasingly dangerous precedent: hate wins.



Unfortunately, the post-colonial hangover is something still very much real in Pakistan today. Not only were lines between ethnicities hardened, even after partition, but it was also made sure that the lines were drawn in a way suited to foreign intervention in a nascent nation which found itself in an extremely important geo-strategic location. Today, in the twenty-first century, despite it being written in stone that ethnonationalism has no future, and is not sustainable, it is still a very real thing in our part of the world. It is fueled and propagated by hostile powers for their vested interests.

The tragedy of identity politics, in both, South Asian and MENA countries is simple: you cannot explain an intangible threat to a largely illiterate, yet zealous population. The onslaught of fifth and sixth generation warfare can be as real as it is today, there may be mass investigations by bodies such as EU Disinfo, but the public at large will not comprehend it, will not actively take a stance against it, or be able to figure out how to put up a fight against it. On the other hand, if a war against an invader or an arch rival is announced tomorrow, nearly everyone would be willing to take up arms, even children

We are living in an era where post-modernism, to an extent, is still ruling. Post-modernism is an art movement that took birth almost a century ago. Artists believed in questioning the 'reality of reality. It allowed art and artists to break free from the shackles of life-like paintings with covert symbolism. Perception is the easiest thing to play in today's world. A single-sided hostile narrative, un-counteracted, has the power to drown the other party, in a quagmire of misinformation.



This makes the domain of propaganda an interesting one to explore. False narratives can have dire consequences. But narratives are supposed to be built in a way in which they can be absorbed. Pakistani social media has reduced it to gender cards, religion cards, minority cards and abuse. Propaganda is defined as information, especially of a biased or misleading nature. Used to promote a political cause or point of view. It is important to understand this concept for several reasons. Knowledge is power. This means information warfare can accomplish strategic, operational, and tactical objectives. Moreover, information warfare is capable of doing so without causing measurable and identifiable damage.

What does politicizing digital media bring about? The one-word answer to this question is polarization. Lately, this has indeed been an alarming trend, particularly on Pakistani social media. Hyper nationalists, leftists, far-right religious parties, communists, insurgents, various political parties, all have their social media teams, whose only purpose is to troll others and put forward propaganda.

We also live in a world where free media has become a myth of sorts. From comics for children, like Bamse, being accused of indoctrinating children with the views of the Swedish left, to Amaq Newsagency, everyone is pointing fingers.



Recently, Reuters dismissed the recent protests in Bangladesh as “Islamic”. We witnessed appalling coverage of protests worldwide, regardless of whether it was the Black Lives Matter movement, pro-Navalny protests or the Farmers Protest in Delhi. Responsible reporting seems to be dying a slow death. If everything on mainstream media is propaganda, where do we find the truth? We used to believe that social media gives us a more “authentic” view. Data-driven journalism is on the rise because even what seems authentic and real, is just pushed. It is no secret that politics is a dirty game. Nor is it contestable that most South Asian countries are democracies in name only: they are in fact plutocracies, where a handful of rich families are running the show behind the scenes, regardless of what is sold to the public. Living in a region as volatile as South Asia, the politicization of digital media is in all its possibility a ticking time bomb. We not only need to be informed and aware of the threat of propaganda warfare, but we also need to counter it. The answer to propaganda is not social media troll armies, it is the systematic removal of red tape, and taking people who are well-versed in these subjects on board with PTV and ISPR.

