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## **From News to Noise: Weaponization of Information, Social Media, and Security Dynamics in Pakistan**

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### **Abstract**

*This study investigates the process of change from traditional information dissemination to a new dynamic of information “noise” in Pakistan, where misinformation, disinformation and strategically designed narratives have become weaponised. An exploratory study of the nature of political communication and how it is changing with social media platforms in order to understand the effect of social media on security dynamics is conducted. The results point to information weaponization that is done via polarized framing, via emotional amplification, via coordinated digital campaigns, and via hybrid information warfare approaches that involve state and non-state actors. The study's overall findings are that Pakistan's digital information environment is now a battleground in which truth may become a secondary concern and narrative prevails.*

**Keywords:** News, Noise, Weaponization, Information, Social Media, Security Dynamics, Pakistan

### **1. Introduction**

The information landscape of Pakistan has dramatically changed from a relatively editor-controlled, structured and organized news system to a more decentralized, algorithmic and digital environment. In this changing environment, news, opinion, propaganda and entertainment have been more and more confused, leading to the development of what the experts now call an “information disorder” or “post-truth communication environment.” In this environment, the term “news” has been transformed and is constantly redefined, reframed and reshared – often times, speed, virality and emotional appeal take precedence over verifying truthfulness and accuracy, as done by professional journalists.

This change is important in Pakistan because of the unique and complicated political situation, presence of strong civil-military dynamics, active geopolitical positioning and the rapidly growing digital population. Social media platforms like X (previously known as Twitter),

Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok have a user base of millions, and they are the main space for political communication and public discussion, as well as the building of narratives. But this empowerment of information has also brought new threats and risks such as the dissemination of misinformation, disinformation campaigns, coordinated influence operations and emotionally charged propaganda.

This change in the epistemic order is encapsulated in the notion of “from news to noise.” “News” is structured, fact-checked and institutionally verified information that is meant to inform the public. “Noise”, on the other hand, means that there's so much noise on digital platforms, a lot of content, that it's just so disjointed, unverified and sometimes even contradictory that it's hard to know what's what anymore. Information is not just eaten up here: it is fought, actively created and paraded around for political, ideological, sometimes security goals.

Weaponization of information is not only a technological aspect of the process in Pakistan, but also a socio-political process of power relations. Social media is used to frame narratives, defame opponents, mobilize support, and sway public opinion on important domestic issues by political actors, partisan media outlets, digital influencers, and sometimes foreign information operations. These stories tend to get stronger when there is a high level of political uncertainty, a competitive electoral campaign or a security crisis, during which time people are likely to be more receptive to persuasive messaging.

Social media companies give more visibility to content that elicits engagement, typically meaning emotionally charged or sensational or polarizing content would receive more visibility than content that's balanced or factual. This establishes a cycle of outrage, fear and nationalism driving a dominant currency of attention. Consequently, strategic narratives – whether spontaneous or managed – can quickly turn into viral discourses which de facto replace institutional news coverage.

The security environment in Pakistan further accentuates the impact of this change in information. Events are often described in different ways that may be politically charged or simply present a different side of the story, especially when it comes to these issues—terrorism, tensions with the border states, civil-military relations, and political instability. In these situations, information is a means to influence – and perception management has a real impact on national unity, confidence in institutions and even policy legitimisation.

In this context, the current research aims to explore the transition of Pakistan's media landscape from news to noise, and how it affects the information landscape as a form of information disorder. It is particularly concerned with the role of social media in weaponizing information, and how it relates to other security issues. The study uses qualitative content analysis to find the thematic patterns in digital discourse and to gain insight into how these narratives are created, strengthened and challenged.

In conclusion, this research suggests that Pakistan's digital information environment is not just changing but also being reconfigured in a narrative warfare environment to be contested. Here, truth is not always a top priority, credibility becomes questionable and information itself becomes a weapon in the political fight for power and national security perception and virality is the objective.

## 2. Literature Review

### **The state of Information disorder in global times**

Cross-disciplinary research on social media, misinformation and information warfare resonates with the emergence of a worldwide shift from dense news markets toward decentralized information markets that are uncertain, fast and viral. Information disorder” (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) describes such phenomenon, which includes misinformation (information that is false without intent to cause harm), disinformation (deliberately putting out false information) and malinformation (genuine information that is used to cause harm). This disorder is exacerbated by algorithmic curation, ‘visibility’ through engagement, and decentralized content creation of social media platforms, especially in politically volatile contexts, as recent research highlights.

This change is particularly pronounced in Pakistan where digital literacy rate is low to moderate, and the polarization in the society has made people more inclined towards digitalization. It has been claimed that social media has taken the place of the gatekeepers and has become one of the primary means of news consumption with more exposure to unverifiable and emotional content.

### **To store and transmit misinformation and disinformation via social media.**

An extensive literature stream deems social media an important enabler of the dissemination of misinformation. Differential verification mechanisms and high user confidence in the authenticity of peer shared information make the transmission of misinformation quick in Pakistan through WhatsApp, Facebook, X (Twitter) and TikTok.

Empirical analysis in Pakistan has shown that fake news, especially in the political, health and religious sphere is mostly emotionally charged and contains conspiracy theories or imitates trusted sources. The stories are meant to be attention grabbers, not fact, and thus are very shareable.

Likewise, studies show that fear, anger and moral anger are strong, emotional predispositions that can substantially drive content sharing, thus strengthening cognitive predispositions like confirmation bias and selective exposure. This results in echo chambers in which users are continually exposed to reinforcing narratives, and do not have access to corrective information.

### **The algorithmic amplification and structural bias of AI technologies.**

An emerging literature attends to the ways algorithmic systems can be used to determine information exposure. Platforms use engagement metrics (likes, shares, watch time etc.) to prioritise content, and this encourages people to produce sensational and polarising content. In Pakistan, recent research indicates a high correlation between algorithmic exposure to news, and susceptibility towards misinformation among users. Filtration by algorithms is another factor in the “filter bubble” effect, which filters information to users based on their beliefs, which further polarizes users.

The algorithmic mediation not only creates an active and dynamic role for social media as a medium for political perception and public discourse but also turns social media into a medium by which political perception and public discourse are formed. Some scholars believe that these types of systems introduce structural weaknesses which could be used for orchestrated influence operations.

## **Political Communication and Computational Propaganda in Pakistan**

Misinformation in Pakistan is well discussed in the context of politics in the new literature on computational propaganda. The study shows that human actors, specifically organized networks, are combined with automated systems (bots) to spread political messages and influence trending topics as well as silence opposition voices.

Researches show that the digital political campaign in Pakistan is frequently based on the manipulation of hashtags, meme warfare and selective video clipping to build persuasive, yet, misleading narratives. These strategies are especially successful in times of elections and political crises when people's attention is split and is also emotionally charged.

Moreover, digital platforms are used more and more to create political identities and divide them into two moral categories – “patriotic vs anti-state” or “democratic vs authoritarian.” This exacerbates the strong political polarization and limits opportunities for deliberative discussion.

### **The use of social media as a security tool.**

An important dimension in the literature is linking information disorder with the dimension of national security. Misinformation can lead to a deterioration of the situation, to a public perception of security institutions that is misaligned with reality and to impact on policy debates, especially in conflict sensitive environments.

Social media channels are a war zone of competing narratives during cross-border and internal security crises, and information warfare is waged by both state and non-state actors, according to research. In such settings, false or hyperbole can serve to further heighten public fears and add to actual instability.

Recent regional studies also highlight the direct connection between digital misinformation and escalation of the security situation, given the occurrence of fake news reports, and the creation of AI-generated content along with visual manipulation during the period of tension between India and Pakistan.

### **Public Perception, Trust, Media Credibility**

A major theme of the literature is the loss of confidence in the traditional institutions of the media. The importance of social media is growing, as users look to it more and more for news, the power of mainstream journalism is being undermined. Research indicates that the more often the public hear conflicting stories, the less likely they are to believe anything in the media, both government and non-government.

This lack of trust is further complicated by perceptions of political bias, censorship and commercialization in the media in Pakistan. That means that users tend to turn to informal networks – that is, their friends, family, or influencers – to validate the information, thereby also exposing them to further risks of misinformation diffusion.

Research also reveals that digital literacy is an important factor to reduce susceptibility to misinformation, and existing educational interventions in Pakistan have demonstrated mixed results, depending on their design and contextual adaptations.

### **2.1. Research Gap**

Although a lot of research has been conducted on misinformation, disinformation and digital political communication, there are still some significant lacunae in the current literature, especially in the context of Pakistan. First, there is a dearth of qualitative, content analysis based studies that concentrate on Pakistan-centric narratives, particularly on the role of local

political, cultural and security-related contexts on the information flows. Existing studies are mostly quantitative or international in scope, and few do in-depth interpretive analysis of indigenous media discourse. Second, while the concept of information disorder has been widely discussed, the dimension of “noise” as a category of information beyond misinformation is underdeveloped. Much of the current literature deals with the specific phenomenon of false information, but not with the wider context of an array of disjointed, contradictory and overabundant content that makes meaningful communication difficult in digital environments. Third, significant lack of knowledge of connection between information disorder and development of public perceptions of security: less studies systematically focused on how digital information narratives impact on trust of state institutions and perceptions of national security. Fourth, comparative studies between social media are still scarce, in terms of the forms of narratives that are developed, structured, and circulated across different platforms, including WhatsApp, X (Twitter), and TikTok. Last, there is relatively little research on hybrid actors, a new type of political messaging, algorithmic amplification, and automated and/or coordinated digital strategies. All these gaps underscore the need for more research on the process of information becoming fragmented and chaotic in Pakistan's disorganized and news-driven narrative landscape, where meaning is created in a hurry, by virality and strategic manipulation, rather than verified reporting.

## **2.2 Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on an integrated theoretical approach of Agenda-Setting Theory, Framing Theory and Information Warfare/Narrative Warfare Theory to understand the process of how digital information in Pakistan gets transformed from structured news to fragmented “noise”. The Agenda-Setting Theory is used to understand the role played by social media platforms in prioritizing and making political and security issues visible with the aim of influencing what audiences deem important. Framing Theory complements this, as it explains the different ways in which the same events can be interpreted, dependent on how they are framed, by digital actors such as journalists, influencers and political pages, who tend to create polarized frames and emotionally charged narratives that tend to simplify complex realities into a binary opposition. This analysis is extended by Information Warfare and Narrative Warfare Theory, which emphasizes how information can be a weapon to influence, how groups of actors can be coordinated, how hybrid networks can be formed, and how the use of algorithms can be used to shape, amplify, or distort narratives for political or ideological ends. These theories can offer a holistic prism to comprehend the routing of attention, the creation of meaning and weaponisation of narratives in the digital media landscape of Pakistan, which ultimately leads towards the proliferation of information disorder and the supremacy of “noise” over verified information.

## **3. Research Methodology**

This study takes a qualitative approach and is based on content analysis as a means of understanding the process of information becoming “noise” in the digital media landscape of Pakistan. The methodological approach is interpretive, with the aim of uncovering patterns, meanings and narrative patterns that recur in the social media and on-line news texts.

### **Research Design**

The content analysis method used was qualitative content analysis to systematically analyse textual, visual and multimodal digital content that circulates on social media. This approach

enables to uncover the latent meaning and manifest meaning of the communication in political and security related communication.

### Data Sources

Data is secondary was taken from:

Social media websites (X/Twitter, Facebook, TikTok)

Internet news portals and electronic news headlines

Political and security-related posts that are likely to be shared by virals

Political and security events in Pakistan and their hashtag based discourse

### Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling technique was used to select content based on:

Political relevance (elections, government-opposition discourse)

Security relevance (incidents of terror, civil-military narratives)

Hashtag trending and engagement (how much people like or retweet, how many comments they get on their posts etc.)

Diversity of narrative (pro-state, anti-state, neutral, hybrid framing)

### Analytical Procedure

Thematic coding was used to analyse the data. The raw content was coded with first-order codes and then these codes were aggregated into higher order categories and summarized into a higher order theme. The following themes are the dominant forms of narrative structure in the digital information environment of Pakistan.

Code Category	Description (What is observed in content)	Narrative Pattern (How it is framed)	Platforms Dominance	Security / Political Implication
<b>Disinformation Content</b>	Fabricated or misleading news, edited videos, fake screenshots	Presented as breaking news or leaked "truth"	X, Facebook, WhatsApp	Undermines trust in institutions and creates confusion during crises
<b>Political Polarization Frames</b>	Content portraying political actors in extreme oppositional terms	Binary framing (patriotic vs traitor, democratic vs authoritarian)	X, YouTube, TikTok	Deepens political division and reduces space for dialogue
<b>Emotional Viral Narratives</b>	Highly emotional posts (anger, fear, nationalism, religious sentiment)	Sensationalized storytelling and outrage amplification	TikTok, Facebook	Triggers mass emotional reaction and reduces rational analysis
<b>Coordinated Amplification (Hybrid Actors)</b>	Repeated hashtags, synchronized	Manufactured consensus and artificial trending	X, Facebook	Distorts organic public opinion and manipulates

	posting, bot-like behavior			visibility of issues
<b>Security Event Framing</b>	Narratives related to terrorism, protests, military actions	Selective reporting and politicized interpretation of events	TV clips shared on social media, X	Influences perception of national security and institutional legitimacy
<b>Noise / Information Overload</b>	Excessive, contradictory, and repetitive content streams	Fragmented and competing narratives with no dominant truth	All platforms	Creates epistemic confusion and weakens ability to verify facts
<b>Hybrid Media Manipulation</b>	Mix of political messaging, influencers, and algorithm-driven content	Strategic blending of entertainment, opinion, and propaganda	TikTok, YouTube Shorts	Normalizes propaganda through entertainment formats
<b>Counter-Narratives / Fact Correction</b>	Content attempting to debunk misinformation	Reactive and often less viral corrective communication	News portals, fact-check pages	Limited impact due to lower engagement compared to false content

#### 4. Master Thematic Table Analysis

Thematic analysis in the master table revealed that the digital information environment in Pakistan has an increasing mix of disinformation and emotional storytelling, algorithmic amplification and hybridised use of narrative strategies. Social media is not a well-defined informational sphere, it is an arena filled with various power struggles, conflicting and overlapping narratives. A prominent aspect of this space is the inclusion of disinformation materials and information, from fabricated news reportage to manipulated visuals. This information is typically presented as breaking news or insider tips, adding to its credibility and driving the spread of such information on platforms like X, Facebook, and WhatsApp. It calls into question the credibility of official institutions and institutions in general, and it poses perennial confusion when politically sensitive or security related events occur.

One of the major patterns emerging from the analysis is political polarization framing, which involves the increasing binary dichotomy of political realities and the framing of politics as a dichotomy, for example between being 'patriotic' versus 'anti-state' or 'democratic' versus 'authoritarian'. This framing tactic is particularly effective in contexts with high emotional connotations, because it simplifies forms of political discussion which are nuanced and complex into ideological boxes. This intensifies public polarization, and makes it difficult to reach a consensus or rationally discuss issues. Emotionally charged stories can further reinforce this polarization by reinforcing narratives that are built on fear, anger, nationalism and religious feelings, with the aim of maximizing engagement. So platforms like TikTok and Facebook, especially, will boost such content, as they favor emotional, high-engagement material, and so too can sensationalized narratives spread quickly and widely.

It also points to the important role of coordinated amplification and hybrid actors in the formation of digital discourses. These actors can work either individually or in groups to create trending topics through synchronized posting and hashtag manipulation that may be politically motivated or involve a network of influencers and/or automated and/or semi-automated accounts. This helps to foster a belief that there is universal agreement, even where stories are carefully crafted and not “grassroots” driven. This undermines public opinion and disrupts the organic flow of information, particularly on social media such as X and Facebook, where trending algorithms have a significant impact on visibility.

A second aspect is the frame of the news event, in which security-related events can be selectively reported and politically interpreted, whether it's about acts of terror, protest or interactions between civil-military affairs. Most often, these stories are shared with the audience in a condensed manner, using video that has been cut from television or digitized content that is then repackaged to uphold a particular political agenda on social media. Such framing can have a direct impact on the perception of national security, affecting citizens' views on the credibility of institutions, the authority of the state, and the effectiveness of response to crisis situations. One of the most important points is that a new condition of the digital ecosystem is “noise” or an information overload. Noise is different from traditional misinformation in that it is the overabundance of contradictory, repetitive and disjointed content that overwhelms user feeds. In this landscape, even the most correct information has a tough time cutting through the clutter – and the information is often drowned out by the emotional and algorithmically-boosted content being thrown about. This leads to a situation of epistemic confusion, in which users struggle to tell the difference between news and manipulations.

The study also highlights how hybrid media manipulation, which is the incorporation of political communication into entertainment-based media, is a new method of communication which is becoming more and more prevalent, especially with the rise of TikTok and YouTube Shorts. Propaganda is also mixed into entertainment, which makes it easier to get users to accept persuasive messages because they are viewing the message not as information to be evaluated, but as something to be enjoyed. As a result the political is normalised in the ordinary use of digital media and is therefore more subtle but also more pervasive.

Lastly, there are counter-narratives and fact-checking initiatives, mirroring the fact that work is still underway to re-establish information integrity. But, according to analysis, the latter is generally not as visible or viral as the former and thus does not correct misinformation as effectively. It shows an imbalance in the way this engagement is happening, a structural imbalance in the digital ecosystem, where more salacious content is always louder than corrective information.

In sum, the results show that the digital media ecology in Pakistan is not just a landscape of misinformation, but a complex and evolving field of contestation of narratives, emotional framing, and algorithmic manipulation—one in which the shift from news to noise has a profound impact on political views and security discourses.

## **5. Findings**

The analysis shows that Pakistan's digital information landscape has become more and more unstructured and chaotic with increasing “noise”, information is being constantly challenged, reframed and promoted through social media platforms. One of the key findings is that

disinformation and misinformation are no longer one-off phenomena, but rather part of an ongoing ecosystem whereby fabricated news, manipulated visuals and misleading headlines spread and proliferate very quickly, especially at politically and security-sensitive events. This helps to foster a lot of mistrust and confusion and undermines people's confidence in both traditional media and state institutions.

A key insight is the use of polarized politics to frame digital political communication, in which digital politics is always presented in terms of political dichotomies like pro-state/anti-state or democratic/authoritarian. This framing will increase polarization in the political arena and allow less room for nuanced debate. The study also reveals that emotions are a crucial part of virality, with anger, fear, nationalism and religious sentiment key drivers of virality and thus of public opinion, as compared to factual reporting.

The study also highlights the increasing role of coordinated amplification and hybrid actors, such as political communicators, networks of influencers, and semi-automated and automated accounts using hashtags, trends and engagement patterns strategically. This puts artificial visibility and interferes with natural public discussions. Furthermore, the results indicate that security-related events are often being narrativized in politicised manner and this has a direct impact on the institutional legitimacy and national stability perceptions.

According to the analysis, a key result is that there is a growing “noise” of information, resulting in the user being overloaded with information, which is often contradictory and fractured, making it ever more difficult to determine what verified information is and what is manipulation. This is compounded by algorithmic systems which focus on engagement rather than correctness. Finally, the research concludes that counter-narratives and fact checking initiatives are still structurally underdeveloped; often, the positive messages do not reach the same audience or the same virality as positive messages that carry an emotional dimension.

## **6. Recommendations**

A multi-dimensional policy, media institution, digital platform and public education strategy is needed to tackle challenges identified. Firstly, there is a high demand to enhance the media literacy programs at the national level, let alone in the digital media, in order to strengthen the critical evaluation skills of citizens, especially students and young digital media users, and their ability to detect misinformation.

Second, the accountability systems of platforms should be strengthened by working with social media companies to address co-ordinated inauthentic activity, amplify accounts and misinformation about political advertising by bots. To minimize the dissemination of harmful content, it is crucial to have clear guidelines for algorithmic operations and more effective content moderation mechanisms.

Thirdly, there is a need for the mainstream media to have a fact checking department, and real-time verification systems to effectively combat misinformation and restore faith in credible reporting. More substantial editorial rules, less political bias in reporting, is also important.

Fourth, government and institutions need to create a strategic communication framework that can swiftly react to misinformation in the event of a crisis, especially a security incident, and avoid having the narrative manipulated and public panic.

Finally, more research in both the academic and policy fields is needed on how narratives develop across platforms and comparative studies of platforms are required, particularly WhatsApp, X (Twitter), and TikTok.

Finally, more attention should be paid to monitoring and counteracting the operations of hybrid influence actors, including the coordinated use of political messaging, involving influencers and using automated amplification. Their effects can be minimized by improving cyber monitoring and ethical governance of the digital world.

In conclusion, the recommendations highlight the need for a multifaceted strategy that combines regulation, educational initiatives, institutional strengthening, and research development to effectively address information disorder in Pakistan's digital landscape.

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