

Social Media and Cyber-Jihad In Pakistan

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Abstract:

The Internet and social media are part of today's battlefield between the forces of liberalism and those of extremism, at least in Pakistan. Both forces are jostling for using—and controlling—the Internet and social media to make themselves heard and silence the opposition. This paper looks into how extremist forces appropriate the Internet and social media to get their message out, sway public opinion in their favor and seek new recruits. It also examines the potentials of social media for civic activism in Pakistan and how the misuse of blasphemy laws in Pakistan's constitution stifles liberal voices on the Internet and social media. This paper discusses the concept of blasphemy in Islam, their incorporation in the legal system of Pakistan and their impact on the freedom of expression. This paper concludes that an effective use of social media is contingent on at least three things: 1) Literacy 2) access to the Internet and social media tools and 3) media laws and policies that guarantee freedom of expression and access to information. These are essential for the creation of a vibrant public sphere, which can then be strengthened by using social media as a long-term tool. Without freedom of expression, liberal forces cannot make full use of social media for promoting democracy and rights of minority groups.

Key words: Social media, Internet, blasphemy laws, Pakistan, activism.

The Internet and social media are part of today's battlefield¹ between the forces of liberalism and those of extremism, at least in Pakistan. Both forces are jostling for using—and controlling—the Internet and social media to make themselves heard and silence the opposition. This was observed recently on two occasions: In May 2010, a High Court in Pakistan, after an extremist outcry, banned Facebook for promoting blasphemous content. However, liberal forces

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protested against the ban, which was lifted after two months. But by then a Muslim rival version of Facebook—Millatfacebook—had been launched and extremist views became even more amplified.

Second, when a liberal governor, Salmaan Taseer, was assassinated in January 2010 for his support for a Christian woman accused of blasphemy and for demanding the repeal of blasphemy laws, a fan page was launched on Facebook to lionize his killer. Liberals responded by setting up their own pages in honor of Taseer's memory, only to see them overtaken by conservative voices.²

These two incidents, among many others, show the potency and significance of the Internet and social media for both liberal and extremist forces. Terrorists and their supporters use the Internet to disseminate propaganda, raise funds and seek supporters. Liberal forces use it for promoting freedom, democracy and rights of minorities. Analysts emphasize that "online social networks seem to be the preferred medium for radicals who want to create a new culture [in the name] of *jihad* while taking full advantage of the technology."³ This makes cyberspace as important as the real world in countering and pre-empting the threat of terrorism and ideological extremism.

This paper looks into how extremist forces appropriate the Internet and social media to get their message out, sway public opinion and seek new recruits. It also examines the potentials of social media for civic activism in Pakistan and how the misuse of blasphemy laws in Pakistan's constitution stifles liberal voices on the Internet and social media. For this purpose, I discuss the concept of blasphemy in Islam, their incorporation in the legal system of Pakistan and their impact on the freedom of expression.

In the conclusion, this paper recommends that the misuse of blasphemy laws should be thwarted to allow liberal forces to use mainstream and social media, without any fear, for civic activism and fighting extremist forces in the new emerging public sphere. This paper also recommends that being the largest Internet and telephone service provider, the state-owned Pakistan Telecommunication Corporation Limited (PTCL) should extend broadband to rural areas as well to bridge urban-rural divide.

Introduction:

On May 19, 2010, a high court in Pakistan banned social networking Web site Facebook for promoting blasphemous content. The order came when a petition was filed after an American cartoonist announced a Facebook competition, "Everybody Draw Muhammad," featuring caricatures of Prophet Muhammad to protest the censorship of an episode of American television show, *South Park*. The court in Lahore—capital city of Pakistan's largest province, Punjab—issued the order after a relatively unknown organization called Islamic Lawyers Forum sought a ban on access to the popular social networking site. The petitioners pleaded—and the court agreed—that caricaturing any prophet, including Muhammad (PBUH), amounted to blasphemy, which carries a death sentence in Pakistan.

The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), which regulates the establishment, operation and maintenance of telecommunication systems and provision of telecommunication services, banned Facebook in Pakistan after the court's ruling. "Using the pretext of limiting circulation of blasphemous content,"⁴ the PTA also blocked 10,548 Web sites and other information sources like YouTube, Flickr, Wikipedia, and more. Mobile phone providers also halted Blackberry services, at first completely, then only its web-browsing functions "to make sure Facebook is blocked for all Internet users in Pakistan."⁵

Background:

The controversy started when a Seattle-based cartoonist, Molly Norris, announced to observe May 20, 2010 [and then every year] as "Everybody Draw Muhammad Day" in support of freedom of speech after Comedy Central, an American cable television and satellite television channel, cut a portion of a *South Park* episode following a death threat from a radical Muslim group.⁶ *South Park* in one of its episodes called a character in bear costume as "Muhammad, the prophet of Muslim faith". Subsequently, someone created a Facebook fan page, which prompted another to create a rival page "Ban Everybody Draw Muhammad Day." In the face of threats from Muslim extremists, including Al-Qaeda, and a public outcry in many Muslim countries, both Norris and others dissociated themselves from the protest. Norris has since changed her name and gone into hiding under advice from the American FBI.⁷

The court ruling determined that contents of the protest movement on Facebook would "harm the religious sentiments" of 45 million users of the Web site in Pakistan. Facebook administrators in a statement on May 19, 2010, however, said while the content of the page on their Web site did not violate their terms, "we do understand it may not be legal in some countries."⁸ Under pressure from an extremist outcry in social and mainstream media, Pakistan's embassy in Washington, D.C. requested the U.S. government to "take effective measures to prevent, stop or block this blasphemous contest immediately."⁹ Subsequently, Facebook apologized and agreed to block access to the page from Pakistan.

The court ruling demonstrated the power of hardline religious groups, which are often able to impose their will on a majority by claiming a defense of Islam.¹⁰ But ban on Facebook and YouTube divided opinion in Pakistan. Not everyone supported a total ban on Facebook. Liberal forces protested against the ban, which was lifted after two months. But by then a Muslim rival version of the Facebook—*MillatFacebook*—had been launched.

Millat Facebook:

When some furious Internet users responded by shutting down their Facebook accounts, Omer Zaheer Meer and others decided to take a more practical approach and set up www.millatfacebook.com. (*Millat* is an Urdu word which means ‘nation’ of Muslims.) It soon attracted around 7,000 members, mostly in Pakistan. *MillatFacebook* claims to provide a ‘sanitized’ environment for Pakistanis to find their soul mate and allows for live shots from Makkah, one of the two holy cities of Islam in Saudi Arabia, to be viewed on the homepage.¹¹

Even when the ban was lifted and Facebook removed the controversial page, extremists continued to agitate the cartoon issue in social and mainstream media. Owners of the www.millatfacebook.com hosted a conference in Islamabad almost one year after the Facebook ban titled “Blasphemy by Facebook and the Role of Muslim Youth on Social Media.” Speakers and religious scholars at the conference urged Muslims to boycott products of the countries and organizations involved in blaspheming Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), especially Facebook.¹²

One of the founders of *MillatFacebook* is a member of the Islamic Lawyers’ Forum, which won injunction from the high court against Facebook. It shows that religious and extremist forces in Pakistan no more fight against social media, rather they want to monopolize and use social media for the propagation of their ideologies and counter, even silence, liberal voices and civil rights activists, who protested the ban. But support for their protest did not come from most sections of the mainstream media, which amounted to support for the extremist outcry. “While the press has fought many battles to uphold freedom of expression, it is treating this ever-widening ban as a separate matter,” Kamila Shamsi, an England-based Pakistani author, wrote in British newspaper *Guardian*.¹³

Ban on Facebook laid bare a stark reality in Pakistan: extremists operated with organized precision, able to mobilize the masses in an instant, while liberal voices remained paralyzed by fear and passivity.¹⁴ Even the fervor that followed the ban had been entirely one-sided in favor of extremists. A poll conducted by an IT portal called *Pro Pakistani* showed 73 percent out of about 8,000 voters favored a permanent ban on Facebook. Misinformation through the use of social media also intensified extremists’ propaganda to rally public support both online and offline. There had been a widespread SMS campaign perpetuating a narrative that Pakistan’s ban has brought a behemoth anti-Muslim company to its knees.¹⁵ Ban on Facebook, the emergence of its rival *MillatFacebook* and subsequent incidents show that extremist forces in Pakistan have appropriated social media for promoting their ideology well before the liberal forces could harness them for a social change.

Salmaan Taseer’s assassination

Salmaan Taseer, Governor of Punjab province, was gunned down on January 4, 2010 by his own security guard in the capital city of Islamabad.

Mumtaz Qadri believed that Taseer was a blasphemer¹⁶ because the slain governor sought the repeal of Pakistan's blasphemy laws. The 26-year old assassin, who surrendered to his fellow policemen without any resistance, was unrepentant: he told journalists he was "proud" to have killed Taseer. Just a month before, the slain governor had publicly supported Aasia Bibi, a Christian woman and mother of three who has been sentenced to death for allegedly insulting Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Taseer's assassination was orchestrated through public announcements, hate speech on television, text messages and even by distributing pamphlets.¹⁷

Taseer's assassination divided the media landscape of Pakistan: English language press was critical of the murder and condemned it, while the Urdu (national and commonly understood language in the country) press focused on the slain governor's 'controversial' utterances and outspoken support for Aasia Bibi and his rants against the blasphemy laws.¹⁸

As *The Economist* noted in its January 6, 2011 editorial, Taseer's murder followed a campaign of vilification by the clergy and sections of the press as a "broad alliance of the clergy rushed out a statement lionizing the assassin."¹⁹ "No Muslim should attend the funeral or even try to pray for Salmaan Taseer," an extremist organization said in a statement which was prominently published by the mainstream Urdu press, including the largest circulated *Jang* [war] newspaper.²⁰

While religious parties and some media outlets openly called the assassin as *ghazi* (a holy warrior), the mainstream media, irrespective of whether Urdu or English were circumspect in calling Taseer a *Shaheed* (martyr). *Express*, a Pakistani affiliate of the *International Herald Tribune*, was the only newspaper that tried to lionize Taseer and called for repealing the blasphemy laws in its January 5, 2011 editorial. *Dawn*, an influential and the most widely read English newspaper, called it a "crime of hate."

Qadri became a celebrity in Pakistan²¹ as many religious parties rallied in his support, especially in his hometown Rawalpindi, a twin city of capital Islamabad. Soon rallies in other cities also took place. In Karachi, the largest and only coastal city of Pakistan, a crowd of no less than 40,000 marched in favor of the assassin. Qadri's support was not confined to the streets and mainstream media; his support would go viral when extremists took their ideological battle to Facebook, which became a new ideological battle space.²²

Social Media in the Service of Extremism:

The governor's assassination underscored how deeply religious extremism has penetrated Pakistani society. When identity of the killer was revealed, a Facebook fan page was set up in support of the assassin.²³ Soon there were over 2000 "likes" for the page that painted the assassin as a hero, a holy warrior and a champion of Islam.²⁴ "We support the action of Malik Mumtaz Hussain Qadri and want the Supreme Court of Pakistan to take immediate action against his arrest and order to free him," thus read the text on the profile fan

page.²⁵ Facebook became a veritable battleground between liberals and conservatives.²⁶

More dedicated Qadri supporters would write entire “articles” part-theological, part-political that would encourage other users to “invite your friends,” while claiming “exclusive access” to the latest video footage of Qadri that they had grabbed from television and uploaded either directly to Facebook or embedded through YouTube.²⁷ “Particularly popular was a clip of Qadri, in full commando uniform and equipped with an automatic weapon, reciting a *na’at* [a Muhammad (PBUH)-centric hymn]. Comments that such videos garnered as feedback were overwhelmingly extremist, approving of the murder, and hateful of Taseer.

At this time liberal sections of society picked up some courage and started their own fan page on Facebook in praise of Taseer. They also kept appealing to Facebook’s central administrators to remove Qadri’s fan pages. By midnight, Facebook had struck down Qadri’s fan page but soon six other groups had sprung up. A message on a page called Ghazi Malik Mumtaz Hussain Qadri urged people to make groups as many times as others reported it.²⁸ Qadri’s supporters also adopted a new technique, making “closed” Facebook groups—private cyber-rooms that allowed unadulterated virtual virtues, while requiring a clearance for membership, and allowing the page managers to scour, sort and select recruits.²⁹ *MillatFacebook* became a safe place for the fanatics.³⁰

Beyond the murder and ban on Facebook:

Extremist organizations’ presence in social media is not sporadic; groups, like the proscribed Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which campaigns against democracy and wants to establish a global Islamic caliphate, regularly use Facebook, Twitter and mobile phone text messages to share their views. “They also spread provocative views and encourage attacks against religious minorities, without any fear of crackdown by the government.”³¹ U.K.’s counter-terrorism strategy document for 2011³² warned that terrorists were making more and more use of new information technologies to communicate their propaganda. The document also warned that extremist forces like al-Qaeda were increasingly sophisticated in their use of social networking and video sharing Web sites. Social media, and especially the Internet, have many attractions for extremist and terrorist organizations, particularly when they look for new recruits and donations. Just like big Internet-based companies, extremist organizations use users’ demographics to target those with sympathy toward a cause or issue, and to seek donations.³³

Blasphemy Laws and Freedom of Expression in Pakistan:

Punjab High court's decision to ban Facebook in Pakistan was guided by blasphemy laws in the country's constitution, while Governor Taseer was gunned down when he called those laws as 'draconian' and demanded their repeal. This is how the misuse of blasphemy laws chokes freedom of expression and casts its long shadow on the Internet and social media as tool of information.

Blasphemy, commonly to Muslims, is reverence toward holy personages, religious artifacts, customs, and beliefs that Muslims respect.³⁴ The penalties for such behavior vary by jurisdiction, and can include fines, imprisonment, flogging, amputation, crucifixion, hanging, or beheading.³⁵ However, blasphemy as a crime does not exist in many Muslim countries.³⁶ But Pakistan has the strictest blasphemy laws³⁷, which apply only to purported blasphemies against Islam, not against any other religion.³⁸

Late military dictator Zia-ul-Haq incorporated the blasphemy laws in Pakistan's legal system in 1980s as part of his broader effort to *Islamize* laws of the country. The blasphemy provisions were an important component of a social engineering campaign devised and implemented³⁹ ostensibly to Islamize the state. However, human rights activists and others have criticized these laws on many counts, especially their use against religious minorities by persons and outfits to settle other scores.

The misuse of blasphemy laws also targets freedom of the press.⁴⁰ Their misuse has not spared even the Internet as a public sphere where people can freely express their opinion. In the wake of a series of cartoons of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) being posted online, mainly from America, in May 2010, the government blocked access to YouTube and Facebook to stop Pakistanis from being able to view blasphemous material.⁴¹

This is not the first case. In 2006, the Supreme Court of Pakistan directed the government to block all Web sites that displayed Danish cartoons of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and ordered police to register cases of publishing or posting the images under Article 295-C of Pakistan Penal Code⁴² where blasphemy or defamation of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is punishable by death. In 2008, the government ordered to prevent access to a YouTube video mocking Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), which resulted in a near-global block of the entire YouTube Web site for around two hours.⁴³

Social media and civic activism:

In the two instances discussed above extremist forces successfully appropriated social media to their own cause. But, on three other occasions liberal activists equally successfully used social media to organize civil society and disseminate information. In this part of the paper I will analyze how social media had been used to challenge state repression and to mobilize civil society for democratic causes and fighting vigilantism.

In 2007, when President Pervez Musharraf dismissed the Chief Justice of Pakistan, civil society and lawyers launched a movement for the restoration of judiciary. The mainstream media also joined their ranks by putting the

president's arbitrary action to public scrutiny and highlighting the lawyers' and civil society's movement. This prompted the government to block news channels and jam cellular networks in a bid to thwart anti-government demonstrations. Pakistanis, mostly youngsters, across the globe continued to plan and organize protest rallies via Facebook.⁴⁴

This protest movement also witnessed the emergence of 'citizen journalism' through the use of social media and the convergence of different genres of journalism. It created a hybrid model of mass media where old and new media collaborated to keep the public informed.⁴⁵ Civil society activists, mostly university students, became citizen journalists by sending out information to the mainstream media, including international news channels like CNN. At the same time they also used Facebook, Twitter, and blogging to organize and coordinate protest marches.

University students armed with mobile phone cameras became virtual reporters who would videotape protest demonstrations in city centers and upload their videos to Facebook, YouTube, Flickr and even international TV channels. Some of them would send their live updates to blog posts specially created to challenge the state repression and to fill the information vacuum created by the censorship of television channels. Thus everyone became a user and a producer of media, which was unprecedented.

This digital network of mostly young Pakistanis—both inland and in the diaspora—was reactivated when devastating floods struck most of Pakistan in 2010. Through Facebook and Twitter, donations were arranged and relief efforts were coordinated in most parts of the country. Relief activists used Facebook to solicit contributions from relatives, friends, and friends of friends both at home and abroad.

In some cases, civil society activists used social media to pressurize the mainstream media and influence their agenda. A private cable television, *Samaa*, was recently forced to take off the air a morning show and fire its host after an intense online campaign by liberal forces against its contents. In a controversial episode of the morning show, the host Maya Khan and a posse of middle-class women were seen conducting a 'raid' on a public park in Karachi, Pakistan's industrial hub and largest city. They would question dating couples engaged in "immoral" behavior.

Outrage sprang from the Internet and percolated into the national newspapers, where writers slammed Ms. Khan's tactics as a "witch-hunt".⁴⁶ When members of the civil society vented their fury on social Web sites at what they said was intrusion, it ignited a debate on journalistic ethics in the mainstream Pakistani media. The host of the show was forced to seek public apology, but by then she had been fired after her show was taken off the air.

This capped the success of social media in changing the mores of mainstream media. Similarly, another private television ran its own show, which tried to intrude into private lives of people. By then civil society activists had already created Citizens for Free & Responsible Media (CFRM). They launched

an online petition against the show, which forced the host of the show to quit and seek public apology on Facebook.

Social Media Landscape in Pakistan:

The social media landscape in Pakistan has registered a steep growth over the last few years. Mobile-cellular subscription has skyrocketed in the country, exceeding 114 million by January 2012,⁴⁷ placing Pakistan at 9th level in country comparison and 5th in Asia.⁴⁸ More than 90 percent of people in Pakistan live within areas that have cellular phone coverage and more than half of the Pakistan's over 180 million population has access to a cell phone.⁴⁹

Internet users in Pakistan have also been on the rise; more than 20 million people are online with a greater percentage accessing the Net via mobile phones.⁵⁰ With an increased use of mobile phones and the gradual spread of broadband Internet in Pakistan, access to information and communication technologies has increased, as have citizen journalism and online activism. Though, remote areas of the country have no access to broadband. Promoting access to the Internet for the common people has not been a development priority for the government.⁵¹

Government priority is not the only reason behind the slow growth of broadband in Pakistan. There are other issues too: like, financial incentives, cultural traditions, language barriers, and most importantly, the lack of a robust telecommunications infrastructure.⁵² There are 50 Internet Service Providers (ISPs) throughout the country, along with 10 broadband service providers and two HFC operators providing broadband Internet.⁵³

Despite these physical barriers Pakistan recently recorded a sharp increase in the number of Facebook users. Over six million people, 4.14 million men and 1.94 million women, use the social networking Web site, putting the country on number 26 in the list of countries where Facebook users are based.⁵⁴ Of the 20 million online Pakistanis 32.86 per cent use Facebook. One million users registered for a Facebook account just in six months between August 2011 and January 2012.⁵⁵

Over 55 per cent of Facebook users are between the age of 18 and 24 years, which shows social media's popularity in the young generation. This also shows potential of the social media in social, political and ideological activism. It also shows that extremist forces can easily access this young population through social media by staying diffuse in the cyberspace to keep an eye on their potential recruits.

Conclusion:

Social media are—and have been—used as tools for social and political activism not only in Pakistan, but elsewhere too. Social media have become a fact of life for civil society worldwide,⁵⁶ involving actors from diverse fields with conflicting interests. New media, with immense potential, are open to civil society and governments as well as everyone else who have access and know how to use them.

Organizations that are well-connected offline can use social media more effectively to efficiently coordinate their activities. Proscribed militant organizations like Hizb-ut-Tehrir, as discussed in previous pages, have activists who are adequately tech savvy to use social media to challenge a democratic government, demonize democracy and thwart social activism by liberal forces.

An effective use of social media is contingent on at least three things: 1) Literacy 2) access to the Internet and social media tools and 3) media laws and policies that guarantee freedom of expression and access to information. These are essential for the creation of a vibrant public sphere, which can then be strengthened by using social media as a long-term tool.

In Pakistan, where the literacy rate is less than 50 percent for men and far lower for women, a large section of society was just silent spectators when a minority had been active in using social media for social and political activism. Moreover, the promises that the Internet and social media hold for civil society and liberal forces are also there for conservative, obscurantist and terrorist entities. That's why the Internet is proving to be the ultimate safe haven for extremist and terrorist organizations. Sebastian Abbot argues that al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden was logged off, but not his terrorist outfit when the U.S. Navy SEALs killed him in a Pakistani city on May 2, 2011.⁵⁷ The Internet offers extremists and terrorists to remain diffuse, virtual but equally active.

Clay Shirky argues that social media can compensate for the disadvantages of undisciplined groups by reducing the costs of coordination,⁵⁸ but any coordination that exists only online is ephemeral because of lacking hierarchy, which Malcolm Gladwell counts as a weakness inherent in social media networks.⁵⁹ Offline ties are essential for using social media for civic engagement or mobilization because "identity of the message-bearer makes a big difference"⁶⁰ in high-risk activism. Liberal forces have been successful in using social media for public mobilization only when extremist forces did not challenge them or had no stakes involved. When both forces had to fight it out in social media for a single cause with divergent views or standpoints, extremists have succeeded in having their say and silencing liberal voices.

Recommendations:

Shirky argues that "the best practical reason to think that social media can help bring political change is that both dissidents and governments think they can."⁶¹ That extremist and conservative forces as well as liberal organizations are trying to use social media for their divergent purposes proves Shirky's point that new media can be a tool for social and political change, but they can also be instruments of control and suppression of freedom of expression.

A large section of population in Pakistan, especially in rural areas, has no access to the Internet. It has widened rural-urban divide in terms of development and democratic participation. Extending the Internet to the periphery can bridge this urban-rural divide. The state-run Pakistan Telecommunication Corporation Limited (PTCL) is so far the only company that

provides landline telephone in Pakistan. Broadband piggybacks on landline in Pakistan. PTCL is the only company that has its telephone infrastructure across Pakistan, including rural areas. There only the government can extend broadband to the rural areas to connect them to the mainstream society. The Internet and other information and communication technologies can be used for the promotion of education and civic engagement.

The misuse of Pakistan's blasphemy laws targets freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Even the Internet as a public sphere is not beyond their purview. Liberal forces take extra care in using social media fearing prosecution under these laws. The misuse of these laws needs to be thwarted in order to promote freedom of expression. Without freedom of expression, liberal forces cannot make full use of social media for promoting democracy and rights of minority groups. Ban on Facebook and the blocking of YouTube on blasphemy charges show that how carefully journalists and civil society activists have to tread so as not to offend extremist forces.

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