

## Social Media and Indo-Pak Relations: Applying Agenda Setting Theory

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### Abstract

*The present study aims at analyzing the relationship between Pakistan and India in terms of Social Media. In the study, the questions like what is the role of Social Media in shaping the Indo-Pak relations, how Social media is construction the societies in Pakistan and India, and how citizen diplomacy is being practice in Pakistan and India through Social Media, have been answered in the present study. It is basically a qualitative study in which literature has been reviewed in the area of the mainstream media as well as social media with respect to Indo-Pak relationship. The major findings of the study reveal that social media is playing a key role in shaping the indo-Pak relations. Where mainstream media reflects and exaggerates the issues, social media shows public reaction, which is a great example of citizen diplomacy. This public reaction in return influences the policy makers to take decisions. In a nut shell, the study can be concluded as the Indo-Pak tension and its reflections and reactions on social media are the true examples of negative agenda setting theory.*

**Keywords:** Social Media, Indo-Pak Relations, Agenda Setting Theory

### Introduction

Role of media in the international conflicts has always been very important and central. In any international conflict throughout history, media has played a key role in mobilizing and shaping public opinion. Media plays a key role in the relations between states especially when the two states are at war. Agenda setting is primary done by the media and keeping the nation onboard with the government in the state of conflicts is a critical job done by the media. In the case of Indo-Pak relations, media has always played a very important tool. India & Pakistan are one of the most traditional and historical rivals since the partition of subcontinent. In every race starting from military, technology, sports, diplomacy, arms race & even the cultural race by citizen which is carried through media, both India & Pakistan are head to head.

There is an emergency of increasingly-interconnected world because of globalization and quick advancements in the IT. The social media and cellular revolution continues to spread across the globe. There is a free flow of information across the internet due to its revolution. Global communities are created easily based on many filters online. Almost everything from business to academics is carried out online through the internet. Geographic distances do not matter anymore and the internet has actually transformed the world into a global village.

Due to such a rapid expansion of social media cloud, the world has witnessed many events as its reaction. Arab Spring is one of the most recent event and a turning point in global history and many attribute the events of Arab Spring and recent social uprisings to the social media's strong influence on the society. There is no wonder why some refer to the Arab Spring as "Twitter Revolution". The participants of the Arab spring used the basic tools of social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to unfold the stories and actual ground happenings to the world. Due to the fears of social media, realization of its potential

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and role, the Syrian government just recently cut down the internet access of its citizen temporarily. Such events prove that social media has a major role to play in political mobilization on a global level.

Paul et.al (2004) reveal that social media has emerged in a time where there is a dispersion of authority. The world is facing crisis in the leadership. Due to social media there is an increasing public demand of transparency and accountability in both public and private sector. Traditionally, diplomacy was done behind the doors but now social media provides new tools to the leadership of the world to communicate internationally and with the people. Keeping in view the importance of social media, the US department of State has established a dedicated wing for this purpose. Managing more than 20 million followers on social media, US State Department has now a dedicated staff to manage 301 official twitter accounts and 408 Facebook accounts. This interaction is done in more than 11 languages and is known as 21st Century Statecraft Agenda.

It was January 17th of 2001 when the Philippine President Joseph Estrada was facing impeachment trial. The Philippine congress voted that key evidences against him should be set aside. In less than 2 hours of the announcement of this decision, thousands of Philippine's citizen gathered in rage that the corrupt leader might get freedom. It was all done in the matter of minutes by the effective spreading of one text message. With one text message, in a few days, the crowd of thousands was transformed in to millions literally jam packing the downtown of Manila. 7 million text messages were sent that week in Philippines and the world had never seen such an effective quick response from the public by the use of social media for a political uprising. As a result, the legislators had to rethink and Estrada was gone in a matter of days. He blamed the "text message" for his downfall.

US Census Bureau (2013) reports that ever since the dawn of internet in the early 90s, the world population networked through social media has expanded from a few millions to low billions. Social media has become an integral part of lives in the 21st century. From the government level to the individual level, people from every sector of life treat social media as one of the important component of everyday life. According to latest reports by different surveys, almost 40% of the entire world population is using the internet. According to latest reports, Facebook has crossed 1.15 billion users worldwide. Total world population is now estimated to be 7.125 Billion.

India & Pakistan are the two nuclear armed historic rivals. Both the countries have a long history of armed conflict. Since the partition of sub-continent in 1947, both these countries have been facing each other in many types of conflicts starting from the massacre of independence itself, four major wars, river water issues, Siachin conflict, arms race, Kashmir issue & many other issues for that matter.

With such a rich & historical rivalry, alongside with military, political leadership, science & technology field, economical race, the citizen & media of both countries have also been engaged in the rivalry and has played its role which indeed is very important. Armies of both the countries have gone through some major reorganization and modernization programs which has brought the war to even higher standards of technology and tactics including nuclear battlefield (Badri-Maharaj. 2000). Some statistics of Indo-Pak nuclear battlefield are shown in the Annex "A" Table 2.

During past conflicts, mainstream media has been playing its role shaping the mindset of the people of both countries to develop hatred against each other but post internet revolution, social media has become one of the most important and dominant battlefield where the citizen of both countries are doing online warfare.

Role of social media and citizen journalism cannot be ignored in case of Indo-Pak conflict. While studying the conflicts between both India and Pakistan, it is important to learn and find out how the social media plays its role and the impacts of citizen diplomacy &

citizen journalism on the relations of both countries in conflicts like latest LoC tension on border, Mumbai Attacks, India's involvement in Balochistan, etc. and how it makes the relationship between the two countries, good or bad.

Thus it can be sum up saying that in Indo-Pak relations, social media is playing a negative role and is dominated by war-mongering elements from both sides that use it for negative agenda-setting. Moreover, while studying the impacts of social media on Indo-Pak relations, following questions must be answered.

- What is the role of social media in shaping the relations between India & Pakistan?
- How social media is constructing the societies of India & Pakistan?
- How citizen diplomacy is practiced through social media between India & Pakistan?

## Literature Review

Riedel (2013) writes that born from the British Raj, the two nations share a common heritage and history. Both the nations have been traditional rivals. Both have been rising with globalization in the 21st century and are trying to cope up with the fast growing technological world. Today both the nations are recognized globally in many aspects. Competing with each other from more than half a century now, the two nations have been through many conflicts. In his book *Avoiding Armageddon*, Bruce Reidel has shed some light on the background on the history of conflicts between the two nations.

India is ranked 2nd globally and Pakistan is ranked 6th in terms of population. Both countries have attracted the attention of world in many ways. Since both India & Pakistan are nuclear armed rivals therefore this rivalry catches the attention of the whole world and whenever the situation is tense between the two, the entire world is concerned because any kind of major war or a possible nuclear strike by any of the two rivals can pose a dangerous threat to world peace and the entire humankind.

Media has been playing a role in the state of conflicts between the two countries over the course of history. When the tension was born between the two nations of Indian subcontinent, it was media that played its role and journalists like Maulana Muhammad Ali Johar used publications and media of that time to create and shape public opinion to pave the way for partition. In partition itself, countless lives were lost and it was the biggest migration in human history according to some. Followed by partition in 1948, both countries fought a major war and the hatred was boosted up. Then in 1965, both countries fought a major war and media at that time was comparatively stronger than that of the time of partition and it played a key role in motivating the nations against each other and supporting the armed forces. The evolution of media continues as both countries faced each other on different frontiers of 1971 and other. At the time of Kargil conflict in the late 90s, media had become even stronger and was used by the states to keep the population on board with its decisions.

In the 21st century, a tidal wave of technological advances and the advent of internet shook both nations and it gradually took everyone in its influence. With cellular revolution and social media's advent, people of both nations adopted this new way of life and it is getting stronger every day. There is a continuous increase in the number of social media users of both countries.

Internet and Facebook users in India and Pakistan are rapidly increasing and it is hard to tell the exact number. The number is increasing every minute. Table 1 in the Annex "A" shows the approximate statistics.

SAFMA, the South Asian Free Media Association is practicing peace journalism and has faced a lot of criticism as well in both countries. SAFMA is a body of media practitioners recognized by SAARC. It has further different bodies like SAWM (South Asian Women in Media), SAMC (South Asian Media Commission), SAPANA (South Asian Policy Analysis

Network), SAJ (South Asian Journal), SAMN (South Asian Media Net) and FMF (Free Media Foundation). The two main objectives of SAFMA when it was founded in 2010 were:

- i. Media development, free flow of and access to information and a free, professionally competent, unbiased and independent media in the region.
- ii. Promote a culture of dialogue and an environment for understanding, tolerance, peace, conflict resolution and cross-border cooperation leading towards a South Asian Union.

Keen observation of different forums of social media crowded with the citizen of both countries discussing and debating from both sides. Their comments, thinking and behavioral observations tells a lot about this issue especially when we see that in certain situation, for example: latest border tension between the two countries. Also present on social media the political and media figures sharing their viewpoint against the other country, which could be positive and negative and how people react to that. The issue of Mumbai attacks or the issue of Indian involvement in Baluchistan is also hot debated topics on social media.

Scholars on both sides criticize media for being war mongering. People in Pakistan blame Pakistani media for being pro Indian showing the Bollywood content on prime time news and all this criticism is seen on social media by the people. Reporting on the recent LoC border tensions between India & Pakistan has been reported in a highly irresponsible manner by the Indian media. Many Indian scholars and Pakistani analysts criticize the war mongering role of Indian mainstream media in escalating the tension between the two countries.

Two major news media groups of India & Pakistan, the Jang group and times of India have jointly launched a campaign to promote peace and reduce the tension between the two countries. The project is known as “*Aman<sup>3</sup> ki Asha<sup>4</sup>*” which translates as hope for peace. “*Aman*” is a word from Urdu language while “*Asha*” is a Hindi word. Both the groups have faced a heavy criticism as well as appreciation from both sides for carrying out this joint venture.

### **Role of Social Media in shaping relations between India & Pakistan**

Just like the mainstream media, social media is also playing its critical role in the relations between India and Pakistan. In past, the mainstream media of both sides was state owned and acted as a mouthpiece of the state itself. Later privately owned mainstream media emerged but it was also being manipulated by stake holders for agenda setting purposes. Both sides blame the media of each other in escalating the tension and propagating propaganda against each other at the hands of war-mongering elements.

Peace journalism focuses at finding the structural causes of conflict. Media coverage always shapes the course of events at the time of peace and war between the two parties. Lynch and Galtung’s (2010) peace journalism model is used to promote peaceful initiatives. War coverage and war journalism is more dominant in the case of India-Pakistan journalism than the peace journalism. Most of the stories from the newspapers of both sides promote war journalism and the peace journalism is ignored. In most of the news from both sides, the other side is portrayed more of an enemy rather than a friend (Siraj, 2008).

As the mainstream media is playing a negative and war-mongering role in the two countries, social media is one step ahead of that. Whatever happens on mainstream media is reflected on social media in a more intense and escalated manner. In 2008 Mumbai attacks, Indian media played a very irresponsible role and even the supreme court of India declared that the media made the situation worse by unethical reporting and it should be regulated. In Mumbai attacks, the reporting was done in a way which caused problems the security forces carrying out the operations. It was officially declared in India by the court that media played

<sup>3</sup> A word of Urdu language which means Peace

<sup>4</sup> A word of Hindi language which means Desire or Wish

a key role in helping the terrorists. Indian officials blamed media for showing classified footage and content which helped terrorist handlers across the border to get the latest news and inform it to the terrorists carrying out the attacks in Mumbai. Bench of Indian court also blamed media for letting the terrorist operatives on Pakistani sides know and inform to the operatives carrying out the operation that Ajmal Kasab has been caught and that a senior police official has been killed, along with other important developments of the attacks. Also it played a negative role in society and globally made the situation terrible. Social media was one step ahead and while mainstream media was blaming Pakistan within some limits, social media openly waged a social media war with Pakistan in case of Mumbai attacks. Opinion leaders openly started blaming the state of Pakistan for carrying out Mumbai attacks and globally an impression was successfully established that the state of Pakistan is behind the Mumbai attacks. On the other side of the border, Pakistani social media fought back blaming Indian media openly on social media for the escalation of conflict bringing the two countries at the brink of war.

In the relations of India and Pakistan, Kashmir has always been the central cause of conflict. Wars have been fought over Kashmir numerous times and both countries are still at war at the Line of Control. Former US President, Bill Clinton referred to the line of control as the most dangerous place on earth. India says that Kashmir is its integral part while Pakistanis say it is a disputed territory and the problem needs to be resolved. Kashmir is one of the longest going territorial conflicts in international history and has always caught the global attention.

Even in the times of peace between the two countries, the LoC is at war. It is at war all the time and small exchanges of fire between the border forces of both countries are practiced in routine. The media used this tension to report in a war mongering way and portray it as a major war between the two countries. The reporting of LoC issue with full of sensationalism makes things worse. The social media in this case is again one step ahead of mainstream media. A small news of routine fire when enters the arena of social media, is portrayed as a major clash between the two armies causing a lot of damage, etc.

The military of both countries always comes under pressure with such actions of the media and is sometimes compelled to fire or attack the enemy check posts at the Line of Control to satisfy the public hunger of revenge. With such sensational reporting, and its response on social media, political and military leadership is pushed to keep an aggressive stand on the enemy. Anti-Hindu sentiments in Pakistani society and anti-Pakistani sentiments in Indian society play their role on social media and become active by writing blogs and using Facebook and twitter to fire at the enemy. Hatred spreading videos are prepared on YouTube and shared through Facebook and twitter to promote the escalation. Even a small routine firing incident is often portrayed as a major clash. Many times the military public relations personnel from both sides have to issue a statement denying many fake news and rumors which gain popularity through social media.

A major flaw in social media is that it is greatly used in spreading propaganda and rumors. Since the users are citizens, not practicing journalists, so whatever they hear is spread out and everyone spreads news in his/her own interpretation and there is nobody to check or regulate it. Having following in millions, when such baseless news and rumors are spread at national level, the consequences are serious and harmful if not fatal.

### **Social Constructivism & Agenda Setting by Social Media**

Social media on both sides is playing a vital role in social construction. Primary focus of social constructivism is to unveil the ways in which groups and individuals take part in their own perception of social reality. The theory of constructivism supports the idea that change can occur through the diffusion of ideas and the internationalization of norms. If that



is the case then social media can be used to bring a major social change in the relations of the two countries in the days to come (Mingst, 1999).

Construction of identities is always formulated through media. In current scenario, whatever is discussed on social media is monitored by the governments of both sides to examine the public mood. With hot issues like LoC tension and Balochistan insurgency being heavily debated on social media, it seems like an ongoing social media war going on. Social media armies of both sides primarily used to prepare YouTube videos and share them through Facebook and twitter. With YouTube being the world's largest and most effective video sharing website, the social media war is fought most effectively by preparing YouTube videos. Pakistani government banned YouTube on publishing blasphemous content which caused a great deal of criticism in Pakistani society leaving behind only Facebook and twitter as the primary mode of social media warfare. The best way to see the mood on both sides is by having a look at the comments below any hatred video posted on YouTube. The participants from both sides go to extreme limits in blaming each other and even using the abusive language. Not only the personalities are criticized but the main cause of difference that is religion and ideological differences are discussed.

The Nation (2013) reports that political and military leadership of both countries keeps on issuing statements against each other. The reflection of which is shown on media and the reaction of which is shown on social media. People always react to such statements in a way they perceive them. Agenda setting theory of media states that news and media have a great influence on audiences by their own choice of what they consider newsworthy and what they want to give importance. Former President of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf is known for handling Indian media with an aggressive manner being a military dictator. On many occasion he has blasted on Indian media and journalists. On one occasion he fired back at a question asked by Indian journalist by replying that what kind of democracy India is running by kicking out Pakistani players and artists and also by pointing out that if Indians want to talk about Kargil, they first have to respond on East Pakistan and Siachin.

Famous Pakistani defense analyst Zaid Hamid is known for dealing with Indians in a very aggressive manner and he primarily uses social media. He has more than 35 thousand followers on twitter and almost 190 thousand fans on Facebook. With such a vast reach on social media, he openly blasts the Indians the way he wants. On the comparison, "*Aman ki Asha*" which is a peace initiative by the two media groups of India and Pakistan has only a combines fan following of just 15,000 fans from both India and Pakistan. With such comparison it is clearly evident that people from both sides of the border on social media are more interested in war and talk of war instead of peace. Zaid Hamid is openly holding Indian government and security agencies responsible for the Taliban uprising in Pakistan and Balochistan issue through social media. Such statements cause anger and rage in his followers on social media and there is a major part of Pakistani nationalist youth and citizens following him. Similarly Sheikh Rasheed, a Pakistani politician is very popular among the people because he openly criticizes India on media and has a great fan following on social media.

Famous Indian defense analyst Bharat Verma is known for speaking against Pakistan and having anti-Pakistan/anti-Islam sentiment. Many compare him with Zaid Hamid on Pakistani side. Bharat Verma equally and aggressively responds and attacks Pakistan through mainstream and social media and is very popular in India for that. Many channels of mainstream media invite him to have panel discussions with Pakistani analysts like Zaid Hamid and Gen. (R) Hameed Gul.

Social media is also used by actors on both sides to create public knowledge and awareness. Secret documents when leaked on social media through wiki leaks become talk of the town. Analysts like Zaid Hamid and others have openly explained Indian secret leaked

documents like the cold-start doctrine on social media for the common man to understand. Thus it creates a free flow of knowledge at unprecedented proportions. There are also many differences seen between the mainstream media and social media of Pakistan. Where mainstream media is pro-Indian showing Bollywood content and news while social media criticizing it. Therefore journalists like Hamid Mir and Saleem Safi of mainstream media openly criticize social media of Pakistan whenever they get a chance.

## Conclusion

Social media is playing a shaping role in the relations of India and Pakistan. Mainstream media shows the reflection of the ongoing events in an exaggerating manner while social media shows the reaction by public. Issues and events like Siachin, Kashmir, Sir Creek, water dispute, LoC tension, Balochistan insurgency, Indian Parliament attacks, Taliban uprising and Mumbai attacks are debated widely on social media by the people and this open debate has enabled them to practice citizen diplomacy. The public reaction is monitored by the government and it influences them to make decisions and policies. Senior military and political leadership has confirmed that the media pressure influence their decisions and events that took place and also those presently occurring, especially on the line of control. Overall, the social media is playing a war mongering negative role and is doing negative social constructivism and agenda setting. Where many scholars have a viewpoint that social media is beyond agenda setting theory and it does not apply now but the Indo-Pak tension and its reflections and reactions on social media are the true examples of negative agenda setting and war journalism model.

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## Annex A

**Table 1:**

Comparison of Approximate Internet and Facebook users in Pakistan and India

Country	Total Population	Internet Users	Facebook Users
India	1.25 Billion	151 Million	62 Million
Pakistan	190 Million	20 Million	10 Million

**Table 2:**

Statistics of Pakistan VS. India Nuclear Battlefield<sup>5</sup>

Estimated nuclear casualties for attacks on 10 large Indian and Pakistani cities				
City Name	Total Population Within 5 Kilometers of Ground Zero	Number of Persons Killed	Number of Persons Severely Injured	Number of Persons Slightly Injured
<b>India</b>				
Bangalore	3,077,937	314,978	175,136	411,336
Bombay	3,143,284	477,713	228,648	476,633
Calcutta	3,520,344	357,202	198,218	466,336
Madras	3,252,628	364,291	196,226	448,948
New Delhi	1,638,744	176,518	94,231	217,853
Total India	14,632,937	1,690,702	892,459	2,021,106
<b>Pakistan</b>				
Faisalabad	2,376,478	336,239	174,351	373,967
Islamabad	798,583	154,067	66,744	129,935
Karachi	1,962,458	239,643	126,810	283,290
Lahore	2,682,092	258,139	149,649	354,095
Rawalpindi	1,589,828	183,791	96,846	220,585
Total Pakistan	9,409,439	1,171,879	614,400	1,361,872
<b>India and Pakistan</b>				
Total	24,042,376	2,862,581	1,506,859	3,382,978

<sup>5</sup> Source: <http://defence.pk/threads/the-nuclear-battlefield-india-vs-pakistan.43856/>