

## **Role of Media in Fostering the Relationship Between India and Pakistan**

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### **ABSTRACT:**

*We are living in the Information age in which media shapes reality and builds public opinion. The current study aims to investigate the role of Pakistani media in influencing the relations between India and Pakistan. Following the qualitative approach and literature review method, online news, video clips and social media campaigns are arbitrarily selected and analyzed for coverage of major issues and incidents, in the context of Indo-Pak ties. It includes Prime ministers' recent speeches, coverage of Kashmir and Baluchistan disputes and cultural exchange and cricket teams' visits. It is assumed that social media can play a unique and positive role in developing a conducive environment for a better relationship between India and Pakistan if represented true public and political will. However, mainstream news media, including both newspapers and TV channels are likely to sensationalize issues for commercial gains and political scoring. Social media can provide an alternative platform to promote citizen journalism and public diplomacy. It can lead to mainstream media and influence policymakers to play a balanced role in improving bilateral ties between Pakistan and India. However,*

*currently, social media mostly mirror public reactions; often extend animosity following negative propaganda on mainstream media and at diplomatic fronts.*

**Key Words:** Indo-Pak relations, Role of Mass Media, Social Media, Historic Rivals, Digital Revolution

**INTRODUCTION:**

Relationship of Pakistan and India relationship has been complex since the beginning due to numerous historical reasons. The narrative of Indo-Pak ties is being dilapidated by the violent partition of British India in 1947, the Kashmir conflict and several political disputes and military combats (including 1965 war, 1971 war that led to the loss of East Pakistan and Kargil War, 1999) between the two nations in the last seven decades.

As a result, the two countries have failed to establish cordial relations despite sharing common cultural, geographical and economic background and interests.

Throughout the history of Indo-Pak ties, media played a crucial role of opinion building. It was often used by the states to build level grounds for difficult diplomatic decisions, especially in times of crisis and wars.

New media, particularly internet and mobile phones, have turned the world into a global village and blurred the geographical boundaries and physical distances. Online communities allow free flow of information, exchange of ideas, news, views and opinions. Social media has become an essential component of our lives in the current century. The percentage of the world population using internet has dramatically increased from 1% to 46% in the last three decades (Internet Live Stats, 2015).

The emerging social media revolution thus leads to some landmark incidents in recent years. Arab Spring also known as the Twitter Revolution is one such example that manifests dynamic, influence

of social media in social movements. Popular online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are often used as primary channels for political awareness, mass communication and public mobilization in these new uprising movements. Considering the potential power of social media, many governments restrict, ban, censor and closely monitor it for its content and following.

Paul et al. (Riedel, 2013 ) identified that social media has a force amidst the depression of authority and leadership crisis. Unlike the conventional behind the doors diplomacy, social media offers and open, free and internationally accessible platforms for political debates and public discourse. Thus visionary governments, such as the US and Canadian departments of States, have formed an exclusive wing with dedicated staffs to monitor and handle the fast-growing channels.

#### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND:**

Many initiatives have been taken in the past to improve the Pak-India ties including the Shimla, Agra and Lahore Summits. However, the relations between the two nations soured since the early 1980s, especially after the Siachen conflict, rising Kashmir insurgency in 1989, Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests in 1998 and the Kargil war (1999).

Meanwhile, some confidence-building measures including the ceasefire agreement (2003) and the Delhi–Lahore Bus service were commendable in reducing tensions. But, these initiatives have been nullified by the recurrent terrorist attacks. Indian Parliament attack (2001) and Samjhauta Express bombings (2007), that killed 68 civilians, mostly Pakistanis, proved to be the crucial twists in the tale of the Pak-India saga. Further the 2008 Mumbai attacks (charged to be carried out by Pakistani militants) proved to be the severe blow to the ongoing India-Pakistan peace process.

Substantial steps have been taken to improve the relations since the last elections in India and Pakistan in the early 2010s, especially to encourage non-discriminatory market access and liberalize trade.

In 2015, meetings were held between the foreign secretaries and the national security advisers of both nations. Subsequently, Prime Minister Modi made a brief, unscheduled visit to Pakistan while en route to India from Afghanistan. Despite these efforts, relations between the countries have remained bitter, mainly due to cross-border terrorism and historic rivalry.

#### **CULTURAL CONNECTIONS:**

Pakistan is sharing somewhat similar traditions, tastes and tales which highlight the identical history of the two countries. Many Pakistani artists, singers and musicians have made their names in the Indian film Industry and likewise Indian films and music are passionately followed in Pakistan.

Media of the two countries have a great potential as well as responsibility to improve the relationship between the two countries, however, mainstream media generally opted to aggravate animosity among the masses for each other through its overstated reporting and biased analysis.

Following the conventional approach, social media has emerged as the new battleground where people of the two countries have been engaged in the virtual combat. Occasionally, online communities and individual sites contributed to clarify confusions and promote collaborative cultural activities aiming at peaceful co-existence and progress of its people.

In order to understand the dynamics of Pakistan-India relationship, one needs to examine the ideal and actual role of media especially new (social) media and the power and potential of citizen journalism in the current information age. It is important to ask whether Social Media is playing any role in reducing or rather increasing the gulf between the two nations. How is it shaping public opinion and people's perception towards each other and how is it used as a channel of citizen diplomacy? The crucial question is that whether it is following conventional mainstream

media path of historical rivalry or is it paving new ways of mutual respect and coexistence.

**LITERATURE REVIEW:**

Riedel (2013) highlighted the history of Pakistan-India enmity in his book 'Avoiding Armageddon' in the following words, "Born from the British Raj, the two nations share a common heritage and history. Both the nations have been traditional rivals. Competing with each other from more than half a century now, the two nations have been through many conflicts. Since both India and 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." (Siraj, 2008)

Historically, mass media is being used as a frontline battlefield in the times of conflicts between the two nations in the subcontinent. Journalists like Maulana Muhammad Ali Johar and Maulana Zafar Ali Khan used the then newspapers and magazines to mould public sentiments in favor of the partition. Throughout the partition and post-partition process, radio and print media of the two countries remained vocal against each other. State-run TV channels and radio-stations also contributed to keep the spirit of patriotism alive on both sides during the wars of 1965, 1971 through one-sided news and analysis alongside nationalistic songs, plays and films. In the late 1990s, during Kargil war, fast-growing electronic media was extensively used for state propaganda to win the public opinion.

Following the Liaquat-Nehru pact (April 1950), editors and journalists of both countries met in New Delhi and candidly accepted the damaging role of biased radio broadcasts and exaggerated newspapers reports in instigating the Hindu-Muslim riots after partition (Jabbar, 2012).

On the other hand, SAFMA, the South Asian Free Media Association was formed by media professionals to promote peace

journalism following Lynch and Galtung's model despite criticism in both the countries. It has several sub-bodies. SAFMA aims to promote independent, balanced and professional media in the South Asia to encourage "culture of dialogue and introduce an environment for understanding, tolerance, peace, conflict resolution and cross-border cooperation leading towards a South-Asian Union" (Zulifiqar Ali, 2014).

Besides SAFMA, the Jang group of Pakistan and Times of India also jointly launched 'Aman Ki Asha' a media movement to uphold harmony and lessen the strain between the two countries. Both media houses have gone through extreme opposition as well as some support from the various social segments.

Overall, subcontinent journalism has been dominated by the 'War Journalism' and conflicts coverage throughout the past seven decades. As Siraj (2008) wrote, "Mostly in the news coverage across the Wagah border, the other side is portrayed as a fierce enemy rather than a friend."

Media experts and critics often condemn the damaging role of mainstream media especially newspapers and channels, that often intensify the tension between the two countries. One such recent example is the sensationalized reporting about line of control (LOC) border tensions between armed forces of the two countries and the Kashmir issue.

Social media is rather one step ahead of the mass media. It echoes the mainstream propaganda in a more penetrating and intensified fashion. Considering the range of social media impact, close monitoring and cyber regulations are suggested and exercised by the authorities especially in times of crises and conflicts.

### **Methodology and Sampling:**

Considering the nature of the theme, content analysis and literature review methods were adopted to study the trends of news and views coverage.

For the purpose, some recent, popular and milestone media campaigns were arbitrarily selected and analyzed from the mainstream news and social media. We followed the convenient random sampling technique based on the availability of the relevant data, keeping in mind its significance at the diplomatic and public fronts between the two countries.

### **NEWS CHANNELS**

Indians news channels are banned in Pakistan for more than a decade by PEMRA and so are Pakistani channels in India. This ban is applicable to cable TV networks only which cover more than 90% of the country's viewership. Viewers of both the countries could access each other's News channels on YouTube if required. As a consequence, a vast majority of masses remain completely oblivious of the other side (Do Pakistanis watch Indian news channels? 2015). Mostly negative news such as disputes, terrorist attacks, accidents, explosions, political changes, natural disasters, summits, cricket and sports competitions, films and celebrities scandals are highlighted by the opponent country's media. There is hardly any positive, productive news about the progressive and developmental aspects from across the border.

The media of two countries, especially news channels, often exaggerate and sensationalize news related to the other side. For example:

- Pakistan dunya ka 3rd Parmano shakti wala desh ban gaya hai
- Pakistan din raat parmano bomb bana raha
- Hafiz Saeed Pakistan administered Kashmir mein rally karr k ayya, aur uss k fouran baad LOC per Pak army nain firing shroo karr di
- Pakistan ek bohat baray atanki hamley ki tayyari karr raha hai India per.

- Pakistan nay bharat main hamlay k lia atankwadi tayar kr rakhay hain etc.,

Similarly Pakistani media is full of anti-India news. Almost every day, there is a news item about the *bilashtial* firing by India at the LOCs, atrocities in Kashmir against Muslims, and RAWs mischievous movement in Baluchistan and Fata, Pakistan. According to a foreign policy expert from India, “The trust in each other's media is at the lowest ebb. This does not help in creating an environment of peace and stability. The media is waiting to catch any source of conflict” (Ramu, 2010).

Despite that when Lahore High Court briefly banned the screening of Indian films and TV channels in Pakistan in December 2013; the decision faced open public and diplomatic resentment. Manish Tewari, the then Indian Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting, demanded for the immediate uplift of the ban calling it “a bar on ideas that could bring the people of the two countries closer if utilized effectively in shaping positive perceptions on both sides.” On the other hand, Pakistani channels have been fully banned in India throughout these years while a number of Indian channels and films have been freely accessible in Pakistan since 2002 after the lifting of the ban during Musharraf regime.

#### **ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN PAK-INDIA RELATIONS:**

Social media in recent times can play an extremely crucial role in creating a suitable atmosphere for strengthening bilateral relations between the two countries if used constructively.

However, it follows war journalism approach with evidently negative agenda. For example, at the time of Mumbai attacks in 2008, Indian social media conveniently declared an online media war against Pakistan and blamed it for carrying out the terrorists' attacks worldwide. From the other side of the border, Pakistani social media reciprocate and condemned Indian government and media for bringing the two countries at the brink of war.

Social media is often utilized for disseminating rumors and projecting propaganda. In absence of efficient gatekeepers and effective regulations, anyone can use this platform to communicate one's ideas, beliefs, news and analysis without realizing its consequences. Considering the fact that social media's reach has expanded to billions, the groundless information and propaganda could create havoc and cause serious damage to the peace process between the two conventional rivals.

**For example: The hashtag #nocricketwithpakistan** was trending on Twitter in 2009 at the anniversary of 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, as Indian social media users took offence to the BCCI's approval of a bilateral series. Secretary India, BCCI India, Anurag Thakur said at the occasion, "When it comes to Pakistan, it's not that easy to take calls. Five years back, there was no role of social media. Today you see a lot of reaction from social media, but you still can't say it's the sense of the entire country. At times you can't go only by social media; you have to look at the interests of the nation" (Secretary, 2015).

**Prime ministers' speeches at the 68<sup>th</sup> Independence Day,** Addressing India on its 68th Independence Day celebrations, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi took a sarcastic tone while mentioning longtime rival, Pakistan.

"What kind of life is this, inspired by terrorism? What kind of government setup is it that is inspired by terrorism? The world will know about it and that's sufficient for me," Modi said addressing the crowds from the Red Fort (Reporter, 2015).

The PM's reference to Pakistan comes a day after Pakistani PM Nawaz Sharif dedicated Pakistan's Independence Day to Kashmir's right to self-determination.

Most Indian and Pakistani news channels are of the opinion that he intentionally created a controversy and proved that India intervened in Baluchistan by adding that People of Baluchistan,

Gilgit and Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (POK) have thanked him a lot in the past few days and that he is grateful to them.

Pakistan's oldest English daily (Dawn, 2015) condemned Modi's speech, declaring his language "aggressive", and his comments about Pakistan, a breach of "diplomatic norms and threatening".

Meanwhile, *The Nation*, in an editorial exposed the violence in "Indian-administered Kashmir writing that Pakistan will extend its "diplomatic, political and moral support to the valiant people of Jammu and Kashmir till they get their right to self-determination" (Staff, 2015).

### **PAKISTANI SOCIAL ACTIVIST CAMPAIGN FOR KASHMIRIS :**

Kashmir has always been the major bone of contention between India and Pakistan. Both countries remain in the state of war at the LOC with routine exchange of fires between the border forces even in times of peace. Former US president, Bill Clinton declared it as "the most dangerous place on the earth", and one of the ancient most unresolved territorial dispute in the global history" .

Mainstream media of both the countries often exploit Kashmir issue and depict it sensationally that further damage the peace in the region. Social media set an even worse example and generally portray a minor incident of firing as a big conflict between the forces of the two traditional rivals that often put them under immense pressure to retaliate and assail the neighboring check post to hit the headlines for the public's sake.

Since 2015, dozens of Kashmiri civilians have been attacked, injured and killed following the Kashmir's freedom movement. As the atrocities of the Indian forces and use of pellet guns against civilians to blind hundreds of Kashmiris were simply neglected even blackout by the mainstream media, Pakistani social activist, Jibran Nasir has created an effective social media campaign that has taken the internet world by storm.

The campaign was titled as 'What if you knew the Victim? #IndiaCantSee #LetKashmirDecide' It featured photo-shopped pictures of gravely wounded 11 renowned celebrities, including Indian film actors, players, politicians and face book CEO Mark Zuckerberg as pellet attack victims with letters of victimized Kashmiris depicting true stories. (These disturbing images to raise Kashmir's voice are breaking the internet, 2015)

*The campaign states "Why do we need to glamorize a tragedy in order for people to pay attention. Does that make it more important?"*



The campaign hit a nerve on social media. On Facebook, the original post received 12,000 likes and more than a thousand comments. On Twitter, the campaign was retweeted 252 times, garnering positive feedback from a number of users who support an independent Kashmir.

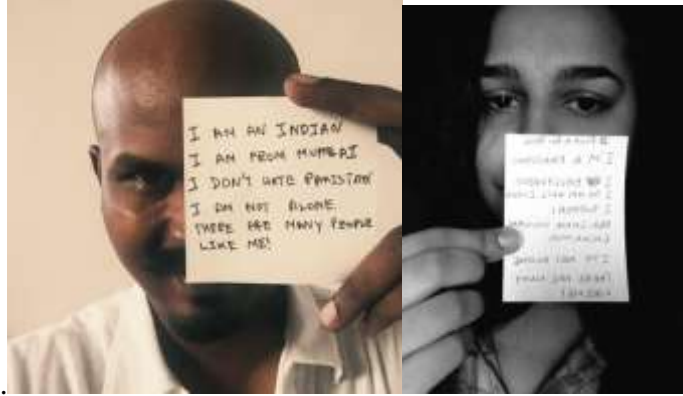
However, several users, especially Indian, many of them Indian criticized it as being one-sided and Pro-Pakistani. Mainstream Indian press also condemned it as biased. Times of India also criticized the initiative for "dragging" Indian celebrities into the "Kashmir row." None of the celebrities in the photo shopped pictures responded to the story. (Trending & why?)

## A social media campaign ‘I am an Indian...I don’t hate Pakistan’



From the other side of Wagah, a social media campaign initiated by Mumbai-based youth Ram Subramanian in 2015, won widespread public support from across the border despite strained ties between India and Pakistan. It started when Subramanian changed his profile picture on his social networking websites with a picture of himself holding out a post-it with the words: “I am an Indian. I am from Mumbai. I don’t hate Pakistan. I am not alone. There are many people like me”. He urged others likeminded people to do the same. Subramanian’s individual act soon turned into a viral trend, with people across Facebook, Twitter and Instagram expressing their support for the campaign by posting similar photos. “By the weekend, more than 15,000 people had changed their profile picture”, says a BBC report. The incredible response came from Kashmir to Kerala in India and from Lahore to Karachi in Pakistan. The campaigner asked in reaction “If this is

the majority then who it is who wants fight is my question?" (Seth,



2015).

**Analysis of Results and Discussion:** Currently the mainstream news media, including both newspapers, magazines and TV channels across the border, are likely to sensationalize the disputes between Pakistan and India for commercial gains and political scoring, while social media simply epitomize the same reactions and rumors in the much exaggerated and colloquial form that often push leadership of both the countries to take a strong stand against each other.

Anti-Pakistan feelings in India and anti-India sentiments in Pakistan are often the most popular trends on Twitter as well as on Facebook. It is the heart favorite theme of many bloggers and online opinion leaders who gain mass popularity instantly through their hate speeches, videos and writings, often based on sheer propaganda and rumors.

Social media has all the potential to redefine the relations between Pakistan and India. While mainstream media mostly have one-sided coverage of the incidents and issues according to its agenda, social media engage people by providing them a platform to share, discuss, debate and analyze all sorts of issues according to their own understanding, thus empower them to exercise citizen

journalism and diplomacy. Thus it enables individuals and groups to construct their own perception of Indo-Pak relation, based on free flow of ideas and internalization of norms.

As Mingst (1999) said, “Social media can be used to bring a major social change in the relations of the two countries, in the days to come.” Like other governments, including Pakistani and Indian authorities, have also started taking public reactions on social media seriously and it often leads them to mould their initiatives and policies to please the public and win its support.

In the due course, it is likely to lead the mainstream media to represent truth and influence policymakers to play a balanced role for improving the bilateral ties between Pakistan and India in the interest of this region, if used this power consciously. It requires a new kind of partnership between the media leadership of both the countries in order to ensure open, consistent and mutually beneficial communication with enhanced awareness and cordial respect for others.

**Conclusion:** The assumption that the social media could play a very unique and important role in developing conducive or hostile environment for better or worst relationship between India and Pakistan is proved to a great extent. Though social media is not the only significant factor, it is certainly one of the crucial factors that are responsible for dissemination of real time information, reporting of incidents, perception making, opinion building and agenda setting. Thus it seems to have a greater power that demands greater responsibility and understanding.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Being mirrors, media are bound to replicate reality. Thus if we want to improve the Pak-India relations, we need to work at the multiple fronts with the peaceful resolutions of the key disputes including Kashmir, Siachen, Kargil, Water sharing alongside

mutual cooperation to reduce cross border terrorism in the region, economic and trade cooperation, cultural and sports exchange, promotion of mass traveling by easing the visa and police reporting requirements for visitors as well as revision of text and history books to eradicate misunderstanding created through demonized and vilified information about the people of the other country.

A Code of conduct must be introduced to set the parameters regarding the use of distrustful, derogatory and hate language on media of both the countries against each other. The code of conduct must ensure a balanced and humanistic angle to the neighboring country without sacrificing objective reporting and freedom of expression.

All electronic, print and online media should be encouraged and motivated to devote regular space and sufficient time to dramatic, exciting, positive changes taking place in both countries in the development sector to learn more from each other's experiences

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