

Associate Paper

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Social Media in Pakistan: The War of the Narratives

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Key Points

- The “post-truth” age has inflicted serious harms on Pakistan.
- Fake news had a decisive impact on the 2018 general elections in Pakistan.
- Social media possesses the power to not only construct, but also deconstruct, a narrative.
- In Pakistan, the power of social media to unravel a narrative has seen the judiciary-military mix impose restrictions on it.
- Contrasting and competing narratives now leave many Pakistanis seeking the truth.

Summary

In Pakistan, the government’s efforts are underway to control social media because it has gained the power to deconstruct a narrative that had made people think and act in a desired way in the past. Social media has, however, made people aware of their past errors and prompted them to find the truth, thereby transcending the boundaries imposed by the judiciary-military mix.

Analysis

The [post-truth age](#) is fascinating in that it allows a disenfranchised person to wage a war without actually fighting it. Deterrence, be it nuclear or humanitarian, has made initiating a

war almost impossible. Nevertheless, the human penchant for violence remains. One way to satiate that violence is to launch a non-physical war that attacks narratives.

It is not important for a narrative to be true. It should, however, be sufficiently convincing as to create a desired perception. A narrative can be constructed around any event to put forward a perception that is removed from objectivity. A narrative serves the cause of building a perception to slake either an injured vanity or a suppressed desire for victory.

Vikram Sood's book, [*The Ultimate Goal: A Former R&AW Chief Deconstructs How Nations Construct Narratives*](#) (published in October 2020), is a fascinating exposition of the topic. Sood argues that narratives are not innocuous. Instead, they are contrived versions of a reality that are designed to meet a strategic objective. Narratives are meant for self-justification, designed by the narrator to counter, say, an act that rankles in the memory of a nation. It is for that reason that countries construct, sustain and control narratives, both at home and abroad; they do so not only to accentuate their own strength and position but also to ameliorate the guilt of past indecisions and inaccuracies.

Sood contends that in the past, intelligence agencies invariably played a critical role in building and shaping narratives by spreading fake news and disseminating disinformation through literature, history, drama, art, music and cinema. They chose to distort history and supported movies that purveyed a desired narrative to sway the minds of readers and viewers. Be it the Vietnam War or the Cold War, countries such as the US and the former Soviet Union permitted the rise of narratives to gratify the local populace. The building of perception, auspicious for a given country, remained a major goal. That was one avenue by which intelligence agencies became an indispensable tool of statecraft.

Sood narrates the success stories of building a narrative and the related perception. For instance, the US administration manipulated the minds of its citizens in the run-up to the Iraq War in 2003. Lately, China has struggled to reconstruct its standing in the world due to negative perception of it in the wake of the coronavirus crisis. As China valued its geopolitical and economic goals, it launched a counter-narrative to bridge broadening US-China rifts, especially when Donald Trump openly questioned its role in controlling the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic – a factor that went to the heart of the recently-held US presidential elections. China's effort was to make a narrative the perceived truth through persuasion. Nevertheless, the cost was borne by the Americans. There is an emerging competition within countries to control narrative-building between the media, the film industry, the religious institutions and the corporate world. Both, the spirit of democracy and the privilege of free speech, are in jeopardy as a result. Sood believes that the battle of narratives has never been as grim as it is today, because real power derives not from the barrel of a gun from but from those who control the narrative. Hence, it is imperative to control social media to regulate the narrative.

The book is an interesting one that allows the Pakistani reader to discover the reasons why the [freedom of social media](#) is also [in peril](#) in Pakistan. In February 2020, the Federal Cabinet of Pakistan approved the [Citizens Protection \(Against Online Harm\) Rules](#), asking social media companies such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to register themselves with the government within three months of the new rules coming into effect. Further, the

companies were asked to establish a permanent registered physical office in Islamabad within the same period. The companies were also required to [establish one or more database servers](#) in Pakistan within 12 months to record and store data and online content. If, for instance, a comment or other post on social media was pointed out as objectionable or fake news, the social media companies would be required to disable the account of the person who made the comment and, in the case of Pakistani citizens residing abroad, delete their posts. Moreover, Pakistan's [intelligence agencies](#) would have full access to the data and activities of the social media companies. The intelligence authorities, which are already averse to [dissent](#), would be empowered to take action against Pakistanis found guilty of targeting state institutions, such as the judiciary and the military, at home and abroad on social media. In the case of non-compliance, the social media company would be fined and banned. The social media companies have refused to submit to those requirements.

It is known that [fake news](#) played an important role in belittling and defaming Pakistan's former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his party during the campaign for the 2018 general election. One of the giants to spread the fake news was the person involved in the notorious [Mediagate issue](#), the scandal which revealed that certain media personalities were involved in accepting payment for staging talk shows. Further, Pakistan's Supreme Court disqualified Nawaz Sharif on [flimsy grounds](#) in the [Panama case judgement](#). The court [skewed the decision](#) against Nawaz Sharif in order to ensure his departure from Pakistani politics. Besides, the Supreme Court demonstrated its [incompetence](#) in its handling of such a delicate but vital matter. Some journalists were beaten by '[unknown assailants](#)' for exposing the truth. The [judicial-military nexus](#) decided the fate of the case. Consequently, both the Supreme Court and the military earned [notoriety](#) and are now out to [defend](#) their positions.

On 19 November, the Federal Cabinet of Pakistan rolled out new [social media rules](#) giving powers to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority to remove and block the digital content that harms, intimidates or excites disaffection towards the government or poses a threat to the integrity, security and defence of Pakistan. The [rules were titled](#) "Removal and Blocking of Unlawful Content (Procedure, Oversight and Safeguards) Rules, 2020" and framed under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, 2016. Given the latest rules, social media may [degenerate](#) from being an instrument of free speech to a medium of a controlled discourse. There are already reports that Pakistan's [top intelligence agency](#) spies on its own citizens in a bid to control social media. Nevertheless, the social media companies have [declared that](#) the rules would make it difficult for them to continue their operations in Pakistan.

It is observable that with the rise of globalisation after 1991, access to counter-narratives has increased several times over. People now judge the depth and authenticity of the narrative that they embraced years ago. They critically appraise narratives and the resultant perceptions. As a consequence, narratives are increasingly being rejected. Perceptions among people are also changing, reducing the control of the governments that seek to control narratives. Social media can deconstruct almost any narrative and blur consequent perception, which was a situation that was prized in the past. The deconstructing power of social media is a powerful adversary. Narratives based on non-realities are no longer tenable. Similarly, perception alone finds no legs to stand on.

In countries like Pakistan, the [war of narratives](#) is fought under the justification of repulsing a narrative after declaring it a counter-narrative. That situation, however, leaves people unable to judge which is a narrative and which a counter-narrative, which one is true and which one not. The situation demands more of ordinary people than of the government. Credulous people, as most Pakistanis are, usually choose to believe the narrative broadcast the state-sponsored propaganda machinery.

Social media is the nemesis of established narratives and perceptions. Like in other countries, in Pakistan, social media can deconstruct a given narrative and muddy its related perceptions. The phenomenon is more profound in urban areas that have access to the Internet. That is another reason why intelligence agencies seek to control social media. In Pakistan's electronic media, many hired anchor-persons purvey the narrative of their paymaster. Social media is similarly populated with paid agents who seek to divert the attention of the people from the role of the higher judiciary and the military in the current political situation.

The underlying fear is the power of social media to unravel a narrative; for instance, the one that led the people of Pakistan down a particular socio-political path in 2018. After the general election of 2018, the deconstructive power of social media took flight, forcing the judiciary-military mix to seek to control social media in Pakistan.

About the Author: Dr Qaisar Rashid is a Lahore-based freelance writer, who has contributed a weekly column for 15 years to various English-language dailies in Pakistan.

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