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Research Article

Social Media and Mob Violence: The Need for Effective Social Media Policy

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Abstract

Despite its immense potential for bringing about positive changes in personal and social lives, social media has frequently been used to incite people to violence in recent times. This trend is extremely harmful to national stability, and in turn, peace and harmony. It disrupts daily life and interrupts economic activity. It may cause doom and depression among the citizens, drive away foreign investors, and cripple national growth. The link between social media and mob violence can be best explained through the 'networked riot theory.' According to this theory, social media can accelerate violence. For the sake of domestic stability, the dangerous trend of societal polarization needs to be discouraged. The states have increasingly been compelled to develop policies to curb harmful activities through social media. This paper suggests a social media policy guideline to reduce societal polarization.

Keywords: Violence, Networked Riot Theory, Social Polarization, Social Media, Social Harmony.

Introduction

Experts recognize violence as a significant mental health problem.[1] Collective violence is more often the result of a mass frenzy. It is the result of perceived injustice and hurt by a group or a segment of society. Sometimes these feelings can develop and simmer for a long time. At other times, they can develop quickly, and a minor trigger can cause a public outburst that can spiral out of control.

Feelings of frustration and rage are exacerbated by prejudice and bigotry. Online intolerance has increased manifold.[2] This has polarized society

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in very dangerous ways. People are not willing to listen to other person's point of view, rather most internet users react to divergent opinions in a very violent manner. Hate-filled viral videos, memes demonising the opponents, and overt instructions to the followers on the social media to incite violence are not a rare news.[3] Social media trolls carryout online harassment and bullying through a of indecent language against those following a different school of thought.[4] In a matter of minutes, charged mobs have been sent on rampage to show their displeasure and disagreement with the opponents.[5] Such behaviors are not only destructive but extremely harmful to the peace and stability of any country.

Increasing polarization within society through the indiscriminate use of social media has become a real problem. It has been argued that in contemporary times, social media provides an alternative to mainstream media with frequent reference to the Arab Spring.[6] The issue is that in the absence of checks and controls and regulatory mechanisms, this potentially useful tool may become a source of spreading false information and fake news.[7] To address this challenge, the development and implementation of a comprehensive social media policy is vital to prevent rifts and heal perceived hurts, and eliminate growing polarization in society.

Current Debates

The literature on social media and mob violence is still developing and lacks a formal structure. Howard Rheingold introduced the concept of the 'smart mob' in 2002. He theorized that a crowd could be directed to participate in protests and riots as a result of the technology-driven synchronization of events.[8] This concept explained the development of a culture of participation, a high degree of networking and knowledge sharing, and the use of specialized information and communication technologies. Since Rheingold first broached this concept, the widespread use of mobile devices and ubiquitous computing has grown exponentially. This has matured within a web ecosystem that facilitates the interaction, engagement, and coordination of crowds towards social and political activism, using a wide variety of interconnected technological devices and systems.

Several authors have explored the 'Twitter Effect' and its power to incite violence. One noteworthy work has been done by the Turkish author Zeynab Tufecki. Her book gives a first-hand account and keen analysis of modern protest, revealing internet-fueled social movements' greatest strengths and frequent challenges.[9]

Miriyam Aouragh, an Egyptian scholar, extensively studied the Arab Spring and how it was shaped by the social media.[10] The sociologist Manuel Castells examined social movements, including those leading to riots and demonstrations, and how these evolved in the context of the internet and social media.[11] Dina Iordanova and Stuart Cunningham in their edited collection "Digital Disruption: Cinema Moves On- and Off-screen" also discuss the role of social media in shaping political and social movements.[12] These books and essay form an emerging corpus of literary works that explains the connection of social media with mob violence.

Theoretical Linkage of Mob Violence with Social Media

It is a fact that social media platforms have been effectively used in contemporary activism and protests to amplify and facilitate the spread of misinformation, rumors, and inflammatory content. This has rapidly mobilized large groups of individuals to indulge in acts of violence, unrest, or even riots. Several factors contribute to this phenomenon, some of which have been discussed below:

Information Dissemination: Social media allows information to spread rapidly across vast networks of users. When misinformation, fake news, or rumors about specific events, incidents, or individuals are shared widely, it can create a distorted perception of reality and trigger emotional responses, which may incite violence.

Echo Chambers and Polarization: Social media algorithms often reinforce users' existing beliefs and preferences by showing them content that aligns with their interests. This can lead to the formation of echo chambers, where like-minded individuals reinforce and amplify each other's viewpoints, increasing group polarization. In extreme cases, this can lead to the dehumanization of opposing groups, making violence more likely.

Anonymity and Disinhibition: Social media allows users to interact anonymously or with pseudonyms, reducing the sense of personal responsibility for their actions. This can lead to a lack of accountability for one's behavior, resulting in more aggressive and hostile online behavior that can spill over into real-world violence.

Instant Communication and Organization: Social media platforms enable real time communication and coordination among large groups of people.

This can be exploited to organize protests, demonstrations, or even violent actions quickly and efficiently.

Viral Content and Emotional Contagion: Emotionally charged content tends to go viral quickly on social media. Videos or images depicting violence, injustice, or incidents of perceived misconduct can evoke strong emotional reactions, further fuelling anger, fear, or outrage, which may lead to violence when channeled into offline actions.

Amplification of Grievances: Social media provides a platform for individuals and groups to voice their grievances and frustrations. When these grievances are shared and reinforced by a large audience, it can embolden people to take collective action, which can sometimes turn violent.

Amplified Visibility of Violence: Acts of violence are often recorded and shared on social media, garnering widespread attention and potentially inspiring others to take similar actions as they perceive it as a way to gain attention or address their own grievances.

It is essential to recognize that social media itself does not cause mob violence directly, but it can act as a catalyst or amplifier in certain situations, given how it is being used. Tackling this issue requires responsible use of social media platforms, critical thinking skills among users, fact-checking, and algorithmic changes by platform providers to mitigate the spread of harmful content. Additionally, promoting digital literacy and media literacy can empower users to be more discerning consumers of online information, reducing the negative impacts of misinformation and propaganda hence minimizing the risk of mob violence associated with social media**.**

"Networked Riot Theory" provides a framework linking social media with mob violence. This theory posits that social media platforms, with their ability to connect large groups of individuals instantly and facilitate the rapid spread of information, can contribute to the formation and escalation of mob violence.[13]

The term 'Networked Riot Theory' suggests that social media acts as a virtual network that connects individuals with shared grievances, frustrations, or ideologies. When a triggering event occurs, such as an incident of police brutality, social injustice, or a contentious political issue, the information and emotions surrounding the event can spread rapidly through social media networks.

As this information disseminates, it can create a sense of solidarity and mobilize individuals, who may not have been physically connected before. The anonymity and disinhibition allowed by social media can further embolden participants, reducing the perceived consequences of their actions.

The 'Networked Riot Theory' clearly links social media with mob violence. It argues that the network effect of social media can amplify emotional contagion, leading to heightened levels of anger, outrage, or fear among users. As these emotions intensify, they may translate into offline actions, culminating in mob violence, riots, or even civil unrest. The ease of coordination through social media platforms can also contribute to the organization and logistics of mass gatherings that can escalate into violence.

The dynamics of mob violence are multifaceted and context-specific. Nevertheless, this theory highlights the role of social media as a powerful tool that can influence the undercurrents of collective action and contribute to the emergence of mob violence in certain situations.

No specific individual or author can be credited with coining the term 'Networked Riot Theory'. It represents the collective thoughts of researchers and scholars in the fields of sociology, political science, and media studies, among others. The theory succinctly sums up various studies and analyzes the role of social media in collective action, including protests, riots, and civil unrest.

Misuse of Social Media Across the Globe

Social media has increasingly shaped conflicts and episodes of violence in contemporary times. This medium has established trajectories of violence and unrest. No divided society or context of conflict can be understood without considering how social media is being used by an array of state and non-state actors (NSAs). Indeed, critics have accused social media outlets of accepting too little responsibility for the use of their technologies to foment division and violence in unstable and conflict-affected societies.

In the context of social cleavages, political instability and insecurity, social media has often paved the path to systematic violent repression or mass killings. In many of those countries, where the risk of mass atrocity crimes is most pronounced, internet-savvy youth often outnumber the rest of the population. In the regions, where deadly armed conflict rages, combatants often wield a gun in one hand and a smartphone in the other. Their cameras

have been weaponized in a propaganda war uniting battlefields and cyberspace, unfortunately.

Deliberate misinformation, including false allegations and dehumanizing peripheral groups, have been enduring features of conflict over the ages. In the social media age, the process has been accelerated to an unprecedentedly. In global politics, some countries are employing fake news as a tool in hybrid warfare by disrupting of global order to achieve their strategic objectives through disinformation, impersonation of official institutions of other countries, resurrection of dead people, and creation of fake media etc. as has been the case of India.[14] At the societal level, the ease of access to social media has given every violent bigot the potential to use the public platform to fulfill his or her nefarious designs. For instance, the racist, who went on a killing spree in Masjid Noor in Christchurch live streamed the gory killing of his hapless victims to a bloodthirsty audience of like-minded morons.[15] The message of hate did not find traction thanks to the healing touch provided by New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern. Her expression of sympathy for Muslim citizens prevented an escalation for this gross and violent act. Her strategy of outreach clearly showed that she was siding with the victims and not the white supremacist.

Media regulations in various countries have evolved during the past decade and several countries have put several monitoring and regulatory checks on the social media platforms as well as the activity of individuals on them.[16] On the flip side, states have been complicit in spreading hate against their people, who are not part of the mainstream. Social media is a tool in the hands of states.[17] The anonymity of social media gives the state a means of plausible deniability. These states incubate and incite hatred and fan its flames across international borders. Conflict narratives, conspiracy theories, and extremist views quickly find a home on platforms where every voice competes for attention, and the moderate voices and restrained language necessary for peacebuilding are lost in the acrimonious din.

Social media platforms have been used to stigmatize ethnic and religious minorities. Violence has been legitimized and killers have been actively recruited. In India, social media has invigorated an aggressive, exclusionary Hindu nationalism; rumors and hate speech spread on WhatsApp have led to a number of mob attacks and lynching of Muslims on petty allegations of cow slaughter. A wide-ranging atrocities and human rights abuse has been carried out against Muslims in Kashmir and other parts. This

has resulted in genocide, mass killing, and systematic violent repression in the Indian Illegally Occupied Jammu and Kashmir (IIOJK).[18]

Likewise, in the troubled state of Manipur in North Eastern India, the indigenous Kuki people have been suffering at the hands of the more dominant Hindu Meiteis. The conflict sparked violence when a viral video showing two Kuki women being paraded naked by the Meitei rankled the sensibilities of the oppressed class. The outraged people took the law into their own hands and burnt the house of the accused perpetrator of the crime.[19]

Moreover, in Sri Lanka, the majority of religious groups have been spreading rumors on social media encouraging anti-Muslim mobs to attack Muslim places of worship. This anti-Muslim tirade was reignited in the wake of Easter Sunday church and hotel bombings by ISIS in April 2019.[20]

Political leaders, rebel groups, activists and ordinary civilians have all used social media as a tool for communication. Even in the most fragile and divided societies, where internet access remains minimal, such as South Sudan, the role of social media is growing, as traditional media landscapes and technologies rapidly transform.[21] In the civil war in Sudan between rival army factions, social media has also been used to goad followers to resort to acts of violence.[22]

Similarly, social media platforms have been used by all sides in Syria's devastating conflict. Videos uploaded to YouTube have received hundreds of millions of views. This unending civil war is being dubbed as a 'social media war.'[23]

The Rohingya have been persecuted by Myanmar's Buddhist majority for decades. The Facebook platform has further exacerbated the situation. It has been claimed that the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's armed forces, has used Facebook to boost propaganda against the Rohingya and to amass public support for a military campaign of rampant killings, rape, and arson targeting this predominantly Muslim minority.[24]

The propensity of state actors and NSA to use social media for spreading their ideologies is no more a covert phenomenon. Even the Taliban leader Anas Haqqani entered into the social media war between Twitter (now renamed X) and Threads, by stating that he preferred Elon Musk's platform because it did not restrict his freedom of speech.[25]

In conflict zones, a wide range of armed groups rely on social media platforms for a range of activities: to coordinate movements, recruit supporters and fighters, glorify victories and dispute opposing narratives, and solicit funds. The so-called Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) has employed similar tactics. During its ascendancy, the fear instilled by graphic videos of executions, attacks, and other content distributed through its sophisticated online presence encouraged many members of minorities to flee the territory under its control. With the collapse of the group's self-described caliphate in Iraq and Syria, the organization has now moved to other countries including Afghanistan. It is now increasingly relying on social media to increase its footprint and spread its agenda of virulent ideologies and hate.[26]

In the civil war raging in Central African Republic (CAR) religious and ethnic divides have been stoked through online hate campaigns by rival groups. Existing inter-communal animosities between Muslim and Christian citizens of the country have been heightened through inflammatory misinformation and disinformation. Acrimonious broadcasts on social media have spiraled quickly into violence and caused apprehensions worldwide.[27]

Interstate rivalries have also been increased through the aggressive use of social media. Some countries have used 'bot armies' to legitimize their bombing campaigns resulting in the death of innocent civilians. Tensions between India and Pakistan have been encouraged by the trending of rival Twitter hashtags by nationalists in the two countries.[28]

Even advanced countries like the United States (US) are not immune to racial, ethnic, or political violence spread through social media. There have been spontaneous protests and riots after police brutality incidents went viral on social media. The movement 'Black Lives Matter' owes its existence to social media.[29]

On the political front, former President Donald Trump has been the most active user of social media. A real estate tycoon and a reality show presenter Trump turned to politics in his seventies. He won the presidential elections against all expectation in 2016 by shaping public opinion after finding out the likes and dislikes of the potential voters. He hired the company Cambridge Analytica to collect voter data for his election campaign. The firm harvested private information of more than 50 million users without their permission from their Facebook profiles. This was one of the largest data leaks in the social network's history. This allowed the company to exploit the private social media activity of a huge swath of the American electorate,

developing techniques that underpinned its work on former President Trump's campaign in 2016.[30]

After he lost elections for a second term against his own expectations, he refused to accept the results and exhorted his followers to attack the seat of the government. On January 6, 2021, his followers stormed the US Congress to thwart the certification of Joe Biden's election victory. As the furious mob of the Proud Boy movement headed towards Capitol Hill, Trump spoke to them, urging them to make their voices felt. He used his personal twitter handle to urge Vice President Mike Pence to send the result back to the states so that they could correct it.[31] The violence that took place on Capitol Hill shook the American nation. Never before had in recent history violent crowds resorted to this kind of hooliganism that endangered the lives of their public representatives. Finally, to prevent Trump from participating in the next elections, the US government has indicted him under several charges.

Case Study of Pakistan

Pakistan is no stranger to violence that has been spread through social media. When Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in Rawalpindi on December 27, 2007,[32] the news spread like wildfire across the country through mainstream and social media. The rage and fury exploded all across the country. Public and private property was torched and ATMs were looted. The reaction was strongest in her native province of Sindh, where slogans were raised against the state. The chants of Pakistan *na khape* (we do not want Pakistan) were gaining in strength. Better sense prevailed, and violent crowds were kept in check by the widower Asif Zardari, who asked the crowds to chant Pakistan *khape* (We want Pakistan) instead.[33]

Similar fury was experienced, in May 2023, when news of the arrest of a former prime minister caused a frenzy of violence in all major cities. Violent crowds went on rampage in almost all major cities of the country. In an attempt to express anger against the military leadership, the iconic Jinnah House was raided and Radio Pakistan, Peshawar studio was razed to the ground. The gates of the General Headquarters of military (GHQ) were stormed and monuments of war heroes and memorials dedicated to them were vandalized and defaced. Social media was actively used to direct the crowds and to indicate to them the strategically selected targets for delivering a strong political message. Travel advisories asked people to avoid places, where the crowds had taken law into their own hands.[34]

Hate narrative churned out on the social media created strong feelings against the government and those holding dissimilar political, ethnic or religious views. This constant stream of abuse incited crowds and mobs to violence.

Existing Body of Laws

No matter what is understood by the freedom of speech in a country,[35] there are always legal and moral limits. These limits are set by political and cultural norms acceptable in a society. One thing is certain no one accepts free speech as a medium to spread anarchy in society.

In Pakistan, the debate about the effectiveness of restricting social media to prevent violence when tensions are running high has attracted a lot of comments from various stakeholders. While many governments impose social media controls in an attempt to lessen dissent or division, easing restrictions can unintentionally empower and unite extreme voices. No society can prevent violence or build peace without building a set of laws to control unregulated social media. This is necessary to prevent the risk of mass killing of innocent people caught in the crossfire of hate.

The social media penetration has created effectively unregulated platforms for the dissemination of hatred against minorities. Longstanding support for freedom of expression has been subverted into widespread societal tolerance for the expression of violent extremism such as the burning of holy scriptures. Governments have universally failed to live up to their obligations not just to protect freedom of expression but also to prohibit any 'advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence', as required by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Article 20 no. 2.[36]

In Pakistan, several laws exist to prevent and deter rumourmongering that can cause violence. Section 505 (2) of the Pakistan Penal Code (PPC) criminalizes hate speech. It states:[37]

> *Whoever makes, publishes or circulates any statement or report containing rumour or alarming news with intent to create or promote, or which is likely to create or promote, on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language, caste or community or any other ground whatsoever, feelings of enmity, hatred or ill-will between different religious, racial, language or regional groups or castes or communities,*

> *shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to seven years and with fine.*

Anti-Terrorism Act 8 (for prohibition of acts intended or likely to stir up sectarian hatred) states:[38]

> *A person who- (a) uses threatening, abusive or insulting words or behaviours; or (b) displays, publishes or distributes any written material which is threatening, abusive or insulting; or (c) distributes or shows or plays a recording of visual images or sounds which are threatening, abusive or insulting; or (d) has in his possession written material or a recording or visual images or sounds which are threatening, abusive or insulting with a view to their being displayed or published by himself or another, shall be guilty of an offence if- (i) he intends thereby to strip up sectarian hatred; or (ii) having regard to all the circumstances, sectarian hatred is likely to be stirred up thereby.*

Act 10 relating to Cyber terrorism in Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA 2016) states:

> *Whoever commits or threatens to commit and, of the offences under sections 6. 7, 8 or 9, where the commission or threat is with the intent to- (a) coerce, intimidate, create a sense of fear, panic or insecurity in the (involvement or the public or a section of the public or community or sect or create a sense of fear or insecurity in society; or (b) advance inter-faith, sectarian or ethnic hatred; (c) advance the objectives of organisations or individuals or groups proscribed under the law. shall be punished with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to fourteen years or with fine which may extend to fifty million rupees or with both.*
> *l0A. Hate speech - Whoever prepares or disseminates information. through any information system or device. that advances or is likely to advance inter-faith, sectarian or racial hatred, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to seven years or with fine or with both.*

Two points in the National Action Plan (NAP) of 2014 are also worth noting: Point no 5: 'Strict action against the literature, newspapers and magazines promoting hatred, extremism, sectarianism and intolerance;' Point no. 14: 'Measures against abuse of internet and social media for terrorism.'

The revised NAP clubbed these two points together in a single point: Point No 2: 'Action Against Spread of Terrorism Through Media (Electronic, Print & Social Media) Communication & Cyber networks.'[39]

Human rights activists contest the blanket use of the term 'hate speech.' In their opinion this can curb the citizen's right to freedom of expression on a digital platform. In this context, and in light of the latest effort by the National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) to introduce a smartphone application to report hate speech, it is important to consider the hate speech laws here, explore the history of their use, evaluate the problems with them, and then conclude on the effectiveness, if any, of such an application for the public.[40]

The PPC Articles invoked: once the case(s) are brought up for hearing in a court of law, it will provide a legal precedence for preventing and deterring a repeat of ugly incidents of violence.

Policy Guidelines for Social Media

The existing laws cited above can form the basis of a sensible social media policy. This policy does not have to be gag orders or wholesale censorship. Instead, it should focus on fostering constructive dialogue, encouraging critical thinking, and promoting responsible online behavior.

Flag Violence Indicators: Multiple safety layers should be deployed to flag indicators of violence. Social media sources spreading hate and violence should be identified and legally closed before their narrative achieves a critical mass. It has been argued by experts that social media content of influential people like former US President Trump on his gullible followers should be flagged on social media platforms to prevent violence.[41] This is easier said than done because it will be contested by those preaching free speech.

Encourage Thoughtful Dialogue: A crucial aspect of combating polarization is to create an online environment that fosters open and respectful discussion. Social media platforms should actively encourage users to engage in meaningful conversations by implementing features that promote thoughtful dialogue. For instance, algorithms can be adjusted to prioritize posts that generate constructive debates and offer diverse perspectives, rather than reinforcing echo chambers. Moreover, platforms can introduce tools that allow users to tag content as 'debate-worthy' or 'controversial,' making it

easier for individuals with differing opinions to engage in meaningful exchanges.

Promote Media Literacy and Fact Checking: To reduce polarization, individuals must be equipped with the necessary skills to navigate and evaluate information critically. Social media policies should emphasize the importance of media literacy and promote initiatives that enhance critical thinking abilities. Platforms can collaborate with educational institutions to develop educational campaigns and programs that teach users how to distinguish between reliable and misleading information, fact-check claims, and identify bias in content.[42] By promoting media literacy, individuals become more discerning consumers of information, reducing the likelihood of falling prey to manipulative or polarizing narratives.

Enhance Transparency and Accountability: Social media policies should encourage transparency in content moderation processes, ensuring that decisions are made based on clear guidelines and objective criteria. Platforms should publicly disclose their content policies and make efforts to communicate with users regarding the reasoning behind specific content removals or warnings. Additionally, social media companies should establish mechanisms for users to appeal decisions and provide explanations for automated content moderation actions. By promoting transparency and accountability, social media platforms can instill trust among users and allay suspicions of bias or unfair treatment.

Encourage Civil Discourse and Respectful Behaviour: To defeat polarization, social media policies should encourage users to engage in civil discourse and promote respectful behavior online. Platforms should implement stricter enforcement of community guidelines that discourage hate speech, harassment, or personal attacks. Additionally, proactive measures can be taken, such as providing users with reminders on respectful online conduct, implementing AI-driven tools to detect and flag offensive content, and creating user-friendly reporting mechanisms for abusive behavior. By fostering an online culture of mutual respect and constructive engagement, social media platforms can contribute to reducing polarization.

Collaborate with External Organizations: To create an effective social media policy, collaboration with external organizations is crucial. Social media platforms should engage with experts in psychology, sociology, and digital ethics to gain insights into the underlying causes of polarization and develop evidence-based strategies for eliminating it. Additionally, partnerships with

non-profit organizations (NPOs), academic institutions, and government bodies can help in developing educational programs, conducting research, and implementing policies that address societal polarization effectively.

Conclusion

Societal polarization caused by toxic narrative-building through social media should be carefully analyzed and studied. The urge to craft a one-size-fits-all all solution should be avoided. A wide set of violent incidents resulting from social media-driven rhetoric needs to be carefully examined. The triggers and their linkages with social media broadcasts need to be established.[43]

Developing linkages between academia and practitioners for formulating a logical and effective policy can lead towards finding a practical set of guidelines for eliminating nuisances of social media. Further inputs from members of the civil society, digital rights activists, lawyers, parliamentarians, journalists from the mainstream as well as social media and law enforcement agencies can help form holistic social media policy for the country.

A comprehensive social media policy should advocate thoughtful dialogue, critical thinking, transparency, accountability, and respectful behaviour. These are significant steps towards eliminating polarization in the society. The responsibility lies not only with social media platforms but also with individuals to engage responsibly online, challenge their own biases, and seek diverse perspectives. By working collaboratively, we can harness the potential of social media to bridge divides, foster understanding, and build a more inclusive and cohesive society. Only an imaginative and proactive strategy can stop violence from spiraling out of control.

Notes

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