

New Media as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare: Analyzing Pakistan's Case

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Abstract

The hybridity of warfare has been a long-standing phenomenon, yet the term has become more popular in recent years. Its revival has largely come in the context of misinformation and disinformation campaigns within and among states, targeted at and by varied actors in the world today. Manipulation of information has become a feature of our globalized world as communication media continuously proliferate – hence the rise of 'New Media'. To explicate the intrinsic link of media with disinformation and hybrid conflict, this study centers on Pakistan's case and answers the question, 'how new media may impact Pakistan's national security?'. It argues that the fundamental challenge lies in the possibility of new media being employed as a tool of hybrid warfare against Pakistan. The argument is qualitatively substantiated using existing academic literature and primary factual data collected from new media platforms (primarily X (formerly twitter) and You Tube between 2021-2023. The data-based-findings helped to establish how new media is already being employed for subversive purposes in and against Pakistan. The argument seeks theoretical support from Shaw and McComb's agenda-setting theory that emphasized traditional media's ability to influence, direct, and shape perception regarding what issues are 'imminent' and 'important' while relegating others down the agenda. Comparably, New Media's agenda-setting potential allows faster spread of mis- and disinformation (without credibility checks) – thus posing a hybrid challenge. The study is significant in terms of clearly establishing this equation between New Media and hybrid warfare – that may be replicable to cases of other states and societies.

Key Words: New Media, Hybrid Warfare, Agenda-setting, Misinformation, Fake News

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Introduction

The link between media and politics has long existed and is well researched. In simplest terms, Media (a plural of medium) collectively refers to the means of mass communication – including broadcasting, publishing, and the internet. Media's traditional role was one of manufacturing consent², in a direction of states' choosing. However, with progress from conventional print and electronic media to mass/social media, states' control over the outcome of information dissemination got challenged. Undoubtedly a tool of mass communication and influence that makes information reach to the target audience with relative ease, media has also played a role in spreading unwanted or undesired content. This comes as a byproduct of rapid technological advancement that has transformed media into a complex entity. To the exiting print and electronic media platforms, the rise of 'New Media' adds further complexity by enhancing multilayered vulnerabilities. New Media is any media – from newspaper articles and blogs to music and podcasts – delivered digitally.

Social science research already recognizes media as a non-kinetic weapon, especially when discussing the hybridity of threats to human existence today.³ Despite hybridity's archaic link with warfighting, the term hybrid warfare has gained greater usage over the past decade or so. Information misuse is the most common tool of hybrid warfare that plays into adversary's hands, enabled by media's wide-scale employment and access. Therefore, the role of media finds a central mention in majority discussions on hybrid warfare in the 21st century⁴ - reinforcing its linkage to security. Through media, a target's information environment may be accessed to spread fake news and steer public opinion to achieve the set goals. Promoting divisive narratives between the state and its people undermines national cohesion that aids the pursuit of foreign agendas.

Placed in the said context, this study probes into the challenges that Pakistan faces with the rise of New Media. The link between traditional media and hybrid war against Pakistan is well acknowledged⁵ (by country's strategic community and policy elite) and provides the rationale for current research. As the discourse on Pakistan's experience with hybrid warfare has evolved,

² Edward Herman & Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York City: Pantheon, 1988), <https://chomsky.info/consent01/>.

³ C.A. Gillis, "Media as the Dominant Factor in Modern Conflict," *Canadian Forces College*, 2015.

⁴ "Social Media as a tool of hybrid warfare", *NATO Strategic Communications Centre for Excellence*, 2016.

⁵ Sajjad Hussain et. al., "Role of Media in Hybrid Warfare in Pakistan: How to Convert Challenges into Opportunities," *Journal of South Asian Studies* 11 (03): 2023, 231-241.

employment of media - both as a weapon against, and as a counterstrategy has been discussed.⁶ New Media may thus be feared to become just another tool of such warfare in the country. Therefore, it is pertinent to explore and document its impact on Pakistan, in order to better equip and prepare the country for the challenges ahead.

The primary research question that this research addresses is, (i) how the New Media may impact Pakistan's security? The subsidiary questions addressed along the primary one are: (ii) What is New Media and how is it differentiated from other media? (iii) Why is the New Media seen as a rising challenge for states? and (iv) how has the rising use of New Media impacted Pakistan? The objective of research thus is to highlight the unique features of New Media and to explore the impact these may have for national security in Pakistan's case.

A review of literature helps identify the gap(s) in existing discourse on the subject. First come the source lying at the intersection of media's information function and hybrid conflict. Hoffman's⁷ and Joseph Nye's⁸ works have contributed towards conceptualizing media's role in hybrid warfare. Those specifically establishing the role of media in waging information and cyber warfare through spreading dis- and misinformation are also numerous.⁹ A few works focus on Russia's information operations adding hybridity to conflict environments.¹⁰ Similarly, multiple sources talk about hybrid threats as a challenge for Pakistan¹¹ yet few emphasize directly on the role of media as an instrument for that.¹²

⁶ Haseeb Ur Rehman Warraich, Muhammad Waqas Haider and Tahir Mahmood Azad, "Media as an Instrument of Hybrid Warfare: A Case Study of Pakistan" *Global Mass Communication Review* VI (I): 2021, 12-27.

⁷ Frank G. Hoffman, "Conflict in the 21st century: The rise of Hybrid wars," *Potomac Institute for Policy Studies*, 2007.

⁸ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Cambridge: Public Affairs books, 2004).

⁹ C. J. Hamelink, *Media and conflict: Escalating evil* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2011); Mary Aikin, *The Cyber Effect: A pioneering cyberpsychologist explains how human behavior changes online* (New York; Spiegel and Grau, 2016).

¹⁰ Edward Lucas and Peter Pomerantsev, "Winning the Information War: Techniques and counterstrategies to Russian propaganda in Central and Eastern Europe," *Centre for European policy Analysis*, 2016; Ofer Fridman, *Russian Hybrid Warfare: Resurgence and Politicization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹¹ Tahir Azad and Muhammad Waqas Haider, "Cyber Warfare as an Instrument of Hybrid Warfare: A Case Study of Pakistan," *South Asian Studies* 36 (2): 2021; Javeria Jahangir & Naheed Bashir, "Fifth Generation and Hybrid Warfare: Response Strategy of Pakistan," *Academic Journal of Social Sciences* 6 (2): 2022; Imtiaz Hussain Naz, "Foreign Policy in Hybrid Warfare Environment – Way Forward for Pakistan," *Margalla Papers* 25 (1): 2021; Mian Nadir Sulaiman, "Fighting Hybrid: Hybrid Threats to Pakistan's National Security," *Pakistan Perspectives* 28 (1): 2023; Hafiz Imran Ahmed Qureshi & Iram Khalid, "Hybrid Warfare in the 21st Century: Implications for Pakistan," *Journal of Development and Social Sciences* 5 (4): 2024; Tughrul Yamin, "Hybrid Warfare – Challenges for Pakistan," *Strategic Thought* 1 (1): 2021.

¹² Zainab Khan & Abdul Wajid Khan, "Role of ISPR in Countering Hybrid Warfare," *Human Nature Journal of Social Sciences* 1 (1): 2020; Sajjad Hussain et al., "Role of Media in Hybrid Warfare in Pakistan," 2023.

The second category of literature reviewed was related to challenges of New Media specifically. The challenges these works have associated with New Media (digitized mass-access platforms) include misinformation and disinformation spread through fake news via social media¹³; New Media's algorithmic bias creating filter bubbles and echo-chambers with reinforce negative emotions/sentiments¹⁴; the socio-cultural and economic effects¹⁵; and the enlarging threat of polarization and eroding democratic values across states.¹⁶

The last strand of reviewed literature is one detailing the impact of New Media on Pakistan specifically. Zafar et al. have elaborated social media's role in improving the political socialization of youth¹⁷, while Baqir et al. have analyzed X/twitter data between 2018 and 2022 for its impact on political polarization in the country.¹⁸ Social media has become a central instrument of political awareness and opinion-framing among youth.¹⁹ A recent work uncovers the misuse of social media for derailing democratic values and processes including elections.²⁰ Research has worked upon the positive²¹ and negative²² socio-cultural impact of digital media on university students in (Pakistani) Punjab. How social media fed misinformation related to public health sector during Covid-19 has also been established.²³ Manzoor and Shahzad have highlighted the deteriorating media ethics and substandard journalism in South Punjab as one impact of digital-social media.²⁴

¹³ Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, "Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election." *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 31 (2): 2017; C. Wardle & H. Derakshan "Information Disorder: Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policy making," *Council of Europe*, September 27, 2017.

¹⁴ Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: What the Internet is Hiding from You* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011); Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: NYU Press, 2018).

¹⁵ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011); Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

¹⁶ Robert W. McChesney, *Digital Disconnect: How Capitalism is Turning the Internet Against Democracy* (New York NY: New Press, 2013)

¹⁷ Zubaida Zafar, Ruqia Kalsoom and Maria Jafar, "Impact of social media on socio-political socialization of Youth in Pakistan," *Journal of Policy Research* 10 (2): 2024.

¹⁸ Anees Baqir, Alessandro Galeazzi, Andrea Drocco and Fabiana Zollo, "Social media polarization reflects shifting political alliances in Pakistan," *Social and Information Networks* 2023, <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2309.08075>.

¹⁹ M. M. Ali, A. M. Alaa and Ambreen Shahnaz, "The impact of mobile learning in English language classrooms in Pakistan," *Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education* 9 (1): 2024.

²⁰ Sudaish Kumari, Sahr Rafaqat and Tooba Shabbir, "Misuse of social media: Impacts on Pakistan politics," *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 9 (1): 2025.

²¹ H. K. Tareen and M. Adnan, "Political communication with Social media in Pakistan: Internal and External efficacy," *Global Social Sciences Review* VI (II): 2021.

²² Ghulam Safdar, "Effects of digital media on Pakistani culture" A study of university students of Punjab, Pakistan," *Online Media and Society* 3: 2022.

²³ Haroon et al., "Investigating misinformation dissemination on social media in Pakistan," 2021, <https://arxiv.org/abs/2106.09338>

²⁴ Samia Manzoor and M. A. Shahzad, "Impact of Social Media on Media Ethics of Journalists in South Punjab, Pakistan," *Pakistan Social Sciences Review* 8 (3): 2024.

The existing works have established the role of media as a tool of hybrid warfare, the challenges associated with its rise, and its impact on Pakistani state and society. However, comprehensive academic research that links the rising use of ‘New Media’ to the context of Pakistan’s hybrid warfare challenge, has not been found. This study therefore argues that ‘New Media brings greater challenges for Pakistan’s security, by being employed as a tool of hybrid warfare against it’.

The said argument has been substantiated qualitatively through the collection and representation of factual data. A simplified form of content-analysis (analyzing selected content from New Media platforms) has been employed. Case/instances displaying the exploitative use of New Media vis-à-vis Pakistan have been extracted from New Media platforms – primarily Twitter(X) and YouTube - and documented for validating the argument. Furthermore, to theoretically relate the findings based on factual data, agenda-setting theory has provided the main conceptual frame.

This work is significant for its contribution to the larger discourse on New Media and hybrid warfare. It establishes the use and employment of New Media as an instrument of hybrid warfare – something already unfolding in Pakistan’s case. Facts have been collected to anchor the proposed argument. Another significance comes with the use of agenda-setting theory – one that evolved in relation to traditional media but is being extended here to study ‘New Media’. The point of emphasis being that the speedy dissemination and mass accessibility of New Media only enhances its agenda-setting potential.

The remainder of the article is *organized* into four sections. The second section describes the defining features of the New Media, its differentiating features and tools. Towards the end, this section also provides a brief overview of agenda-setting theory that is employed as a conceptual frame here. The third section elaborates on the challenges associated with the rise of New Media, i.e., what allows it to be used as weapon against states and also describes the extent of access to New Media in Pakistan. The fourth section documents and studies the cases where New Media has been employed as a tool of hybrid warfare against Pakistan. This is followed by the conclusion that caps the main findings of this research.

Understanding New Media and its Distinguishing Features

New Media is the latest addition to the list of media available to states for effective communication and outreach. It is an ever-more online and digital way of exchanging information than the regular

press, print, and electronic media. It is easily accessible to the masses and is believed to give voice to the unvoiced. *New Media is any media – from newspaper articles and blogs to music and podcasts – delivered digitally. From a website or email to mobile phones and streaming apps, any internet-related form of communication can be considered New Media.*²⁵

New Media relies on digital means to communicate, opposed to traditional print and electronic media.²⁶ It is accessible through digital devices such as computers, laptops, mobile phones, and tablets.²⁷ It includes web-based digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, in addition to YouTube, information communication and storage apps, gaming applications, and digitized platforms like blogs, websites, podcasts, email, and internet ads.²⁸

New Media relies heavily on digital transmission channels facilitated by advancements in satellite, digital cables and fiber-optic communications. The latest information coming from traditional media can be stored and assessed anytime in New Media. Anyone can create an account on digital media to express themselves, where information storage and ease of access provides avenues for greater creativity, collaboration and community engagement that may bring greater convergence – if that be the end goal sought.

Elements constituting New Media

Three elements are responsible for disseminating any information on New Media. First are the ‘Agents’ who produce the content. Officials/citizens of any state organization can be agents. They may belong to any political party, religious or ethnic group, or can be non-state actors, or individuals. Agents’ agendas differ as per their identities, e.g., states, political parties, religious groups, and non-state actors (multi-national companies and terrorists) will all have diverse agendas and target audience. Agents make and disseminate latest content for seeking either prestige, financial gains or for influencing others.

The second element is ‘Messages’, which can be either malicious, informative, or entertaining. A message has four characteristics: a good piece of information; the repetition of that information; it provokes an emotional response; and it contains images or video. The messages are drafted according to the agenda and target audiences. Some messages may be relevant to ongoing

²⁵ Joe Cote, “What is New Media?”, *Southern New Hampshire University*, September 23, 2022, accessed January 29, 2025.

²⁶ Margaret Rouse, “New Media,” *Techopedia*, May 20, 2022, <https://www.techopedia.com/definition/416/new-media>

²⁷ Lauryn Peterson, “What is Digital Media and How Can It Help Your Business?” *DIGITALLOGIC*, accessed January 29, 2024, <https://www.digitallogic.co/blog/what-is-digital-media/>

²⁸ Ibid

situations; for example, when relating to a political development, historical event, leader, or religion, the message may have a longer life.

The third element is the ‘interpreter’, who receives message, and can either spread or debunk the message through his or her emotional or logical response respectively. Interpretations of neutral and passionate observers greatly vary. The message can be interpreted in these three ways: a “hegemonic interpretation,” interpreted as it is a “negotiated interpretation” that accepts a part but not the entire message; and “oppositional interpretation,” which rejects the content of that message. The interpreter understands the messages based on his or her academic qualification, biases, socio-cultural status, ethnicity, experience, and political and religious affiliation. The psychological health of an interpreter also matters in understanding the message.

Dissemination Tools for New Media

Artificial Intelligence (AI) created a new tribe known as the “Digital Tribe” on social media. As a result, like-minded people are becoming closer digitally, and those with opposite views are becoming distant. Traditional media now also uses New Media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X and YouTube etc. to reach audiences that do not use traditional media.

- ***Memes***

Memes are short messages- images of anything, an idea, and behaviors spread from one user to another. The meme can be in the form of text, picture, and video. It is a digital trend to engage the audience, spread disinformation, convince the audience of the campaign, and market the product. Memes are used for trolling of public figures, advertising, commenting on current events, and sharing the content with like-minded people to express oneself. They may be shared and reshared without having a copyright issue.

- ***Social Media Bots***

Social Media Bots are software programs that are used to operate the internet. They are assigned repetitive actions without human instruction. There are two types of bots: Social media bots and chatbots.²⁹ Humans can manage thousands of social media bots, but chatbots require human intervention to perform. Chatbots give responses to any input, are faster than humans and available 24/7. Bots significantly affect the information flow on social media and can be used to spread fake information. Bot accounts are created to increase fake followers, spread false information, get

²⁹ “What is a social media bot? Social media bot definition,” *Cloudflare*, accessed January 29, 2025, <https://www.cloudflare.com/learning/bots/what-is-a-social-media-bot/>.

more attention, and influence audience for specific agenda. Around 15% of bot accounts are present on Twitter.³⁰

Bot accounts are non-organic (social media) accounts that automatically upload content on social media. Now, Facebook has over 60 million bot accounts.³¹ Multiple types of bots include fake followers, spam bots, promoter bots, phishing bots, followers' bots, impersonation bots, self-promotion bots, survey, and spam bots.³² The bot accounts pose a significant challenge as these can be used as political tools in campaigns to change public opinion and spread propaganda.

▪ **Hashtags**

The hashtag symbol (#) is used before the keyword on social media posts. It is primarily used on Twitter, but is also used on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Pinterest, TikTok, and LinkedIn.³³ It develops friends' and other users' interest in posts and critical issues. It helps users to find relevant content and trends on social media to expand influence in the target audience.³⁴ While writing/ -- Hashtags, 1) the user can use numbers, 2) punctuation or symbols cannot be used, 3) there is no space between words, 4) it can be at any place of post, like in the middle, end, or beginning. Specific hashtags can attract a bigger audience, as people other than followers and friends can also find the hashtag. Hashtag on Twitter is used to converse with users who do not even follow.

Bots and trolls can generate trends to produce pre-set conversations that blame and defame any political or religious leader and state institution. During the 2016 US elections, 23-27% of conversations were generated by automated accounts³⁵, and 40% fake conversations during Covid-19 were bot generated.³⁶ Another example of hashtags is the Branded Hashtags. They generate conversation on a political leader, political events or crises, and slogans.

³⁰ David M.J Lazer, Matthew A Baum, Yochai Benkler, Adam J Berinsky, Kelly Greenhill, "The science of fake news", *Science* 359 (6380): 2018.

³¹ Scott Shane and Mike Isaac, "Facebook Says It's Policing Fake Accounts. But They're Still Easy to Spot," *The New York Times*, November 2017.

³² Ibid.

³³ Clodagh O'Brien, "How to Use Hashtags Effectively on Social Media," *Digital Marketing Institute*, January 8, 2022, access date January 29, 2025, <https://digitalmarketinginstitute.com/blog/how-to-use-hashtags-in-social-media>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Shane and Isaac, *The New York Times*, 2017.

³⁶ Sana Jamil Khan, "Did WhatsApp fail us during the pandemic?" *The Express Tribune*, March 2021.

▪ ***Trends***

Rapidly proliferating true and false information often becomes trends on New Media. Trends are not permanent and continuously evolve alongside political events. The text, photos, memes, hashtags, audio, and video would generate a trend relevant to an ongoing social or political issue where more and more people share these, generating feelings of fun, anger, and sadness. Fake accounts (bots) help to keep the trend longer. Algorithms keep proliferating content that is popular among users giving it more visibility among target audience.

Evident from the above discussion, New Media's distinguishable features compared to traditional media are: its digital accessibility, greater user friendliness, unmatched freedom for content creation, weaker credibility-checks, and faster information dissemination. These collectively make New Media more difficult to regulate while simultaneously making it stand out as something that must be effectively regulated. New Media is the reality that is connecting the masses and to information at an unprecedented scale. Just as each new technology has its own dividends and challenges, New Media is no exception.

▪ ***Conceptual Frame: New Media's Potential for Agenda-Setting***

Donal L. Shaw and Maxwell McComb's Agenda Setting theory talks about the role of Media in determining what people believe to be important and real. Media and press shape and filter reality rather than simply reflecting what is out there. Media concentrates on issues that are important for media managers, and the public tends to perceive those issues as important. Thus, Media determines which stories should be on the top-most agenda and which are of lesser significance.

Shaw and McComb's theory is well-suited to explain New Media's potential for agenda-setting, though the logic differs from the one for traditional media. Given the fact that New Media decentralizes information and loosens authority over content dissemination – it is the alternative discursive function and its tautological effect that allows the framing of issues on the agenda (something that traditional media does in a more animate way). Algorithmic feedback loops and large language modelling facilitate the New Media even more in terms of guiding viewers' perceptions and shaping their preferences of belief and disbelief. Though the content generation is personalized, the fact that paid contents get greater promotion and dissemination on feeds of individual users (to engender a specific thought process) tells how external actors may find a way into spreading a desired idea/agenda or belief.

New Media can influence people and masses, making them believe in importance of an issue or individual much more speedily and efficiently than traditional media. For the same reason, rivals can use New Media to spread disinformation about state, its institutions, and about fellow citizens (as a tool of hybrid warfare) leading to bigger divide within state and society, thus impacting security.

Challenges Associated with New Media in the Context of Hybrid Warfare

Our intensively globalized world with multiple interdependencies offers a context where the rising number of non-traditional security issues and sophisticated technologies contribute to exacerbating vulnerabilities. Hence, the more hybridized and complex threat spectra. The advent of cyber-crimes, AI tools and New Media have changed the way threats are perceived, as these allow direct control or indirect access to one's information environment. Information, though always central to warfare, today finds greater salience as a tool/instrument of warfare.³⁷ Thus, preparing for war today means much more than having standing armies.

Hybrid war that amalgamates different kinds of war is a key expression repeatedly used to describe contemporary wars as the means to exercise hybridity have now become discrete. States as well as non-state actors can both be the perpetrators or the targets of hybrid attacks. It succeeds by exploiting the vulnerabilities that persist due to poor governance. Societies with fault-lines like political volatility, religious or ethnonational divisions, a weak economy, and poor law and order situation are easy targets of such warfare.

A threat of hybrid warfare exists when an enemy deploys all the available kinetic and non-kinetic means of national power, directly or indirectly, to overpower or destabilize it for seeking political objectives. Strategy, operations, and tactics can vary with context, including (but not limited to) propaganda, disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks, diplomatic disruptions, and economic and political sabotage. In most cases, however, information management provides key to waging and winning a hybrid war. Controlling the narrative in the target state to influence leaders' decisions by constraining their choices is one goal of hybrid war. New Media fits in the debate as its features encourage its misuse for pernicious ends.

New Media thus brings challenges despite its potential to improve communication and outreach. It offers greater avenues for adversaries to engage in disinformation campaigns and carry

³⁷ Raymond Ridderhof, "From Classic Wars to Hybrid Warfare", *Peace Palace library*, July 17, 2017, accessed January 29, 2025, <https://peacepalacelibrary.nl/blog/2017/classic-wars-hybrid-warfare>.

forward their agenda. This is because people can start giving their opinions on what goes viral on mainstream and social media. New Media can be called a new ally or an enemy of the states because it allows people to produce content and share it with each other relatively freely. This content may be employed to target specific segments, motivate them against the state, or change the perception about state or state institutions.

The ‘use of New Media as a tool of hybrid warfare’ is an important qualifier here. This means that the New Media’s *impact depends on how it is employed or utilized*. Its ‘constructive’ use with sufficient checks can enhance the dividends. New Media can change the nature of conflict and become a weapon for information warfare when employed to exploit natural vulnerabilities of the states like socio-political instability, historical grievances, economic inequality, and regional injustices.

▪ ***Spread of Violence and Hate-Speech***

The use of New Media is increasing day by day. There are 5.24 billion users of social media worldwide, which is 63.9 % of the world’s population.³⁸ New Media blurs the line between news and entertainment. The content on New Media is an asset that can be weaponized at any time by states, individuals, or companies. The difference between traditional and New Media is ‘censorship’; there is no censorship and editorial process in New Media. Digital platform owners usually do not bear the responsibility for credibility or scrutiny of the content uploaded and provide a disclaimer to that effect. Whether this results out of commercial considerations, incapacity, political affinities, or for survivability amidst powerful political actors - unregulated content is bound to cause bigger problems in less literate societies.

New Media is therefore a cheap and easily accessible platform for malicious actors to proliferate incorrect information, normalizing violence, spreading terror and gathering sensitive information. The amount of information on New Media, its international reach, and low cost make it a competitor to mainstream media.

▪ ***Trolling and Defamation***

Trolling is an online anti-social behavior when a user makes controversial, offensive, and funny comments on any post that hurts someone’s emotions. The purposes of trolling are varied. Social media users troll to get attention, for character assassination, to insult, create fun of other cultures, hurt religious and ideological sentiments, and to take revenge. Trolling contains abusive content

³⁸ “Social Media Usage & Growth Statistics,” *Backlinko*, February 2025, <https://backlinko.com/social-media-users>

and threatening criticism. Someone's enjoyable comments on social media may be an act of trolling or torture for others. People with physiological disorders and mental health issues participate in trolling. The mass information on New Media becomes a weapon for the state, company, or individual bringing defamation or damage through enabling perception management.³⁹

▪ ***Instigating Public Unrest and Agitation***

New Media can be used to mobilize ordinary people for protests against governments. The New Media is used to spread false or fake news, disinformation, mal-information, non-information, and misinformation. Political, religious, and other differences are the leading causes of disinformation. The bias on the issues compels users to accept and proliferate the disinformation. False information is a challenge for the states because some of it also becomes news headlines.

New Media can create chaos by changing society's behavior toward the state leaders, political decisions and events, through encouraging popular resistance and upheaval. It can complicate an existing volatile situation by engendering greater confusion. The recent India-Pakistan confrontation (post-Pahalgam) in May 2025 well-exemplifies how New Media may be employed by an adversary to undermine your social cohesion and national solidarity in pursuit of its coveted goals. Interestingly, however, the same crisis also unraveled that sharing credible and well-sourced information via similar platforms might be an effective antidote to adversary's disinformation campaigns. While Indian digital platforms exaggeratedly portrayed Indian forces' penetration of Pakistani soil, the short clips of Pakistan Air Forces (PAFs) aerial performance entailed contradictory graphic evidence whose viral dissemination sufficiently undermined the credibility of Indian media's ungrounded pronouncements.

Such disinformation creates mistrust between the state (institutions) and people by maligning their reputation. Psychological operations aim to divide society on important issues by reshaping public perception vis-a-vis the state. New Media is used to change the perception and re-design community narratives. The proliferation of false information occurs in both peace and war times. In peace time, digital media influences society and ethnic groups dissatisfied with the state. For example, during the pandemic, misinformation on health issue was meant to: discourage people from testing, diagnosis and vaccination; to create confusion about whether to get treatment

³⁹ Fahri Aksüt, "Social media evolves to warfare tool: Expert," *Science Technology*, April 26, 2020, accessed February 26, 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/science-technology/social-media-evolves-to-warfare-tool-expert/1818953>.

or not – thus dividing the society making it question the government policies on treatment and disease prevention, thereby displacing popular trust in government’s decisions on health matters.

▪ ***Influence on Democratic and Electoral Processes***

New Media has a proven use in impacting the electoral process. Using New Media, the losing party can quickly mobilize its supporters to rise in protest against allegedly rigged elections and stolen votes. The voters may be few, but widespread incorrect information motivates them to protest. Moreover, incorrect information can motivate people to refrain from voting and later on disinformation is spread regarding those who do not vote (displayed as if their votes were not counted). The purpose is to make people anti-democratic and not believe in elections. It may influence a single political party or the overall behavior of the voters in the country.

During elections, the candidates’ character assassination and disinformation about him or her is now common place. The candidate’s data can be shared on social media very easily to change the voters’ choices by undermining their trust in the political leader and making them see the candidate/party as incapable of running the state. This raises questions on their eligibility for election due to controversial news being spread about candidates including their religious choices, foreign ties or citizenship. The manipulation techniques efficiently work after determining voter preference through AI and algorithmic analysis. This undemocratic activity is driven by voters’ desire for healthy information before and after the election to make a correct choice.

Thus, New Media is challenging the core pillar of democracy, i.e., a well-informed voter with (in)correct information. The misleading content may be created and spread through New Media with the aim to confuse the voters about the election date and timing, voters’ eligibility, misguide them to the wrong polling stations, counting non-residents as well as the dead for casting the vote, and disseminating unverified content against the candidates – all of which can impact the election results. Malicious actors may be provoked to hack an election commission’s official website, thus, delaying election results.

Employment of New Media in Hybrid War against Pakistan

This section specifically analyzes the evidence about the employment of New Media as a tool of hybrid warfare against Pakistan. Following discussion describes cases where disinformation campaigns were pursued against Pakistan’s interests using various New Media platforms. Interestingly and expectedly, without an intention to fix the sources, most efforts at spreading

disinformation about Pakistan have found their sources of origin linked with India – our known archrival who has no intention to bury the hatchet.⁴⁰

1. Disinformation about a New Terrorist Group - Jaish-e-Fursan-e-Muhammad

On January 13, 2023, a video of Jaish-e-Fursan-e-Muhammad in North Waziristan updated that the terrorist organization has started terrorist activities again. Several Twitter accounts uploaded videos and pictures of terrorist organizations. Each had uploaded two pictures and two videos of non-state actors. A Twitter account called “WLVN Analysis” with the twitter handle @THELegateIN with the description *Update on Geopolitics, defense, national security, war, and aviation. Politically neutral. Not on Telegram or DFI and affiliated to WLVN music/radio* uploaded a picture of terrorists.



Fig 1: Newly formed jihadist group 'Jaish-e-Muhammad, threatens to carry out attacks targeting Pak Army & ISI.

The tweet was uploaded at 7:52 pm and claimed that “Newly formed jihadist group 'Jaish-e-Muhammad, threatens to carry out attacks targeting Pak Army and ISI,” shown in figure1. This tweet tried to spread terror inside Pakistan by portraying that another terrorist group was there to target, and that Pakistani armed forces did not win any war on terror, and a new wave of terrorism is ahead.

⁴⁰ Sumeera Imran, “Propaganda Warfare: Indian Disinformation Campaign against Pakistan,” *CISS Insight* 04, no. 8 (2021): 32–46, [https://doi.org/10.31703/gsssr.2021\(VI-II\).04](https://doi.org/10.31703/gsssr.2021(VI-II).04).

2. False Information about Pakistani Journalist Arshad Sharif's Murder

On 24 October 2022, Kathy Peterson had tweeted about Pakistani journalist Arshad Sharif's murder writing "Pakistani official is busy playing candy crush during their visit to Kenya office. Are they serious in the investigation?" as shown in Figure 2. In her Tweet, a person was playing a game on his phone, and his phone was marked. Two people of South Asian origin and two of African origin were in the room. She tried to exhibit that Pakistan authorities were not serious to investigate his murder. Protests were recorded on his murder; it was right time to proliferate disinformation about Pakistani authorities. It had relatable actors "black and brown" people sitting in the room. A person was playing game on his mobile, which was used to indicate "Pakistani authorities" were not serious in his murder investigation. This would create more divide between the people and the State.



Figure 2: Kathy Peterson shared false information during Journalist Murder

Twitter Accounts	Username	Views	Retweets	Likes	Quoted
WLVN Analysis	@THELegateIN	60.2k	188	1,413	14
Megha Updates	@MeghUpdates	51.4k	210	1,239	19
Fineet	@cozyduke-apt29	10.3k	10	42	3

3. Anti-Pakistan Trends regarding Afghan Peace Process - Panjshir Valley

In the last month of President Ashraf Ghani's government in Afghanistan, fake news and disinformation were spread. Indian news channels such as India Today, The Republic, and Time Now, were three news channels that started spreading false news.

Arms-3 video, a video game, and an old photo were broadcast by The Republic, Hindi News, and Zee Hindustan while stating that the Pakistan army supports Northern Alliance against the Taliban and that the Pakistani drones were used in Panjshir Valley. It showed that a Pakistan Air Force jet was shot down in Panjshir Valley. Ahmad Shah Masoud's son Ahmad Masoud tweeted a photo of an aircraft shot down depicted as a picture of a Pakistani fighter aircraft shot down in Panjshir Valley.

In reality, the US F-16 fighter Falcon jet crashed in routine training near the Arizona-California border.⁴¹ The picture was taken from the military.com website. The Boom fact-checking website found that this was a video game, *Arms-3 video*. Time Now also posted a tweet on Panjshir Valley: “#watch1st visuals of a fighter jet allegedly belonging to Pakistan, hovering over #PanjshirValley in Afghanistan.” It was posted on September 6, 2021. TV9 Bharatvarsh also tweeted the video on September 6, 2021. It became clear that it was a fake video shared out of context when the UK Defence Journal confirmed it, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3: US F16 fighter Falcon jet crashed in routine training near Arizona-California border

It was an American F-15 aircraft flying in Great Britain during Royal Air Force air exercises.⁴² India Today and TV9 Bharatvarsh shared a fake video of a fighter jet captured in Panjshir,

⁴¹ <https://abcnews.go.com/International/iraqi-16-fighter-jet-crashes-arizona-training-mission/story?id=32024137>

⁴² <https://www.raf.mod.uk/news/articles/first-exercise-for-raf-f-35-lightning/>

Afghanistan, belonging to Pakistan. Anti-Fake News War Room (AFWA) found an old video shared on Facebook in December 2018. It was also shared on Jyoti Dwivedi's Twitter account from New Delhi on September 7, 2021 with hashtag #Panjshir, a Pakistani terrorist capture, #EndProxyWarinAfghanistan.

This happened in the context when NATO and US lost war on terror in Afghanistan and withdrew from Afghanistan. It was alleged that the Pakistan Army was violating Afghanistan's sovereignty, and Pakistan was now openly supporting the Afghan Taliban, helping them to establish a government. The narrative building claimed that Pakistan would assist the Afghan Taliban and was not a peacekeeper/peacemaker in the region. It had benefited from America's withdrawal and the fall of Kabul. It was the right time to spread disinformation about Pakistan's role in Taliban control over Afghanistan. When Taliban were trying to establish their control over the remaining areas of Afghanistan, and facing resistance in the Panjshir Valley, the video portrayed that Taliban did not have any air power that could help in the Panjshir fight. The Afghan Taliban had friendly relations with Pakistan, and so Taliban were using the Pakistan Air Force to invade Panjshir Valley as shown in figure 4.



Fig 4: "Republic News Shared fake of Pakistan Army invasion in Panjshir"

Pakistan was facing allegations of terror financing. This fake information provides fertile ground to make Pakistan's role controversial. They tried to convince the international audience that Pakistan was still assisting terrorists in Afghanistan.

4. YouTube Channels spreading propaganda on current affairs and political decisions in Pakistan

Two YouTube channels were involved in spreading disinformation about Pakistan: the first is “WION”, and the second is the “First Post”. WION is an online platform on other social media accounts, too. The WION app is available on Google Play Store and Apple Store. The Second YouTube channel ‘First Post’, also has a presence on other social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.



Fig 5: Pakistan Army was targeted by WION.

WION reported false news titled “Gravitas: Pakistan insults its founder Jinnah” as shown in figure 5. The contender gave baseless information. She narrated that March 23 is observed as Pakistan Day every year, and not celebrating it is an insult to both the country and the founder of Pakistan - Quaid-e-Azam. She gave several reasons why Pakistan had to cancel the parade; first due to the economic crisis, Pakistan could not observe the national day and second, Pakistan cancelled the parade due to political instability, and third reason was the terrorist attacks in Pakistan. She raised the question of whether the government can provide security to its military parade against terrorists or will terrorist guns attack all political leaders.

Platform	Subscribers	Total Videos
WION	8.49M	137k
First Post	3.93M	16k

The host shared the perception of Pakistan as a failed state, which could not celebrate the national day. The real situation was not presented. Pakistan was facing a tough time due to bad

economic conditions. The government had planned to celebrate the Pakistan Day on a small scale in the President's House. However, the parade was cancelled due to severe weather. The official statement came from Aiwan-e-Sadar.



Figure 6: Fake information that “Pakistan Army may be planning another coup”

Another disinformation thread said that “Pakistan Army may be planning another coup,” as shown in figure 6. The video blamed the Pakistan Army for overthrowing the puppet Prime Minister Imran Khan: it said that the Army governs Pakistan and called the Pakistan Intelligence Agency a “rouge agency.” Ex-DG ISI was more loyal to the political government than the Pakistan Army, and the Army was not satisfied with its role. Ex-Prime Minister Imran Khan was alleged to be intervening in army promotions. She questioned whether Chief of Army Staff General Qamar Javed Bajwa would repeat the history, as General Zia-Ul-Haq and General Pervez Musharraf did with the (Ex-) Prime Ministers of Pakistan. It said that the Pakistan army can destabilize the government by using other actors within Pakistan like in the past. It may use the extremist Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan, which was mainstreamed by the Pakistan Army in 2018, to destabilize the Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz government.

Another YouTube channel, “First Post,” also narrated the same story as WION. In this video, the broadcaster tried to portray that Pakistan Army had planned to overthrow another democratically elected government. They tried to spread the narrative that it is easy for the Pakistan army to overthrow any elected government, and the Pakistan army rules the country.



Figure 7: Fake information Pakistan army is planning another Coup

There was no chance of any coup in Pakistan, but it tried to propagate that the Pakistan army had an appetite for power. She tried to make it look controversial. The narrative came along with the undertones that Pakistan's security forces are now weak and cannot fight the terrorists. The government feared intelligence failure as a new wave of terrorism came to Pakistan and thus it was planning a coup.

Conclusion

The employment of New Media as an instrument of hybrid warfare against Pakistan is underway. While existing works have highlighted the challenges of New Media in a generic manner, a focused study on the challenge of 'New Media' for Pakistan - in the context of hybrid war was lacking. In addition to filling that space, this work has also qualified new digitized media as being able to perform agenda-setting function – just like traditional media. It has been found that faster pace of dissemination, easy-mass accessibility, and dearth of regulation make New Media more appealing and challenging at the same time. New Media poses challenges to democracy, the state and society, as malicious actors feed anti-state sentiment through dis- and misinformation. In Pakistan's case lately, whenever an internal political instability occurs it provides fertile ground for advancing disinformation fed through external sources. Twitter and YouTube are most commonly used to proliferate disinformation against Pakistan as seen during India-Pakistan confrontation in 2025. As the threat is novel, states would be stressed to respond effectively. However, the threat must be comprehended well for states to be more informed about responding to New Media as a hybrid

war tool. Therefore, Pakistan must first sort and understand the challenge well in order to come up with appropriate strategies to deal with it.

New Media provides platforms where ordinary people can become influencers without much effort and share their thoughts fearlessly with the help of tools such as ads, memes, hashtags, social media bots, and trends. New media can therefore serve as a breeding ground for proliferating fake information - a popular instrument of hybrid warfare – that plays in the hands of state's adversaries. Getting control of a target's information environment can give an enemy the power to manage perceptions by spreading fake news, flooding unsolicited knowhow, building and disseminating desired narratives to masses. The goal of promoting divisive narratives between the state and society can thus undermine national cohesion to facilitate the pursuit of foreign agendas. To the existing media platforms, the rise of New Media thus adds complexity by enhancing multilayered vulnerabilities in a world of multiple interdependencies and rising number of influential non-state entities.