



WORKING PAPER

# Online Voices: Engaging the Community Against Extremism in Digital Spaces

Based on Round-Table Meeting Recommendations  
September 26, 2019

# Online voices: Engaging the community against violent extremism by promoting online voices on social media

This paper presents evidence on how digital voices through online activism can help the state and the society in preventing violent conflict, and contribute towards peace and harmony. It aims to help media practitioners and researchers in the field of conflict prevention and communication, explore ways to improve efficiency in this area. This working paper for the GNMI research desk was produced on the basis of a round table meeting held by Media Baithak on September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2019 in Karachi, Pakistan. (*The list of panelists is attached herewith*)

## **Introduction:**

One of the first points to consider is how much reach will online presence have and what is its impact on the average Pakistani? According to the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority 62 million of the 190 million people in the country have access to the internet; this means that almost 30% of the population is susceptible to extremist propaganda online. Another point to ponder upon is what defines violent extremism and what are the sources of violent extremism on the internet? For the context of digital space, violent extremism is any strain of thought that allows, encourages or enables its way of life or status to be maintained through threats or acts of violence. Is it the alienated minority that feels wronged? Or is it in fact a xenophobic majority that feels an encroachment upon the privilege that they enjoyed without question? Studies show that in countries such as America and Pakistan it is the dominant demographics inciting hate against the minorities in online and offline spaces in majority of the cases. In America, terrorism from external forces accounts for a much smaller percentage than shootings perpetrated by domestic demographics<sup>1</sup>. Literature on the subject of online extremism is saturated with references to ISIS and Muslim majority countries; however this tunnel vision is intellectually dishonest and shortsighted as many crimes against innocent civilians in the West have been perpetrated by local individuals or group members. In light of this pattern, experts who study online violent extremism have placed special focus on the social media platforms that allow nationalist groups to function and relay their extremist hate speech on their websites with little to no interference or investigation<sup>2</sup>. In the West and in our own narrative the focus has been unduly concentrated towards 'Islamists,' the alienated and the underprivileged. However the real

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<sup>1</sup> The Real Terrorist Threat in America: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2018-10-30/real-terrorist-threat-america>

<sup>2</sup> 'White power ideology': why El Paso is part of a growing global threat <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/04/el-paso-shooting-white-nationalist-supremacy-violence-christchurch>

perpetrators of violent extremism have little to do with religion except use it to guise their righteousness and superiority over the people they choose to inflict their violent extremism on<sup>3</sup>.

According to an investigation by Radio Mashaal, it was disclosed that in Pakistan 36 of the 75 militant organizations that have been banned are operating freely on social media with access to millions of subscribers. Another reason for there being little impact on fighting extremist ideology online is that the officials are only interested in shutting down the platforms of those who criticize state practices.<sup>4</sup> Due to Pakistan being a Muslim majority country, the most reliable way to traumatize its people is to make them believe their religious way of life is under threat. According to security expert Norbert Almeida, ‘This particular battle is not online, it is offline. When people have reasons to accept an extremist viewpoint readily, it doesn't matter how the message is conveyed to them. The state must focus on eliminating those factors, whether that is through education, job creation or other means. In viewing this issue as an online problem, we will simply be tackling the outcome, and not the cause.’<sup>5</sup>

## Background:

Even though most hate speech is still disseminated from sermons and *khutbas*, extremist factions are fast taking up space online and recruiting as well as targeting users in this arena. Online spaces are simply reflecting offline sentiments and practices; every demographic that experiences violence and abuse in real life is attacked online as well.

An FIA Cybercrime report from 2018 has some illuminating statistics that can help paint a picture of the struggle against violent extremism and general misuse and abuse of online spaces to harass alienate and terrorize others. 90% of cybercrime victims are women and girls, and 90% of internet crimes are committed on Facebook and WhatsApp, where 70% of the cases involve pornographic content and only 10 officials working on an average of 4000 complaints per 6 months. There are other staggering statistics that debunk the myth that only the poor and minority demographics would partake in bigoted or extremist discourse as according to assumptions they would have the most reason to be disgruntled and reactive.<sup>6</sup>

The real issue, as Almeida describes above, is that if the violent extremism being carried out in society, is sanctioned by a sacred cow of an institute like religion or the establishment, the state is reluctant to challenge it in earnest for fear of it resulting in their lowered popularity for elections. It is also public knowledge that the government routinely requests for major internet platforms to remove or ban the voices that criticize its policies under the guise of ‘hate speech.’<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In strategies to counter violent extremism, politics often trump evidence:

<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/05/06/in-strategies-to-counter-violent-extremism-politics-often-trumps-evidence/>

<sup>4</sup> Pakistan Extremist Groups Thrive On The Ground And Online: <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/pakistan-extremist-groups-online/28682281.html>

<sup>5</sup> Pakistan's Internet Landscape 2018:

<https://www.bytesforall.pk/sites/default/files/Internet%20Landscape%20Report%202018.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Hate Speech: A study of Pakistan's cyberspace:

[https://www.academia.edu/9731744/Hate\\_Speech\\_A\\_study\\_of\\_Pakistans\\_cyberspace](https://www.academia.edu/9731744/Hate_Speech_A_study_of_Pakistans_cyberspace)

<sup>7</sup> Omar, R. (2019), ‘Defining Hate Speech’: <https://www.geo.tv/latest/229089-defining-hate-speech>

Due to the vague terms in which hate speech laws are defined in Pakistan, it has been possible to incarcerate those who are simply critical of powerful institutes and individuals; whereas in the international policy regarding hate speech it is measured according to the harm it causes minority and vulnerable demographics. Studies on the data collected on hate speech online have disclosed that the majority of the targets of hate speech and threats online are in fact politicians and pillars of the state. This could however, be resultant of the general discontent felt towards the inefficacy of the government to provide welfare for the state. Furthermore due to the legal system being intertwined with religious scripture, that many turn to in order to justify their bigotry, it is almost impossible to introduce more tolerant legislatives that can protect the human rights of gender, religious and racial minorities<sup>8</sup>. When religious discrimination, declaring Ahmadi's non-Muslim, is enshrined in the very constitution, it is intellectually dishonest to expect the public to embody tolerance. Additionally, despite 92% of those surveyed having come across hate speech online – 85% of those targeted by the hate speech saw no consequences to it even after it was reported and 'among religious targets, total respondents indicated that hate speech against Shias (70%) and Ahmadi's (61%) was markedly high.'<sup>9</sup> When religious and nationalist sentiments are this sensitive in a people, it is fertile grounds for extremist factions to recruit more members through social media. Facebook is also under fire for promoting right-wing and fundamentalist content in favour of populist leaders and distorting the real representations in politics<sup>10</sup>.

As mentioned above, the state is surveilling those that might be criticizing it instead of monitoring those participating and practicing hate speeches and inciting violence. Therefore countering and preventing violent extremism is not something that needs exclusive targeting on social media but in society as a whole, and the efforts must be realized from within the upper echelons. Strict measures must be taken to ensure that there is no incitement of hate towards minorities from government officials, political leaders, and religious elders, on television, film or newspapers; only then will the tolerance be translated onto social media and society.

## **Keywords:**

Counter extremism, digital media, journalism, media for peace, peace and security, counter radicalization, CVE, non-violent extremism, intolerance.

## **Research Questions**

The following questions served as research questions to the speakers of the round-table to guide this working paper.

1. How different is digital media in comparison with traditional media?
2. Does content on social media influence people, or does it merely reflect the views of the society?
3. How has digital media been successfully used to promote peace in Pakistan?
4. What are the effects of digital media on peace-building?

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<sup>8</sup> Sirmed, M. (2017), Hate speech and restricted speech: striking a balance: <https://www.pakpips.com/web/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/MarviSirmed-Curb-Hate-Speech.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Ground breaking study on hate speech online in Pakistan: <https://www.apc.org/en/news/ground-breaking-study-hate-speech-online-pakistan>

<sup>10</sup>Tariq, W. (2019), Pakistan among countries where internet 'not free': report <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2094139/8-pakistan-among-countries-internet-not-free-report/>

# Recommendations

Following are the key recommendations presented by the panelists on the subject matter.

1. A uniting platform: Social media can be an effective tool for likeminded progressive voices to build a joint group to devise strategies related to the contemporary issues. It can support greater understanding and cohesion between people who are seeking allies. It can give voice to the most marginalized in society.
2. Better governance: A fact-based, independent, transparent, accountable and impartial reporting can highlight grave issues through citizen journalism, which can hold officials accountable and make public administrations more transparent. It allows the people to be more inclusive and helps them to put their voices in the corridors of power for better action on issues which matter.
3. Awareness: An individual is likely to be more aware about the issues related to peacemaking and tolerance with their active presence on the respective digital space as the ideas and debates generated by the influencers/activists give massive awareness on the topics with a little search.
4. Caution: The social media activism aware the people about any rising threat which is not being given enough consideration. Be it climate change or human rights issue, the discourse has a potential to create pressure for the authorities to take action.
5. A medium to express: The online spaces area good medium to let people put their personal thoughts and connect with the likeminded individuals. The online engagement is a good medium to ‘vent out’ what one feels.
6. Influencers’ factor: The influencers can motivate people to take any required action or think along the lines on important issues. The action can prove to be a catalyst to drive a discourse towards a complex topic, urging the society to take action and participate in an activity, adopt a behavior, and call out a negative development or support programme.

## SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVISM STRATEGY

1. The content to counter violent extremism must be in the same language that the content promoting violent extremism is being disseminated in. If all voices that are speaking for equal rights and tolerance are doing so in English, a language that 90% of the country is not fluent in, those voices and messages are wasted. It becomes an echo chamber where there is no impact on the ground level.

2. The content must be fact-checked to the maximum to ensure that its credibility is not questioned. Fake news and morphed images harms the narrative as the users start questioning the validity and reliability of the content.
3. Gender-neutral terms must be adopted by the activists to ensure that the message has inclusive underpinnings.
4. Before sharing or retweeting a message from the account, always make sure that the account is verified and is being used by the person who it claims to be. No matter how good the message is, it loses its effectiveness if sent through a fake account.
5. Immediately report hate speech, abusive content or defamation to the social media outlet and state's regulatory authority so that the content posted/tweeted is removed.
6. The activists must know and understand their audience: What content do people consider relevant and why? What do they produce and with whom do they share or engage? Understand them and engage responsibly with them to gain their trust.
7. A joint strategy should be discussed and maintained for highlighting a cause or an issue on digital space. As a united front is more likely to give an impactful response on the potential reaction from other users.
8. Academic institutions should be taken in loop for social media training as the students and teachers must be trained by the professionals for the better usage of the social media for their objectives.
9. Make more cohesive and clear cut legislation around hate speech on the internet so that dissenting voices providing constructive criticism to the government, as is their democratic right, are not ensnared under the Cybercrime Act.
10. Security officials nationwide must be sensitized to internet crime as currently, even to remove revenge porn from social media one needs to register an FIR. This can prove to be traumatic for anyone who is not met with the sorts of security officials who are trained to handle situations such as this with sensitivity and discretion.
11. Ridiculing someone for their weight, dark skin, height or any other defining characteristic is common within Pakistani families and social circles. Identifying and acknowledging this as hate speech in our daily lives and everyday situations will enable the new generation to be more inclusive and tolerant and compassionate towards one another and on social media as well as real life.
12. People who are found to be responsible for running social media accounts that incite hate speech or violence should not only be arrested but they must be enrolled in workshops that train them how to be empathetic and understand the impact of their beliefs. Interfaith sensitization is a priority as sectarian divides are significant in the community.
13. If the government and political parties will be resorting to paid users and bots to promote their propaganda, it will make it much more difficult for the legal authorities to deter fundamentalist groups and individuals from the same practices as the precedent is being set for unethical social media tactics.
14. Parents must be trained to be vigilant regarding social media trends and practices that their children are a part of since much of social media is detrimental for self-esteem and psychological development. This makes children particularly vulnerable to influence and suggestion, therefore it is up to parents to instill the confidence and good values in their children so that they have the fortitude to not be swayed towards fringe elements.

## **List of Panelists:**

1. Mr. Arsalan Khan  
Social media influencer
2. Mr. Taha Khan  
Executive Director – Envio Tech
3. Ms. Quratulain Tejani
4. Executive Director – The School of Writing
5. Ms. Zoya Anwar  
Freelance Journalist
6. Mr. Jamal Siddiqui  
New Media
7. Ms. Asifa Zehra  
Pakistan Peace Club
8. Ms. Afshan Jaleel  
Pakistan Peace Club
9. Mr. Arsalan Farooqi  
Pakistan Academic Consortium
10. Advocate Liaquat Ali  
Lawyer
11. Ms. Manal Khan  
Freelance journalist
12. Mr. Waleed Shaikh  
Shaoor Foundation
13. Dr Hina Imran  
Clinical Psychologist
14. Mr. Najam Soharwardy  
Scholar, Journalist
15. Mr. Kamal Faridi  
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**About the Working Paper:**

This working paper is based on 10 days of desk-based research and policy recommendation proposed in aforementioned round-table. It was prepared for the GNMI ©. The views and recommendations expressed in this working paper are those of the speakers and experts of the round-table, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of GNMI, its partner agencies or the federal or provincial governments of Pakistan. The GNMI Research desk provides rapid syntheses of key discussion and of expert recommendations in response to specific topic of discussion on governance, social development, humanitarian and conflict issues. Its concise working papers draw on a selection of the best recent literature available and on input from national experts. Each GNMI Research desk working paper is peer-reviewed by a member of the GNMI team.

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