

TALAL YOUSAF

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ESSAY

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ESSAY TOPIC:-

DIGITAL TERRORISM AND  
FREE SPEECH : BALANCING NATIONAL  
SECURITY WITH CIVIL LIBERTIES  
FREE SPEECH.

Outline.

1) Introduction:-

Thesis statement: Free speech without any necessary checks and balances poses threat to national security, as it causes digital terrorism and undermines state's national interests. Thus, ~~balancing~~ <sup>balancing</sup> cyber security measures with civil liberties is essential.

2) How free speech without any checks and balances compromises national security. (crunch paragraph)

3) Understanding how unchecked liberty of "free speech" causes digital terrorism and becomes threat for national security

a) Misuse of "Twitter" for maligning state institutions

b) Sharing of posts, consciously or unconsciously, that are detrimental to national interests.

c) "YouTube" allows users to make videos irrespective of the fact what harm these videos can inflict on national security.

d) Digital platforms, without any checks and balances, help in promoting anti-state and terror activities.

e) Case study of Jaranwala incident: <sup>Negative</sup> Role of social media in the blasphemy allegations.

4) Impacts of Digital terrorism ~~and~~ on National Security.

a) Negative perception building of armed forces and other state institutions.

b) Character assassination of notable state figures.

c) Stirring the nationalist sentiments of Baloch and Pakhtun population against the state.

d) Case study of how hostile foreign intelligence agencies negatively use digital platforms against Pakistan.

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- 5) How to balance national security with civil liberties
- Ensuring the effective monitoring of users activities on digital space
  - Making cyber security laws and agencies effective.
  - Ensuring social media apps operates within the ambit of national laws.
  - Punishing those social media activists who are negatively using digital platforms against the state authorities
  - Positive role is needed to be played by religious and political leaders.
  - Making a clear distinction between necessary criticism and digital terrorism; undue restriction on civil liberties harm democracy
  - Learning from the ongoing state efforts in curbing digital terrorism in Pakistan

6) Conclusion.

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Article 19 of the constitution of Pakistan states that every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression, and there shall be freedom of press subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law. This article though guarantee free speech but restrict it with the national security interests. This means there should be a balance between national security and free speech. Drawing this balance is a much necessary step to be done by the state authorities, as unchecked liberty of free speech causes digital terrorism and becomes a threat for national security. This can be seen in the misuse of social media platforms, where its irresponsible use promote anti-state activities. It impacts the state in many negative ways such as building state negative perception and stirring nationalist sentiments.

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of Pakhtun and Baluch populations. Thus, balancing civil liberties with national security is essential. For this, state has to make effective cyber security laws and then implement properly. Also, those who are negatively using social media must be punished by the state authorities. However, a necessary distinction line must be drawn between what is valid criticism and what is anti-state propaganda. In this way, both the civil liberties and the national security can be balanced. Free speech without any checks and balances by the state can compromise the national security. This can be seen in the case of Pakistan's Armed forces operation, "Operation Silence", against the administration of Lal Masjid, in July 2007, in Islamabad. The operation's objective is to protect the capital from extremist elements. However, the media

in Pakistan had adopted "war journalism" working style, emphasizing conflict rather than solution. This contributed to polarized public opinion and shaped public perception against the state authorities, especially in the ex-FATA region, as 70% students of the Lal Masjid students belongs from there. (Bushra Jameed, "Pakistan media as an agent of conflict", 2019). Thus, press reported the conflict in a way that severely harms Pakistan's national interests.

One of the manifestations of how free speech causes tension is in the misuse of "Twitter". This popular social media platform is used to malign state institutions. This is mainly done through creating trend by using # (hashtag). The popular hashtags of the recent years included posts that were full of anti-state content. For instance

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in the aftermath of last General Elections of 2024, when Twitter was replete with the anti-state trend. This compelled the state authorities to completely ban the Twitter platform till the necessary checks are not placed on it. This ban continued till now.

Thus, "Twitter" platform in past had continuously been used by the different actors for maligning the state institutions.

The same trend can be seen in other social media platforms, where ~~prepar~~ consciously or unconsciously share posts that are detrimental to national interests. This can easily be seen in the "Facebook", another popular social media platform, where posts are irresponsibly shared without knowing the possible consequences. These posts target either to minority group or to any other sectarian group, ~~forming~~ ~~disturbing~~ inter-faith harmony.



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Thus, sharing of such types of posts <sup>maintaining</sup> are detrimental for <sup>a</sup> social and religious harmony.

Thus, in this way, digital platforms, without any checks and balances, help in causing digital terrorism by promoting anti-state and terror activities. When they target state institutions they are in fact targeting state. Similarly, by spreading negative views regarding any other religious group, they are propagating their own religion and sect, and cause sectarianism.

For example, the popularity that #Yeh-jo-dehshatgardi-he-is-ky-pechy-wardi-he trend got, both on Twitter and Facebook, in 2018, had caused much harm in building positive perception of <sup>the</sup> state institutions. Thus, digital platforms, without any checks and balances, help in promoting anti-state narratives.

In the religious matters, the negative role of social media in the blasphemy allegations is evident in the Jaranwala incident. The Jaranwala incident occurred in Aug 2023, when the desecrated pages of the Holy Quran were found outside a house in which two Christian brothers lived. These brothers were accused of desecration of Holy Quran and soon with the help of different social media platforms some 6000 members gathered and desecrated dozens of churches, destroyed scores of houses and caused other terrorism.

All these fake allegations were propagated with the help of social media platforms (whatsapp, Facebook). (HRCP report, 2023). Thus, digital platforms help in promoting religious extremism.

The impacts of this digital terrorism on national security are

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many, chief among them being the negative perception of building of armed forces and other state institutions.

Along with this, digital platforms are also used for the characterisation of the notable state figures. One example in this regard is the recent incident, when a doctored video of Punjab CM meeting with the U.A.E minister were irresponsibly shared multiple times. This video, with the help of deep fakes technique, contained unethical content. The sharing of such content on the social media platforms contributes negatively in the public - press relationship.

Another impact that digital terrorism have on national security is that it stirs the nationalist sentiments of the Baloch and Pakhtun population.

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against the state. These may have some legitimate grievances against the state but the social media platforms help the non-state actors there to use these nationalist sentiments against the state. Further, the hostile ~~not~~ foreign intelligence agencies also use these digital platforms for the same purpose. This was confirmed in the Federal Investigative Agency report, when it identified 924 social media accounts spreading such content, including 487 Facebook accounts, 190 Tiktok profiles and 147 Twitter handles. These activities are often linked to shadow networks and external forces, including Indian interference, which exploit social media for information warfare and state subversion (NDU journal, Information Warfare, 2024). Thus social media platforms are negatively used to propagate anti-state narratives.

However, every problem has solutions and digital terrorism is of no exception.

The first and foremost step is the effective monitoring of the users' activities on the digital space. For this, Pakistan

has to make effective cyber security laws. Just like the electronic media

is regulated by the PEMRA, the same should be done in regard to regulating social media

platforms. For this an effective cyber security laws must be devised, so that

there should be an effective monitoring of users' activities.

By devising cyber security laws, the state

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will be ensured that the social media Applications, like Facebook, Twitter, are operating within the ambit of national laws. This will help in balancing national security with the civil liberties, as the digital platforms will help people to enjoy the liberty of free press but within the ambit of law and national security interests.

Along with devising the effective cyber security laws, there should be proper mechanism to ensure its proper implementation. The laws can only be effective when they are properly implemented. For this, Pakistan has to enhance the institutional efficiency of cyber security related bodies. This can help in protecting people from the effects of digital terrorism, especially to the ones that

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accused with blasphemy allegations. As Martin Luther King said "It may be true that ~~the~~ law cannot make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important". Thus, effective legislation must be reinforced with effective enforcement of laws.

However, there should be a clear distinction between necessary criticism and digital terrorism. That is undue restriction on civil liberties will harm the ideals of democracy. For good governance and democratic participation, criticism from press and public is beneficial. So, while devising laws there should be a clear distinction between both of them. Digital terrorism must

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be curbed but at the same time the constitutional guarantee of freedom of speech and press (Article 19) must not be compromised.

The ongoing state efforts in curbing digital terrorism in Pakistan is a good and positive development in this regard.

In May 2024, the military's top leadership emphasized the need to comprehensively defeat "digital terrorism", which aims to induce despondency and sow discord among the populace. This initiative underscores the importance of countering misinformation and extremist content proliferating through digital platforms. For this, there are several checks and balances to be placed in the working setup of these sites.

In a nutshell free speech without



any necessary checks and balances pose a threat to national security, as it causes digital terrorism and undermines national interests.

For this, state has to address digital terrorism, which requires careful balance between national security and civil liberties. While protecting citizens from online threats is vital, it is equally important to safeguard freedom of speech and individual rights. Government, thus, has to adopt policies that effectively counter digital terrorism without undermining democratic principle. Achieving this balance ensures a safer society while preserving the core values of freedom and justice.