

Patriotism and Islam on social media: how Pakistani publics revisit their allegiance to the state

Munira Cheema

Publication date

01-09-2020

Licence

This work is made available under the [CC BY 4.0](#) licence and should only be used in accordance with that licence. For more information on the specific terms, consult the repository record for this item.

Document Version

Accepted version

Citation for this work (American Psychological Association 7th edition)

Cheema, M. (2020). *Patriotism and Islam on social media: how Pakistani publics revisit their allegiance to the state* (Version 1). University of Sussex. <https://hdl.handle.net/10779/uos.23480048.v1>

Published in

Journal of Arab and Muslim Media Research

Link to external publisher version

https://doi.org/10.1386/jammr_00017_1

Copyright and reuse:

This work was downloaded from Sussex Research Open (SRO). This document is made available in line with publisher policy and may differ from the published version. Please cite the published version where possible. Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners unless otherwise stated. For more information on this work, SRO or to report an issue, you can contact the repository administrators at sro@sussex.ac.uk. Discover more of the University's research at <https://sussex.figshare.com/>

Patriotism and Islam on social media: how Pakistani publics revisit their allegiance to the state

Munira Cheema

Abstract

The study focuses on a series of events related to the sudden disappearance of bloggers in Pakistan on 7th January 2017. Following the incident, the broadcast media reported that the bloggers were sharing blasphemous content and were involved in anti-state activities. This revelation triggered online conversations on their and their sympathisers' patriotism and loyalty to Islam. The study locates how this led to the emergence of several hashtag-led publics on Twitter. While focusing two hashtags that polarised the publics on the issue, the study utilises discourse analysis to evaluate the discourses generated by the conservative and the liberal publics on patriotism and national identity. This study finds that while conflating national identity with Islam, the conservative discourse constitutes angry, threat-like closed statements that allowed no room for disagreement. Liberal publics, on the other hand use strategic speaking to create anti-state discourse on patriotism. Despite the heated exchange between the two publics, I argue that on this occasion (event-led), Twitter offered the opportunity for initiating counter narratives that refuse to translate patriotism in the idiom of religion. I see this as an occasional, episodic yet unprecedented form of public sphering in Pakistani context that bring both liberals and conservatives in direct contact with each other.

Keywords: Social media publics and counter publics, public sphere, ideology, patriotism, blasphemy

From liberalising broadcast media in 2002 to embracing Twitter and Facebook by 2007, Pakistani media landscape has significantly changed over the last decade. These changes have been unsettling for the state, and at times for the public. There have been many instances that reveal Pakistan's negotiation with the pervasiveness of the media. Pakistan's first TV channel (PTV) was launched by General Ayub Khan in 1964. Since then PTV almost worked as a mouthpiece for state's narrative on nationalism and patriotism. It was not until 9/11 that another General (Pervez Musharraf) introduced the policy of liberalisation of media. It was driven partly by the motivation to show softer image of Pakistan, and to demonstrate that dictatorial regimes can embrace policies of liberalisation. Most channels launched by already established print media houses. In 2002, Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) was launched as a regulatory body to discipline content on television

and other media platforms. It was the same decade when Pakistan saw a rise in religiosity, and Talibanization became a phenomenon. Soon expressions of religiosity were reflected in content on television (see Cheema 2014, 2016, 2018). In the last decade, there have been various attempts by PEMRA to regulate the content on screen. At times, this meant suspending the transmission of channels for days. Broadcasters such as Geo TV and ARY News have faced suspension a couple of times during Musharraf's tenure and later in Nawaz Sharif's tenure, while YouTube was banned under Zardari's regime (see Stone 2008; Cheema 2018). From dictators to democratically elected governments, none have offered a freer space for media. As per Article 19 of the Constitution of Pakistan, 'Every citizen shall have the right to freedom of speech and expression, and there shall be freedom of the press, subject to any reasonable restrictions imposed by law in the interest of the glory of Islam or the integrity, security or defence of Pakistan or any part thereof friendly relations with foreign States, public order, decency or morality, or in relation to contempt of court, [commission of] or incitement to an offence'. Mazhar Abbas, a renowned journalist, notes that although the Constitution guarantees freedom 'on paper in reality the media remains suppressed because of unreasonable restrictions through unlawful means' (Abbas 2018). While Facebook and Twitter have also been around for a decade, recently, the relationship between social media and the state has become more complicated (see Boone 2015; Hern 2017). In 2006, 'Blogspot was banned' in relation to publishing of blasphemous cartoons, while in 2012, 'another directive was issued to allow Pakistan Telecommunications Authority for the "effective monitoring and control of obnoxious content" online, a regulation meant to control content that is blasphemous and pornographic in nature' (Khilji and Zahid 2017: 16). However, the use of words such as 'obnoxious' make the connotation quite vague. Previously, PEMRA has also attempted to regulate the broadcast content that it called 'obscene', where 'obscenity' was a subjective term that could mean different things to different people. Such attempts at regulating the content are not exclusive to Pakistan, similar efforts have been made in neighbouring Muslim countries like Iran (see Khiabani and Sreberny 2010). Nevertheless, Twitter remains immune to state regulation. Bohman argues that it 'is certainly the case that the relative absence of state regulation in cyberspace means that censorship is no longer the primary means of inhibiting the formation of public spheres' (2004: 137).

It is in this context that the study aims to explore how different sets of Pakistani publics respond to this uneasy relationship between media, Islam and the state on social media. For this, I will focus *on a series of events* (disappearance of the activists) that led to online public sphering on national identity, patriotism and Islam between contesting publics.

On 7th of January (2017), Salman Haider, a university professor disappeared from Islamabad, the capital city of Pakistan. This incident was followed by four more disappearances of social activists from different cities of Pakistan. While their disappearances were reported in the print media, electronic media remained silent for the first few days. Geo News Channel was the first one to break silence on this matter by reporting abductions of social activists on 9th January. Soon family and friends of the abductees took to Twitter to not only report their disappearance, but also express how the system has let them down. The law-enforcing agencies, on the other hand, did not admit that the activists were under their custody. I started following this incident across different media platforms, not only because I wanted to study affordances Twitter allows in transitional democracies, but also because it seemed like a close call for anyone who is Pakistani with a somewhat liberal outlook. Those abducted were not just the social activists but also academics, whose crime (though not told by authorities) was supposedly related to blasphemy or is anti-state. Apparently, activists were also bloggers whose webpages (*Mochi*, *Roshni* and *Bhensa*) hosted pro-atheist content. Several memes mocking Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and Islam were shared through these pages. Of course, bloggers denied any connection to these pages; however, some media sources (Bol TV) maintained that they were responsible for hosting and circulating the blasphemous content. Interestingly, the public came to know about the disappearances through either Twitter or the mainstream broadcast channels, but it was after the abductions were reported on the social media. Dick reminds us that ‘atheism has historically been dangerous to espouse, and even when manifested in private spaces, rarely gets named as such because of the loaded and pejorative nature of the term’ (2015: 375). In Pakistan, having inclination towards atheism or showing it even in private spaces can also have dire consequences (Azhar 2017).

Since the mainstream public sphere is highly regulated, issues of controversial nature often begin their public life on Twitter or Facebook. It is later amplified through its coverage on the mainstream media. Two of the current affairs-based talk shows (*Aaj Shahzeb Khanzada Kay Sath* [Today with Shahzeb Khanzada] on Geo TV and *Aisay Nahi Chalay Ga* [This will not do] on Bol TV) extensively covered the issue. On 9th January, 2017, Shahzeb Khandaza, the host of *Aaj Shahzeb Khanzada Kay Sath*, raised concerns over the disappearances of the activists. He shared that the activists were active on Facebook and Twitter. He added that neither the government nor the law enforcement agencies have taken the activists away for any interrogation. His viewpoint was further reinforced by other current affairs-based talk shows that ran on the same channel. No other channel actively campaigned for the activists.

Interestingly, while the hosts on Geo TV shared how activists have been unlawfully abducted for running online pages, they chose not to share the content of the show (Pakistan Talk Show, 2017).

On the other hand, another show that ran on Bol Channel (*Aisay Nahi Chalay Ga*), changed the drift of the conversation on this issue. In the mainstream media, *Aisay Nahi Chalay Ga* took a different stance. On 18th January, Aamir Liaquat, the host of the show openly stated that those who are supporting the activists are traitors and pro-India. He further added that Geo TV's sympathy towards activists is purely driven by anti-state sentiments (Zem TV Official, 2017). He directly addressed Jibran Nasir, a renowned social activist who led hashtag #recoversalmanhaider as a traitor for supporting the activists. Most importantly, this was the only show to share the content of the controversial pages (Zem TV Official 2017, 27:45- 28:47). The content shared clearly revealed controversial memes created out of Qur'anic verses. To be more specific, Qur'anic verses were fabricated. Since these events have been tied to blasphemy, broadcast media appeared to be cautious in taking sides. Blasphemy is an unforgivable sin in Pakistan that can lead to death penalty. According to Pakistan Penal Code (295 C), the 'use of derogatory remarks, etc. in respect of the Holy Prophet. Whoever by words, either spoken or written, or by visible representation, or by any imputation, innuendo, or insinuation, directly or indirectly, defiles the sacred name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) shall be punished with death, or imprisonment for life, and shall also be liable to fine' (PPC, 295 C cited in Shamsi 2011: 16). Hence, it is no wonder that the broadcast media did not offer free space to discuss abductions in current affairs-based talk shows. Twitter, on the other hand, offered a space where publics could freely express their opinion on the matter. Several hashtags emerged after the disappearance of the activists; each led its own public. This paper sets out to trace how disappearances offered opportunities for Pakistanis to engage with the issue in an unregulated space. Given that both Islam and patriotism are sensitive subjects in Pakistan, the study explores how Pakistanis' engagement with the issue allows them to revisit their allegiance with Islam and reflect on their understanding of patriotism.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical strands of this study utilise the concepts of publics, counter publics and the public sphere. I use the concept of publics to understand the publics of hashtags-led discourses. In doing so, I go back to Warner (2002) and Dayan (2005) to explore the

attributes of the publics. While Dayan links the notion back to performance, Warner understands it in relation to both performance and affiliation to discourses. 'Discourse plays a crucial role in the existence of a public and engaging it in critical reflection' (Cheema, 2014: 45) According to Warner, 'public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself. It is autotelic; it exists only as the end for which books are published, shows broadcast, Web sites posted, speeches delivered, opinions produced. It exists by virtue of being addressed' (2002:67). In this age, hashtagging and tweeting could also be added to Warner's list, where publics of certain discourses are addressed through hashtags and tweets. Moreover, Warner also sees the public 'as a kind of social totality, it might be people organised as the nation' (65). Here, I am dealing with three kinds of publics using Twitter for public sphering on patriotism. The main one is an overarching public of the discourse on Pakistani national identity and patriotism. In its physical form, it can also be referred to as a nation, but this public hosts a wide range of ideological dispositions on what counts as the Pakistani national identity. In other words, this public hold several contesting publics deliberating on national identity; I am only interested in evaluating the discourse created by conservative publics and (pro-religion) and the secular publics on patriotism.

One of the main attributes of the 'public' is that of performance (Dayan, 2001 2005; Warner, 2002). In my previous studies, I have argued that performance could be remote, invisible and distant in relation to broadcast media, here, I argue that it can become obvious on social media. In the case of Twitter, performance of the publics is nurtured by discourses that are led by hashtags. In this regard, Dayan argues that 'performance links the notion of public to that of a public sphere. A public not only offers attention, it calls for attention. Any public requires another public watching it perform' (2005: 52). The performance of a public is born out of a reflexive decision. What really pushes members of the public to perform and present themselves on a public forum is their association with a certain discourse (Cheema 2015). Hashtagging and tweeting are the acts of performing one's public self (see Baym and Tiidenberg 2017). In fact, hashtag could be read as a 'performative statement' (Bruns and Burgess 2012: 6). It is, in particular about presenting 'socially informed reactions to news and current events, but they are also part of the everyday context of presenting the self' (Papacharissi 2015: 95). I argue that 'any discussion on publics is incomplete without taking into consideration the spaces for participation and performance of the publics' (Cheema 2015: 54). Previously, scholars have traced public spheres in different spaces such as mass media, theatres, publishing and movements (Felski 1986; Fraser, 1990 and Dahlgren, 1995).

Others have located public spheres in popular culture in (Cheema, 2018; Hartley 1996; Mc Guigan 2005; Lunt and Pantti 2009; Lunt and Stenner 2005; Dahlgren 2009; Hermes and Muller 2010 and Klein 2013). One of the main features of their understanding of the publics of popular culture is that these publics are somewhat emotional yet committed to their respective discourses. Today, these spaces can be located on Twitter and other social media platforms that may not be identical to Habermasian public sphere, but parallels can be drawn. Returning back to how Habermas (2006: 73) envisions it as ‘a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens....’ For this study, the access to citizens is crucial in Pakistani context. Of course, not all members of the public have access to the Internet. However, those who have the access can get the chance to participate in discourses that are excluded from the mainstream public sphere. Likewise, in the world of hashtags that is led by the mainstream media elites and the crowd sourced elites, some are more equal than others. The publics that have emerged after the disappearance of the activists have been led by certain hashtags, and look like new publics of topical category; however, I argue that these could also be referred to as ‘pronounced’ publics (Cheema 2015) of existing discourses. In other words, their roots can already be traced back to conservative Islamic discourses on one hand, and on the other hand secular discourses in Pakistani context. It is only that the hashtags such as #recoversalmanhaider and #whoaretheydefending act as the stimuli for these existing publics of pro-religion and secular discourses to come out on Twitter and re-endorse (read perform) their association with their existing discourses. In doing so, they reflect and push boundaries of traditionally constrained discourse on patriotism. Due to their long-term association with their respective discourses in an offline world, the pronounced publics can be more involved than Dean’s affective publics (Dean 2010 cited in Papachirissi 2011: 9). The way Pakistani dominant and counter publics are utilizing Twitter could be viewed as an unprecedented form of public sphering in a country where freedom of expression is highly regulated.

While acknowledging that rational deliberation is difficult to materialize textually on Twitter, I argue that one can locate public sphering even in emotionally charged rhetoric. In this sense, the nature of ‘public sphering’ on Twitter (to use Dahlgren’s term (1995:148), is somewhat messy yet insurgent. Brun (2008: 69) notes that Twitter could be read as a ‘patchwork of overlapping public spheres centred around specific themes and communities which through their overlap nonetheless form a network of issue publics that is able to act as an effective substitute for the conventional, universal public sphere of the mass media age’.

In a similar vein, I argue that social media mimics have several attributes of Habermasian public sphere. For example, while in the true Habermasian sense, publics arrive at the *common good* through discursive contestation (Fraser 1990: 71), I maintain, that no matter how crippled/chaotic it may appear, Twitter has become a space to rearticulate the notion of the common good. This is purely because no topic is off limits and users can push the boundaries of a discourse. In Pakistani context, religion has always been part of the public discourse on nationalism. What has changed recently is how liberal publics have become more pronounced on Twitter to make the discourse on nationalism porous, and open to acknowledging secular elements of the society. In this way, counter voices can find some solace in the networked public sphere. It is a space where discourses can be unconstrained that can act as a fodder for a healthy democracy (see Benhabib 1992 for a discussion on unconstrained discourses). Likewise, Benkler, Roberts, Faris, Solow-Niederman, and Etling (2013: 8) also assert that the ‘digital space provides an alternative structure for citizen voices and minority viewpoints as well as highlights stories and sources based on relevance and credibility’.

In this discussion of Twitter-based discourses, the symbol of hashtag plays a crucial role. The sign of hashtag emerged on Internet Relay Chat (IRC) around 1988 but faded with time. It was not until 2007 that Chris Messina initiated the idea of reclaiming hashtagging on Twitter. He began with a view that the tag (or the symbol ‘#’) would initiate ‘group-like functionality’ where tag would be used to ‘mark a status’ that could also be followed by others to ‘eavesdrop on the context of it and then join in the channel and contribute as well’. Several patterns emerged in hashtagging; some were used as anchors for larger discourses (Rambukkanna 2015) such as those on feminism or race, while others emerged as ad hoc, issue-based or topical ones (see Bruns and Axel, 2011). In this regard, Bruns and Axel argue that ‘what particularly allows Twitter and its hashtag communities to stand out from such other spaces for issue publics is its ability to respond with great speed to emerging issues and acute events’ (2011: 7). This study has also located ad hoc publics that have emerged as a result of emerging events such as the unfolding of the disappearance of the activists. At the same time, I argue that such ad hoc publics are the ‘pronounced publics’ of the existing discourses on Islam and secularism (for a similar discussion on pronounced publics, see Cheema 2015). In the present context, I note that it is crucial to study how these publics interact in ways that may seem angry, impulsive, and yet emancipatory in a country where freedom of expression is under threat. As noted by Papachirissi and Oliveira (2012: 280) ‘in

repressive regimes, courage is required to express dislike, hatred and anger, and affective statements thus become political statements.’ Theoretical roots of such publics can be traced back to the earlier works of Felski (1989: 167) on role of publics in parallel ‘discursive arenas’, and that of Fraser (1990) on counter publics. Both stressed on the importance of how counter struggles in alternative spaces can eventually be registered onto the ‘comprehensive public sphere’ (Fraser 1990: 66-67). At the same time, Breese (2011) reminds us that counter publics are aware of their subordinate position and that their identity -individual and collective – relegates their public appearance and contribution to an inferior position vis-à-vis the wider and dominant position (131). This study will also examine how such dynamics play out between the conservative and the liberal publics.

A range of literature has been written about the promises of the Internet in relation to democratisation. Bohman (2004), Downey and Fenton (2003) have already taken the lead in this discussion, while others Jackson and Welles (2016) and Rambukanna (2015) have explored the opportunities it holds for counter publics, which they refer to as hashtag publics. In their study on hijacking hashtag #myNYPD, Jackson and Welles note how ordinary citizens followed by activists and journalists play an instrumental role in ‘creating anti-establishment narratives’ online (2016: 400). Looking at the wide range of media sources including semi-official newspapers, independent newspapers and social media posts, Hamdy and Gomma (2011) study variation in framing of the Egyptian uprising in Tahir Square. They concluded that ‘social media posts were more truthful than other media option’ (208). Drawing on prior research by Asen (2015), Hamdy and Gomma (2012), Jackson and Welles (2016), Rambukanna (2015) and Papachirissi and Oliveira (2012), I also trace engagement patterns of hashtag publics that emerged as a result of the disappearance of the activists. I have collected data and evaluated instances of public sphering (of whatever nature; rough, emergent, insurgent), from 7th January (when abducted) to 27th January (when the activists returned). Despite being on a short timescale, such events open doors for publics to join in an ‘ongoing and evolving conversation’ or discourses on issues of socio-political relevance (see Rambukanna 2015: 162). The post-disappearance hashtags include, #RecoverSalmanHaider, #Recoverallactivists, #whoaretheydefending, #bhensa, #recoverAhmadWaqas, #IamSalmanHaider, #RecoverAsimSaeed, #Mochi, #ShameOnPemra. Using a customised tool, Twitter and Google search bar, all tweets were extracted and quantified under the hashtags, #RecoverSalmanHaider, #RecoverAllActivists, #IamSalmanHaider and #WhoAreTheyDefending. In the second stage, data for each hashtag was further classified to

identify top ten tweets with maximum retweets, likes and replies. While retweets can be taken as the ideological endorsement of a shared thought, I give more importance to replies. I argue that it is in those replies that the actual conversation takes place. The replies take shape in either endorsing a thought or taking issue with it, it is also where detournment in a discourse takes place. Most importantly, it is usually the tweets and the replies that land citizens into trouble with the authorities. Hence, I argue that it is crucial to analyze the tweets that lead and frame the discourse in replies' section.

Since this is a written discourse, I resort to discourse analysts including Norman Fairclough who has significantly informed us on how language can be seen as a space for power struggle and where ideologies are shaped and contested (1996). He argues that discourses are 'determined by social conditions' and also by the relation between the stakeholders within the discourse (19). In other words, discourses are not a set of words grouped together and expressed through a language, rather they are 'a socially conditioned process, conditioned that is by other (non-linguistic) parts of society' (26). In other words, discourses cannot be abstracted from the society. In fact, discourses act as the mirror to the society that needs to be closely examined to understand the ideologies that shape the society. In this sense, discourse analysts are interested in evaluating ideological vocabulary of a discourse. Fairclough (1996) guides us in this direction by suggesting that in capitalist societies (typically British), capitalist discourses travel across and within different institutions and sectors. This, he argues is facilitated by 'social institutions such as education, the law, religions, the media, and indeed the family, collectively and cumulatively ensure the continuing dominance of the capitalist class' (33). Any such discourse that emerges from the most powerful segment of the society and is nurtured through different social institutions assumes the status of the dominant discourse. In order to achieve this status, these discourses need to be naturalised and become part of society's collective common sense (33).

For the purpose of this study, I argue that in Pakistani context, religion enjoys the status of the dominant discourse that travels across different institutions. Since the ideological rationale for creating Pakistan was deeply rooted in Islam, the state has carefully weaved policies (foreign or internal), constitution, curriculum, and the official media discourses in the idiom of Islam. With censorship in media, religion-based discourses across the large canvas of private broadcast media are also Shariah-compliant and strictly immutable on primetime (Cheema, 2018). Given this context, I argue that religion as the supreme discourse significantly shapes the collective vocabulary of 'common sense' (to use Fairclough's term

1996: 3) for the people. The two ways of exercising this power is through coercion and consent, while both are used by the states in different spheres of society, 'consent' that is 'less risky' is usually incorporated in discourses. My position in this regard is that tweet-led discourses are not only utilising the common sense-oriented consensual vocabulary but also coercive one to make the identity-related discourses afloat. This way both conservative and liberal publics are seen to be exercising 'power through language' and they 'must constantly be involved in struggle with others to defend (or lose) their position' (35).

The topics discussed in the reply sections feature nationalism, Muslim identity, Islam, Pakistani identity and patriotism, all of which are highly regulated in the mainstream media. In most cases, a pattern emerged whereby top tweets are initiated by either mainstream media elites or crowd sourced elites. While closely studying the conversations under top tweets for each of the hashtag, several recurrent patterns emerged but the data was further divided to identify themes that pushed the boundaries for *freedom of expression* under the chosen hashtags. This was done with the view that identifying themes can 'help manage data and bring more systematic order to the analytic process' (Tonkiss 2018: 486).

I have chosen to share the findings of analysis of the tweets under two hashtags, #RecoverSalmanHaider and #WhoTheyAreDefending. Echoing Tonkiss (2018), I also stress that 'it is usually more appropriate and more informative to be selective in relation to the data, extracting those sections that provide the richest source of analytic material (2018: 485). Out of eight hashtags, I have chosen to share findings of two representative hashtags that framed the contesting discourses on disappearances. These hashtags offered multiple functions, as tags, information, protests but also as threats. As obvious, #RecoverSalmanHaider was initiated to directly draw attention to the issue of abduction, whereas #WhoTheyAreDefending was the counter hashtag that led the discourse in support of abductions by the conservative publics. After identifying crucial themes within each hashtag and careful phrasing of tweets, I go a little further than locating hashtags to find out the directions in which exchanges between tweets play out to revisit identity questions and patriotism. This, I argue, marks the beginning of the move away from official, single public sphere in print and electronic media (whether state or private, it is Shariah-compliant). Moving onto the findings, the following sections will share how themes of national identity, patriotism, Islam and the state are revisited in the replies' section of the two hashtags.

Findings

#RecoverSalmanHaider: Between hypocrisies and patriotism

Soon after Salman Haider's disappearance, his brothers took to Twitter to report the incident. Faraz Haider, his younger brother was among the first ones to initiate the hashtag #RecoverSalmanHaider. The hashtag was not only self-explanatory but also warranted action. There were 2122 tweets in total. I have chosen to identify five Twitter handles that led the discourse through this hashtag. Interestingly, except for one, four are known in the mainstream media for their roles as journalists and activists.

Twitter ID	Profession
@MJibranNasir	Social activist, public speaker, lawyer
@FarazHaider	Brother
@iamHaiderRizvi	Journalist, social activist
@bilalfq	News Editor, Express Tribune
@AmmarRashidT	Columnist, Daily Times

Jibran Nasir is a popular social activist with a liberal outlook. Nasir has over 218K followers, and he is one of first ones to lead the discourse on disappearances. Using Twitter handle @MJibranNasir, Nasir's tweets led the liberal discourse on kidnapping of the activists. Of all his tweets, I am particularly interested in two tweets under the hashtag #recoveralsalmanhaider. The first one stating: *'I've filed an application today with Supreme Court HR Cell pleading the CJ to intervene in matter of missing activists'*. This was tweeted on 10th January, 2017 with 124 replies, 398 likes and 274 retweets. The tweet also became a point of discussion in the mainstream media. By sharing/pasting a copy of application to the Supreme Court's Human Rights Cell, Jibran Nasir initiates a tweet demanding an immediate recovery of the activists. The discourse under this tweet (in replies' section) takes on an interesting route when liberal and conservative elements of the public exchange tweets. I see this as an occasional yet unprecedented form of public sphering in Pakistani context. It pushes the boundaries laid by PEMRA. Conversations started under this tweet make the representative sample for how Twitter allows Pakistani citizens to voice their opinion unapologetically, and,

without the fear of the authorities. To demonstrate the range of topics addressed under this hashtag (#RecoverSalmanHaider), Table 1 shares representative replies by Tweeters to Jibran Nasir’s tweet. The discussion revolves around two major themes under the first thread, namely, labelling people as anti-state and highlighting the hypocrisies of the society.

Table 1: #RecoverSalmanHaider: First Tweet and the Representative Replies

@MJibranNasir	Ive filed an application today with Supreme Court HR Cell pleading the CJ to intervene in matter of missing activists #RecoverSalmanHaider
@ImtiazAlamSAFMA	Join Lahore protest against kidnapping of bloggers and early recovery on Thursday 12 January at 3pm in front of the Lahore press club.
@HIyvG5RhYkzwMHR	Shame on you for supporting the criminals of blasphemy law.
@m_ghiaz	trying to become another #asmajahangir
@madni31	may Allah help U my dear young talntd frnd bt kindly chek there r lot of so called NGOs r workin n their agnda is agynst Pak
@LondonNiazi	Ur the male version of Asma Jahangir u should be arrested for spreading lies & misleading people. Ur a fake like them be ready
@Madinah411	hv u filed any app for missing childrn?

@shahidkhanmn	RAW backed desi libertal and secular terrorst Nasir Jibran is supported of admns of ths pge he mst be arrstd n hanged
@drbakhtjamal	every Pakistani should know people like u who pretending himself Pakistani but actually working for others country, Iran India
@zarwanali1989	Do protests and ask agencies to release these people. They would run away to other countries, I mean liberals
@Adnan8487	Look at ur face idiot suffer jibran Nasir ... get out from Islamic republic Pakistan there is no space like people of

Soon after Jibran Nasir's tweet, Imtiaz Alam (@ImtiazAlamSAFMA), another liberal journalist used his thread to call for the protest against the kidnappings of bloggers, which in turn triggered a response from conservative publics. Consider, for example, how

@HIyvG5RhYkzwMHR uses the words 'shame on you' for supporting the bloggers. I argue that the word 'shame' here, signifies 'shaming' for not supporting religion or defying blasphemy law. The choice of such words suggests that no benefit of doubt could be given to bloggers, in fact, any initiative in support is deemed condemnable. Since Jibran Nasir also knows these bloggers on a personal level, pro-religion public responded to his tweets the most. What makes replies to this tweet important is how conservatives highlighted a range of prejudices, stereotyping and attitudes to the issue. For example, @m_ghiaz and @LondonNiazi choose to reply by drawing parallels between Jibran Nasir and Asma Jehangir. This is an interesting analogy because Asma Jehangir was also a lawyer, human rights activist (feminist) with a liberal outlook. Many a times, she faced criticism for her liberal and secular approach towards human rights issues. In 2013, US intelligence revealed that she could be killed for her views on clean governance in all the provinces (Buncombe, 2013). She has been vocal on role of the state with regards to missing persons (BBC Urdu, 2017). More recently, she has also been labelled as the Research Analysis Wing (RAW) agent. RAW is an Indian spy agency that features in news for almost all terrorist-related activities in Pakistan. It is a popular belief that publics with liberal outlook do not take religion seriously and have a soft corner for India. Much of it cannot be substantiated except for how liberals conduct themselves in the public sphere. In other words, 'liberal' is often

used condescendingly to refer to someone who does not follow (read perform Islam through a beard or a hijab) Islam. Moreover, it signifies, a lifestyle (Western) and a certain mindset that promotes tolerance towards minorities and repulsion towards radical Islam.

Replies also highlight equally important issues that have not been given adequate attention by liberal social activists. For example, the issue of missing children is raised by @Madinah411 by tweeting '*hv u filed any app for missing childrn?*'. Recently, several children went missing in different cities of Pakistan. This issue got media coverage across print and electronic media, @Madinah411 is reminding, and taking issue with Jibran Nasir's silence on this matter. In other words, @Madinah411 is also implying that Nasir and the liberals' silence on this matter draw attention towards seeking selective justice. Moreover, it implies that injustices of other nature fail to irk liberal sensitivities. Another extreme, yet rampant reaction is echoed by @Adnan8487 who tweets, '*Look at ur face idiot suffer jibran Nasir ... get out from Islamic republic Pakistan....*'. Likewise, @drbakhtjamal and @zarwanali1989 also reacted to Nasir's tweet in a way that suggested he is anti-state, traitor and backed by India or Iran. The reference to 'Islamic republic' also revisits the ideological rationale for the creation of Pakistan, and to some extent how this rationale shapes the collective common sense of Pakistani people on what is acceptable in society. The conservative public that professes the state-endorsed ideology perform quite forcefully, and aggressively to maintain their ideological stance. In this regard, Fairclough argues that there is a constant endeavour on the part of those who have power to try to impose an ideological common sense which holds for everyone (1996: 86)

There were many other tweets suggesting that civil society activists have no place in Pakistan. In this regard, I argue, that this incident brought several prejudices of the society to the fore. The sentiment that was more than prominent was the sheer intolerance towards those who even questioned abduction of the activists. Interestingly, both conservatives and liberals, did not seem to be returning to the actual content of the pages. There was no discussion on whether the content was acceptable even for the liberals. Instead, the discussion mostly featured the existing biases of the society. There have been instances where conversations in the thread leave the ideological stance embedded in the discourse on conservatism versus liberalism and take on personal conflicts. At other times, #recoversalmanhaider has also been used for advertising properties in Punjab. These aspects are also crucial in understanding potential demographics of the publics involved in following and participating in the discourse created by this hashtag. Moreover, it created an occasion and a moment where Pakistani

liberal and pro-religion publics revisit their patriotism through heated exchange of tweets. These, I argue, are the episodic moments that facilitate digital ‘intimacies’ (to use Berlant’s concept) between and around polarized publics that share ‘an aspiration for a narrative for something shared’ (Berlant 1998: 281). In this case, these publics share the homeland. It is in these frictions (to use Tsing’s term [2005]) that several possibilities emerge that cannot be possible in an otherwise polarized society. These possibilities include, bringing publics together, even if it is in disagreement; publics assuming the role of a watch dog; opening the public sphere for a range of debates; initiating debates on a traditionally immutable subject (national identity). In this regard, Tsing offers a useful reminder that ‘friction inflects historical trajectories, enabling, excluding, and particularizing. Friction is not a synonym for resistance. Hegemony is made as well as unmade with friction’ (2005: 6).

#RecoverSalmanHaider: between patriots and mullahism

Moving on to the second tweet by Jibran Nasir, I identify two major themes discussed in the initiated thread. In fact, while the first tweet was just the beginning of the conversation that polarised the publics within the thread (replies), the second tweet was carefully worded to initiate discussion on patriots and mullahism (read extremism).

Table 2- #RecoverSalmanHaider: Second Tweet and Representative Replies

@MJibranNasir	Since activists went missing friends texting me to stay safe. Safe from whom? We are Pakistanis so whose our enemy here #RecoverSalmanHaider
@WaatEvar	you're my most favourite rights activists, i don't want you to get missing so please stay safe from patriots
@MaarKhor7	How you traitors will stay safe from patriots?? Auntiii G

@GinaKhanUK	Shame on you Islamists and extremists who don't value the most brave & outspoken in Pakistan..we have the same issue here ..
@KashifMD	Mullahism is the worst enemy of humanity; May God save Islam, Pakistan and all mankind from this monster

Another tweet by @JibranNasir that initiated discussion on controversial aspects stated: *'Since activists went missing friends texting me to stay safe. Safe from whom? We are Pakistanis so whose our enemy here #RecoverSalmanHaider'*. In this tweet, the use of the words, 'whom', 'we' and 'our' indicates that the activists and Nasir share something in common. I reckon it to be their liberal outlook and their ideological inclination. Moreover, the tweet in general, implies that raising voice for the missing friends would invite unwanted threats. The diectic references have been carefully used to create ideological distance between Nasir, his sympathisers, and the 'rest'. By referring to 'we are Pakistani so whose (sic) our enemy', Nasir also implies that his critics are 'anti-Pakistan'. In the last thread, conservative publics also referred to him as anti-state, a tag that is often used for anyone who disagrees with the other on national issues. Without directly pointing finger at the establishment, Nasir's tweet suggested that he could perhaps meet the same fate as the missing activists or worse. In this case, Nasir's tweet seems to be successful in initiating conversations on anti-establishment narrative. This tweet framed the liberal discourse against the establishment, which was in stark contrast with how mainstream media (mainly Bol TV) pitched it. The discussion that unfolded under this thread was revealing in many ways. Only a few supported Nasir by clearly expressing concerns for his life. At the same time, it implies that the kidnappings were motivated by patriots. For example, in his tweet, @WaatEvar warns Nasir of patriots in this manner:

'you are my most favourite rights activists, I don't want you to get missing so please stay safe from patriots'.

It is also worth noting that the tweeters (such as @WaatEvar) who wrote in support of Nasir were vague in pronouncing what exactly they mean by patriots. Here, the word 'patriots' is worthy of attention. In the mainstream public discourses, 'patriots' is often used

euphemistically for establishment-led actors or the law enforcing agencies. The word is intentionally used for two purposes, firstly, to protect oneself from directly addressing the establishment, and secondly, to avoid offending them. This is what Lee and Pinker refer to as ‘deliberate ambiguity’ as a way of ‘seeking plausible deniability’ when speakers are uncertain of how the hearer will respond (Lee and Pinker cited in Gigliato and Lee, 2017: 2). In their study on discursive strategies around #JeNeSuisPasCharlie after Charlie Hebdo attacks, Gigliato and Lee (2017) identify how counter hashtags use the strategy of ‘saying without saying’ and hedging tweets to shield themselves from direct criticism (13). Hence, in the present context, the use of ‘patriot’ can be viewed as an act of strategic speaking. Another connotation attached to the word implies that the *ideological stance* of the establishment defines true patriotism in Pakistan. In this case, their patriotism conflates with Islam (see Haqqani 2005). This thread is perhaps one of the first ones that offered a unique opportunity to bring conservatives and liberals to exchange ideas on the issue of extremism and blasphemy. Consider for example, how @MaarKhor7 replies to @WaatEver’s tweet:

‘How you traitors will stay safe from patriots?? Auntiii G’

However, those opposing his tweet appeared to be more vocal in calling him a ‘traitor’ who cannot be saved from ‘patriots’. In fact, it also implies that questioning abductions can label one as a traitor. It is an intentional labelling of people into two different sets (patriots versus traitor) within the nation. In the absence of social media, labelling people as opponents or enemies could not be easily possible. Now that citizens have the access to Twitter, it has become much easier to directly label people thereby creating their own collective voice against those who disagree on similar topics. With regards to attitudes of angry publics on the Internet, Bostdorff (2004) notes that the community is built through opposition to other groups, and through angry, persistent messages of hate that discourage dissenting point of views (Bostdorff 2004: 340). It surely does not reveal a healthy exchange of ideas on the issue. In this context, it endorses the act of forced abductions. In addition, it suggests that those who oppose abduction form a monolith category of traitors. It is dangerous kind of stereotyping in a country that takes dissidence of any kind seriously.

To echo the liberal sentiment, @GinaKhan UK and @KashifMD raise a pertinent issue in their tweets in this manner:

@GinaKhan UK: Shame on you Islamists and extremists who don't value the most brave & outspoken in Pakistan..we have the same issue here ..

@KashifMD: Mullahism is the worst enemy of humanity; May God save Islam, Pakistan and all mankind from this monster.



While expressing solidarity with Nasir, @GinaKhanUK's tweet suggests that Islamists do not allow freedom of speech. Interestingly, the tweet also used Islamist and extremists almost interchangeably. This form of stereotyping also suggests that those in support of the activists could hardly stand pro-Islam opinions. In addition, the tweet goes further to imply that Islamists cannot accept those who express their opinions freely. While @KashifMA's tweet goes further to suggest that *mullahism* (extremism) are the worst enemies of humanity, but in what follows, he clearly separates *mullahism* from Islam. This, I find, is an interesting take on extremism in Islam, whereby, liberal Muslims tend to distance themselves from fanaticism while retaining their identity as Muslims. In Pakistan, it is common to publicly register protests against anti-Islam elements, whether in the mainstream media or on the streets. Given strict policing of the public spaces, protesting against the establishment is next to impossible. The angry exchange, in this section, could be the first of the instances that mark a cautious protest against the role of the state in silencing the dissenters. What is worth noting here is that such an exchange can never take place in the mainstream public sphere. Twitter has offered that alternative space for liberal publics to directly question the ideological leanings of the conservative public. In this aspect, Twitter's overarching discourse on patriotism can be seen as a 'parallel discursive arena', where liberal public typically performs as a counter public to 'formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs' (Fraser, 1990: 67).

#WhoAreTheyDefending: Othering of the liberal publics

#WhoAreTheyDefending emerged as the counter hashtag to #RecoverSalmanHaider. Table 3 shares the representative tweets for the hashtag.

Table 3- #WhoAreTheyDefending: Representative Tweet and its Replies

@ZaidZamanHam id	#WhoAreTheyDefending Astaghfurullah...anyone defending this filth "Bhensa" & its admins is actually at war with Pakistan, Islam
---------------------	---

<p>Likes 342, Retweets 329 56 replies</p>	<p>& Muslims..</p> <div data-bbox="523 280 861 392">  <p>Bhensa 26 mins · 🌐</p> </div> <p data-bbox="798 436 1398 492">ہ اور رسول سڑکوں بے خوار ہوتے ہوئے</p> 
<p>@MSalmanAli96</p>	<p>Is there any proof that those 3 missing persons were actually the admin of this page?</p>
<p>@Amirsoomro</p>	<p>This is intolerable. They shud stop this & apologise.</p>
<p>@zeenatevakhan</p>	<p>Apology is not enough they should be sent to the ISIS in Syria for a terrible death</p>
<p>@shaz114455</p>	<p>this is way beyond tolerance level, they r provoking us n if another mumtaz qadri appeared then they will again cry</p>

@ZarrarSalahPTI	I'd certainly like to see them poking fun at the Holocaust. In fact, I dare them to
@Brightlight061	astagfirullah, must hanged all of them
@anz3ee	Media par koi nahi bolega in k khilaf

The tweet that framed the discourse on hashtag counter to #recoveryalmanhaider was led by Zaid Hamid. Hamid has the reputation of an independent political commentator who regularly appears on the current affairs-based talk shows. He has a large following on Twitter and portrays himself as a nationalist. In total, 4000 tweets were retrieved under this hashtag, this particular tweet received 342 likes and 329 retweets. The tweet is reflective of his right-wing ideological leaning. Hamid initiated the discourse by sharing an image and its accompanying text from the controversial webpage run by the activists. The image itself was not controversial but the text could certainly be offensive to Muslims. Since the content of the webpages was controversial (deemed blasphemous in Muslim contexts), it was not reproduced in the mainstream media. Therefore, the image and the caption shared by Hamid was perhaps one of the very few extracts of the content that was shared on Twitter. While sharing the image, Hamid's tweet stated: *"#WhoAreTheyDefending Astaghfirullah...anyone defending this filth "Bhensa" & its admins is actually at war with Pakistan, Islam & Muslims"*. In this tweet, the words "anyone defending this filth & its admins is actually at war with Pakistan, Islam and Muslims" is worthy of attention here. I argue that the framing of words can serve three purposes, firstly, the words, "anyone defending", separate those who had sympathies with the missing activists from the rest of the nation; secondly, the words, "at war", group the sympathisers as the enemies of the nation; thirdly, the words "Pakistan, Islam and Muslims" suggest conflation of the three distinct categories. This is a deliberate conflation that reinforces the idea that Pakistan is the homeland for Muslims (read only for Muslims). In addition, the tweet can also be read as an insinuation, through which likeminded followers are invited to think about the activists and their supporters as the enemies of the state.

Out of 56 replies, only one tweet by @MSalmanAli96 questioned the validity of the Zaid's claims. While adding volumes to how public sphering plays out on Twitter, the tweet asks, "is there any proof that those 3 missing persons were actually the admin of this page?" In most cases, the CSEs are followed by the like-minded online crowd that shares similar emotions towards a certain object (see for example, Ahmed 2012). In this case, the object is Islam. In varying degrees, the followers have used replies to show their emotional attachment with religion. @MSalmanAli96's tweet, then, appears to be the odd one that challenges the original tweet's claim. His tweet does not invite any replies though, it marks one of those rare instances where publics step out of their echo chambers and start a conversation with publics of counter discourses. However, an interesting exchange occurs between two Twitter users. The first one @AmirSoomro condemns the content and the bloggers by saying "This is intolerable. They shud stop this & apologise", an opinion which is endorsed by a far more provocative reply by @ZeenatEvaKhan that says, "Apology is not enough *they* should be sent to the ISIS in Syria for a terrible death". This exchange shows the extreme emotion of hatred towards the missing activists. It is in these moments that the online crowd unites as 'us' against a common enemy 'they', where 'they' is used point out the linguistic deixis that locates readers within a national context and intentionally separates 'they' from the nation (for a similar discussion on the use of pronouns, see Dekavalla, 2010: 640). The careful phrasing of tweet works on readers' emotions while invoking certain form of 'rage against these illegitimate others' (for a similar discussion, see Ahmed 2012: 1). Likewise, it is the same discourse (in this case, right-wing Islam against liberals) that brings Pakistanis of different ethnicities together to prove their allegiance to the ideological kernel of the state. In this regard, Haqqani (2018) argues that 'extreme and violent manifestations of religious sentiment in Pakistan stem from the fear that Islam is under threat. Angry Islamists reject tolerance of others because they suspect such tolerance would dilute their religion'. This paranoia is deeply entrenched in the society, and it has been used not only by the state but also by different political parties to manipulate the vote bank. There is no denying that Pakistan was established as the homeland for Muslims, but it is problematic in assuming that Pakistani identity cannot be fluid. In that, it assumes that the narrative of national identity cannot evolve in 70 years. Even at the time of Partition, Muslims that migrated did not have a homogeneous identity. They were not only ethnically different but also had different religious inclinations; Islam was the only common denominator that united the nation.

@ZaidZamanHamid's tweet was endorsed 342 times, but there was one striking trend that draws attention. Consider, for example, how @shaz endorsed Hamid's tweet: "this is way beyond tolerance level, they r provoking us n if another mumtaz qadri appeared then they will again cry". In this tweet, the reference to "Mumtaz Qadri" warrants attention. Qadri was one of the police guards who killed Salman Taseer, the Governor of Punjab. Qadri claimed that he killed Taseer because he condemned blasphemy law and supported Aasia Bibi, the woman who supposedly committed blasphemy by insulting Prophet Muhammad (Haqqani, 2018). While Qadri faced death penalty for the murder, he leaves a large following among the conservative Muslims. Here, @shaz's reference to Qadri can be read in two ways. Firstly, it can be seen, as the sentiment prevalent in the society towards those who try to insult Islam. Secondly, it can also be read in terms of anticipated reaction or a warning. In addition, it also serves as a reminder that the society glorifies those who kill in the name of religion. Here, the intimate relationship between Pakistanis and Islam means 'that men of faith are portrayed as defenders of the country's ideology, making it difficult for the Pakistan government to act against those who act aggressively to protect the faith that defines the Pakistani state and nation' (Haqqani 2018: 1380).

Another tweet that came to the fore was that of @ZarrarSalahPTI who directly challenges the activists by asking if they would be "poking fun at the Holocaust. In fact, I dare them to". It could be read as an attempt to highlight the hypocrisies of the liberal activists, on the one hand, and raising the fact that freedom of expression should acknowledge sensitivities of a culture. Here, the reference to Holocaust, suggests that not all issues are open to debate in the West. Likewise, some issues are not open to debate in Pakistan, and that should be respected. In addition, it implies that Pakistani liberals are more sensitive to the Western sensibilities than their own. Moreover, there is an implicit suggestion that these activists are based in the West. The tweets under this thread have raised some crucial aspects vis-à-vis biases of the two groups (conservatives and the liberals).

Several tweets in this thread have suggested that the bloggers be 'killed'. While an earlier tweet warned that another Qadri would emerge, @Brightlight061 suggested that the bloggers be 'hanged'. Though similar in wanting bloggers dead, the approach is somewhat different. Here, the suggestion 'hanged' refers to the legal punishment of those who commit blasphemy in Pakistan. Hence, here, the emphasis is on the legal course, and activists' inevitable end in Pakistan. Another tweet by @anz3ee draws attention to how pro-religion publics perceive the media. He raises a pertinent point by asserting that no one in the media (in most cases, the

word 'media' refers to the mainstream public sphere, which is broadcast media, in Pakistan) will speak out against the bloggers. Here, the suggestion implies that the broadcast media is liberal and would not criticise the bloggers. While in my book-length project, I have argued that the content of broadcast media been 'colonised' by religion-based pressure groups (Cheema 2018: 98, 176), the pro-religion publics argue that they find Twitter as a freer space to voice their opinion. It is interesting to note that both liberals and conservatives show confidence in Twitter to register their unfiltered opinion. By and large, in this thread, the publics of #whotheyaredefending negotiate their intersecting identities as Muslims and Pakistanis but align more with their identity as Muslims than as Pakistanis. The references to killing, hanging and intolerance reflect their preference for heroes and outcasts. The discourse created by their tweets appears to be immutable, constrained and non-inclusive. In their performances as members of pro-religion publics, users tend to reinforce the existing boundaries of the discourse on Islam and patriotism. In this discourse, the idea of conflating Islam with patriotism is re-endorsed. While doing this on Twitter, they are virtually face-to-face with liberal publics but not in dialogue. In Habermas' belated acknowledgment of religion as a crucial variable in revisiting 'the political', the emphasis is on making the religious values accessible by translating them into 'a secular idiom and a "universally acceptable language", a task that falls not only to religious citizens but to all citizens – both religious and secular – engaged in the public use of reason (Mendieta and Vanantwerpen 2011: 5). In this regard, I argue that the skill of using a 'generally acceptable language' (Habermas 2011: 25) can be acquired and learnt over time. In repressive regimes, social media is the only space where publics of different discourses have just begun to hear each other out. What might look like an uncivil exchange of words, rather undemocratic in its rhetoric, I see it as the beginning of learning to deal with different opinions. What Habermas notes in a Western context, is equally applicable in Pakistani context. Twitter promises informal exchange of opinions on any given issue. The casual or informal expression creates opportunities for a pluralistic discourse where 'secular and religious citizens stand in a complementary relation', which is a healthy in transitional democracies.

The larger canvas of the study was the discourse on patriotism (vis-à-vis Pakistan) that is nurtured and maintained by its overarching public. During close analysis, it came to the fore that the discourse on patriotism is the space of performance for two contesting sub-publics,

both engaging in the ideological struggle on national identity and patriotism. The study has extracted three major trends to locate the interplay and friction of the two publics.

The findings revealed that the performance (Dayan, 2005) of the two publics transitions between exaggerated/reckless and cautious. While in many other scenarios, performance of members of the publics could be remote or constrained (for example, as viewers of non-interactive genres of television content, Cheema, 2018), the interactive element of Twitter allowed both publics to make it overt, but the strategies used in phrasing tweets were different. The findings of the first (#RecoverSalmanHaider: *Hypocrisies and Patriotism*) and the third trend (#whotheyaredefending: Othering of the liberal publics) show that with emotionally charged tweets, conservative publics not only performed their loyalty to their discourse, but also engaged the contesting publics with their intimidating tweets. Their phrasing clearly revealed liberal publics as their 'implied addressee' (Warner, 2000:72). With discursal roots in state-endorsed ideology on national identity, they used 'coercive language' to impose their agenda on the overarching discourse on national identity and patriotism (Fairclough, 1996:35). These two trends also demonstrated that the conservative public can be read as somewhat closed public that nurtures and is nurtured by the dominant group of society. Its discourse seeks strength from the state and clergy in an offline world, and its discursal performance is the display of its intimidating strength. The choice of phrasing largely reads like closed statements (shame, get out of Pakistan, should be hanged, send them to ISIS), and as part of nation's collective common sense, 'in the sense of being shared by most if not virtually all of the members of a society..' (88) This gives the public an edge over the liberal publics that is not more than a fringe public in an offline world, or the emerging counter public on Twitter.

The section on *Patriots & Mullahism* shows how the liberal counter public cautiously creates an oppositional discourse of 'anti-language' to the dominant one (Halliday cited in Fairclough, 1996: 91) In this trend, we also have an instance for liberal publics trying to 'exceed their discursal right' to create a language (shame on you Islamists, *mullahism* is worst enemy of humanity) that takes on the dominant conservative public (see Fairclough on exceeding discursal rights, 1996: 69). The careful phrasing of tweets by the liberal publics clearly indicate an attempt on creating anti-state discourse on the patriotism. While it may not be true for the conservative publics, but the discourse generated by liberal publics

reinforces Warner's assertion that for a public to be sovereign, it has to organise 'itself independently of state institutions, laws, formal framework of citizenship' (2000:68). I would stress further that it may not be the case for dominant publics operating in the 'comprehensive public sphere' (Fraser, 1990: 68), but the dominated or the counter publics need to operate independently of state to be registered differently and be noticed. At the same time, I argue that the strategic speaking of the liberal tweeters demonstrates that they are well 'aware of their subordinate status' (Warner, 2000: 119). This is interesting because Twitter is an unregulated space, but promoting anti-state narrative can have consequences in the offline world. Here, we also see beginning of the 'friction' (Tsing, 2005) between the two publics as the first step towards initiating a conversation that can over the years lead to a more inclusive idea of national identity. As a result of such exchanges, I stress that the discourse on national identity can eventually be porous.

Overall, the findings across three sections show that the discourse on identity was predominantly occupied by the conservative public (or Fairclough's dominant ideology, 1996), however, the nature of the medium was such that it brought two contesting sub-publics (conservative and seculars) debating on the sensitive issue of patriotism, thereby, a first step to 'unconstrain' the discourse (Benhabib on publics, 1992). In this regard, Benhabib (1992) argues that 'If in discourses the agenda of the conversation is radically open, if participants can bring any and all matters under the critical scrutiny and questioning, there is no way to predefine the nature of the issues discussed as being public ones of justice and the good life' (110-111). Using Benhabib's phrasing, I argue that 'the unconstrained public dialogue' can open streams for new ideas on how to define an ideal Pakistani. In the last 75 years of Pakistan's existence, the ideological leanings of Pakistani publics have evolved. The discourse on national identity should be inclusive to all publics with different understandings of what is an ideal Pakistani.

Conclusion

This study traced how episodic public sphering played out on Twitter around the issue of disappearances of activists in Pakistan. In doing so, it located several hashtags that emerged after their disappearance. While refining the focus, it then, traced how public sphering played out in the replies' section of two opposing hashtags that were led by the liberal and the conservative publics respectively. It came to the fore that instead of entirely enclaving themselves, the liberal counter publics are stepping forward to test the waters. In a month's time, liberal publics were successful in registering their protests not only on Twitter but also in the mainstream public sphere (Geo TV and Dawn Channel). These publics have also pushed the boundaries for freedom of speech through protests in different cities of Pakistan. Not just this, liberal publics have initiated conversation on identity issues, such as, 'what/who is an ideal Pakistani'. Perhaps their idea is not to dismantle the ideological rationale of Pakistan or build a new one, it is to widen the shrunken space for dissenters of all kinds. Interestingly, those who are defending liberal publics are still afraid to accept that the activists maintained anti-Islam blogs, rather they stress that activists were only anti-establishment, thereby conflating establishment, state and Islam into a single category. This, in turn, becomes an admission that Pakistani establishment is viewed as the custodians of Islam.

The ways in which Pakistani users have used Twitter show how as publics of conservative and liberal discourses on Islam and patriotism, they perform in pro-civic ways. Using their respective hashtags as stimuli, the users reflect on what could become part of the public discourse on Pakistani identity. For the pro-religion publics, anti-Islam discourses cannot occupy space in the public spheres whether broadcast or virtual. They appear to be intolerant and undemocratic. These resistant publics operate through the logic of exclusion where the approach is to create an echo chamber to colonise the space with similar thoughts (see Fraser 1991 for a similar discussion). These publics also draw support from the socio-political climate of the society that, in turn, re-endorses their intolerance on Twitter. Liberal publics, on the other hand, use strategic speaking/phrasing to initiate discussions on patriotism. Although liberal publics are also selective in choosing what to discuss, they tend to avoid using extreme references (such as hanging or killing) for those who choose to differ in opinion. Despite intolerance of varying degrees, Twitter has bridged the gap between highly polarized publics. What may seem like engendering echo chambers, could be the beginning of a journey towards a democratic process, where democratic process should be seen as 'learning process' (Habermas 2011: 28). The way pro-religion and liberal publics engaged

with the issue of disappearances of activists on Twitter, was later acknowledged by the mainstream media on Geo TV and BOL. This takes us back to how Felski (1989) and Fraser (1990) stress on the importance of circulating counter discourses that eventually bleeds into the comprehensive public sphere, a beginning of an unprecedented kind for Pakistan.

References:

Abbas, Mazhar (2018), Article 19 and the threat to media, *The News International*, 3 May, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/311886-article-19-and-threat-to-media>. Accessed 26 June 2019.

Ahmed, Sarah (2012), *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Asen, Robert (2015), 'Critical Engagement through Public Sphere Scholarship', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 101:1, pp. 132-144.

Azhar, Mobeen (2017) 'Pakistan's secret atheists', BBC Online, 12 July, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-40580196>. Accessed 9 August, 2020.

Baym, Nancy. K and Tiidenberg, Katrin (2017), 'Learn It, Buy It, Work It: Intensive Pregnancy on Instagram', *Social Media + Society*, January, 3:1, pp. 1-13.

Benhabib, Seyla (1992), *Situating the Self – Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Benkler, Yochai; Robert, Hal; Faris Robert; Solow-Niederman, Alicia; Etling, Bruce (2015), 'Social Mobilization and the Networked Public Sphere: Mapping the SOPA-PIPA', *Political Communication*, 14:1, pp. 1-3.

Berlant, Lauren (1998), Intimacy: A Special Issue, *Critical Inquiry*, 24: 2, pp. 281-288.

Bohman, James (2004), 'Expanding dialogue: The Internet, the public sphere and prospects for transnational democracy', *The Sociological Review*, 52, pp. 131-155.

Boone, Jon (2015) 'Dissenting voices silenced in Pakistan's war of the web', *The Guardian*, 18 February, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/feb/18/pakistan-war-of-the-web-youtube-facebook-twitter>. Accessed 9 August 2020.

Bostdorff, Denis (2004), 'The internet rhetoric of the Ku Klux Klan: A case study in web site community building run amok', *Communication Studies*, 55:2, pp. 340-361. DOI: 10.1080/10510970409388623

Breese, Elizabeth, B (2011), Mapping the Variety of Public Spheres, *Communication Theory*, 21, pp. 130-149.

Bruns, Axel (2008), 'Life beyond the public sphere: Towards a networked model for political deliberation', *Information Polity*, 13, pp. 65-79.

Bruns, Axel and Burgess, Jean (2011), 'The Use of Twitter Hashtags in the Formation of Ad Hoc Publics', In *Proceedings of the 6th European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) General Conference 2011*, University of Iceland, Reykjavik.

Buncombe, A (2013) US intelligence reveals Pakistan plot to kill human rights activist Asma Jahangir, *Independent* (Online), available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/us-intelligence-reveals-pakistan-plot-to-kill-human-rights-activist-asma-jahangir-8797255.html>, accessed on 09 Jan. 18.

Cheema, Munira (2014), Understanding gender dynamics of current affairs talk shows in Pakistani television industry in Raicheva, S. and Ibroscheva, E. (eds.) *Women in Politics and Media Perspectives from Nations in Transitions*. London and New York: Bloomsbury. Kindle Edition.

Cheema, Munira (2015), The Production and Reception of gender-based content in Pakistani TV Culture, PhD Dissertation, University of Sussex.

Cheema, Munira (2016), 'Producing Domestic Abuse in Pakistani Television: Between Commerce, Ratings and Social Responsibility' in Wheatley, H. and Moseley, R. (eds), *Television for Women: New Directions*, London: Routledge, pp. 208-227.

Cheema, Munira (2018), *Women and TV Culture in Pakistan: gender, Islam and national identity*, London: I.B. Tauris.

Dahlgren, Peter (1995), *Television and the Public Sphere, Citizenship Democracy and Media*. London, New Delhi and Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Dahlgren, Peter (2009), *Media and Political Engagement: Citizens, Communication and Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dayan, Daniel (2005), 'Mothers, midwives and abortionists: genealogy, obstetrics, audiences and public' in Livingstone, S. (2005) (ed.), *Audiences and Publics: When Cultural Engagement Matters for the Public Sphere*. Bristol: Intellect Press.

Dick, Hannah (2015), 'Atheism in religious clothing? Accounting for atheist interventions in the public sphere', *Culture and Religion*, 16:4, pp. 372-391, DOI: 10.1080/14755610.2015.1090466

Downey, John and Fenton, Natalie (2003), 'New Media, Counter Publicity and the Public Sphere', *New Media Society*, 5:2, pp. 185-202.

Fairclough, Norman (1996), *Language and Power*. 10th Impression. Harlow, United Kingdom: Longman.

Felski, Rita (1989), *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Fraser, Nancy (1990), 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy', *Social Text*, 25/26, pp. 56-80.

Habermas, Jurgen (1989), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Oxford: Polity Press.

Habermas, Jurgen (2006), The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article, in Durham, K. et al. (eds.) *Media and Cultural Studies: Keywords*. 2nd ed., Malden, Mass: Oxford, Blackwell.

Hamdy, Naila and Gomaa, Ehab. H (2012), 'Framing the Egyptian Uprising in Arabic Language Newspapers and Social Media', *Journal of Communication*, 62:2, pp: 195–211.

Haqqani, Husain (2005), *Pakistan Between Mosque and Military*, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Haqqani, Husain (2018), *Reimagining Pakistan: Transforming a Dysfunctional Nuclear State*. Harper Collins Publishers India. Kindle Edition.

Hartley, John (1996), *Popular Reality, Journalism, Modernity, Popular Culture*. London, New York: Arnold.

Hermes, Joke (2005), *Re-reading Popular Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Hern, Alex (2017) 'Pakistan asks Facebook and Twitter to help identify blasphemers', *The Guardian*, 17 March, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/17/pakistan-asks-facebook-twitter-help-identify-blasphemers>. Accessed 9 August, 2020.

Khiabany, Gholam and Sreberny Annabelle (2010), *Blogistan: The Internet and Politics in Iran*, London and New York: I.B. Tauris.

Khilji, Usama and Zahid, Saleha (2017), The Internet Policy Making Landscape in Pakistan, <http://globalnetpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/The-Internet-Policymaking-Landscape-in-Pakistan.pdf>, Accessed 26 June 2019.

Klein, Bethany (2011), 'Entertaining ideas: Social issues in entertainment television', *Media, Culture and Society*, 33:6, pp. 905-921.

Klein, Bethany (2013), Entertainment-education for the media-saturated: Audience perspectives on social issues in entertainment programming, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16; 1, pp.43-57.

Jami, Aamir (2017), 'Facebook removed 85% of blasphemous material on Pakistan's request, high court told', *The Dawn*, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1323131>, Accessed 26 June 2019.

Jackson, Sarah. J and Foucault Brooke Welles (2016), '#Ferguson is everywhere: initiators in emerging counterpublic networks', *Information, Communication & Society*, 19:3, pp. 397-418.

Livingstone, Sonia. and Lunt, Peter. K (1994), *Talk on television audience participation and public debate*. London, New York: Routledge.

Lunt, Peter and Pantti, Mervi. (2009), Popular Culture and the Public Sphere: Currents of Feeling and Social Control in Talk Shows and Reality TV, in Butsch, R. (ed.) *Media and Public Spheres*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lunt, Peter. and Stenner, Paul (2005), The Jerry Springer Show as an emotional public sphere, *Media, Culture and Society*, 27 (1), pp. 59-81.

Mc Guigan, Jim (2005), 'The Cultural Public Sphere', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 8 (4), pp. 427-443.

Mendieta, Eduardo and Vanantwerpen, Jonathan (2011), *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press. pp. 1-14.

Müller, Floris and Hermes, Joke (2010), 'The Performance of Cultural Citizenship: Audiences and the Politics of Multicultural Television Drama', *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 27(2), pp. 193-208.

Habermas, Jurgen (2011), The Political: The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology in Mendieta, Eduardo and Vanantwerpen, Jonathan (eds.), *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press. pp. 15-33.

Pakistani Talk Show (2017) Aaj Shahzeb Khanzada Kay Sath, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84H2XYpydA>, accessed April 24 2019.

Papacharissi, Zizi and Oliveira De Fatima, Maria (2012), 'Affective News and Networked Publics: The Rhythms of News Storytelling on #Egypt', *Journal of Communication*, 62:2. Pp. 266-282.

Papacharissi, Zizi (2015), *Affective Publics Sentiments, Technology, and Politics*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

Shamsi, Kamila (2011), 'Speak No Evil', *Index on Censorship*, 40 (1), pp. 14-20.

Stone, Brad (2008) Pakistan Cuts Access to You Tube Worldwide, *The New York Times*, 26 February, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/26/technology/26tube.html>, Accessed: 9th August, 2020

Rambukkana, Nathan (2015), 'FCJ-194 #RaceFail to #Ferguson: The Digital Intimacies of Race-Activist Hashtag Publics', *Fibreculture Journal*, 26, pp. 159-188.

Tonkiss, Fran (2012), Discourse Analysis, in Seale, Clive. (eds.), *Researching Society and Culture*. 3rd ed., New Delhi, London, Singapore and Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2012. Pp. 405-423.

Tsing, Anna. Lowenhaupt (2005), *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Princeton University Press.

Warner, Micheal (2002), *Publics and Counter publics*. New York: Zone Books.

Zem TV Official (2017) Aisay Nahi Chalay Ga, available at, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x58y2du>, accessed 24 2019.