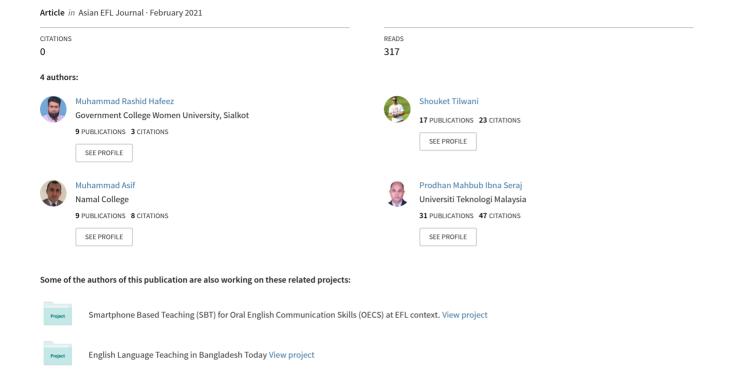# Challenging So-called Fake Media's Power Abuse with Social Media Verbal Abuse: Analysis of Twitter Interactions

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Challenging So-called Fake Media's Power Abuse with Social Media Verbal Abuse: Analysis of Twitter Interactions

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Abstract

The present research focuses on discursive practices of political activists and media persons on Twitter by drawing on the discourse-centred online ethnography for critical discourse analysis of the interactions. Studying these interactions, we argue that political activists' resistance against mainstream media persons' commentary serves to discredit these media persons and poses a challenge to their authority in their field of opinion-making. The study explores how the unknown political activists react to the political commentary of media persons and what referential and predicational strategies the two practices for representing each other. The study finds that in their political resistance against media persons' power, the activists not only resort to abusive language but also humour and pun as discursive strategies in response to media persons' critique of their political leadership and party. Allegations of misuse of media power, lobbying, and being sold out to political parties in addition to criticism on media persons based on gender, ethnicity, and facial features also resonate on Twitter.

Introduction

Nowadays, English has become a globalized language spoken by people from different cultural and linguistic background particularly after the tremendous advances in technology (Alzeebaree & Yavuz, 2017, as cited in Alzeebaree & Hasan, 2020). The influence of media in shaping different spheres of society can hardly be overemphasized (Stromback and Esser 2014). Politics is no exception as far as news media is concerned. Like everything else under the sky, there are two dichotomous views regarding the role that media plays in politics. One of the views suggests that it plays a significant role in shaping public opinion and informing the masses about the policies and manifestoes of political parties so that the voters make informed choices (Strömberg 2015). On the other hand, there is a view that the more powerful the media organization, the more it will have the ability to influence the election results in favour of or against a candidate "through its biased reporting" (Prat 2014:5). News media presents a plethora of reports and huge amounts of images that force people to form opinions about politicians (Krosnickand Kinder 1990). Hence, there have been calls for debate on how "media are controlled, structured and subsidized" (McChesney 1999:6).

Critical Discourse Analysis, Power, Politics and Social Media

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is concerned with the discursive practices that relate to the relationship between language and power. In methodological terms, CDA is interdisciplinary in nature as it dovetails with other disciplines and theories that address the current issues concerned with social change (Fairclough 2013). Being an explanatory and interpretative approach, CDA mediates the link between society and discourse and is based on the premise that the nature of power relations is discursive (Van Dijk 2013). Hence, power, ideology, dominance, race, and class are common themes in CDA, and it analyses the language used for the development and maintenance of structural relationships of power, dominance, discrimination, and control (Wodak 2001). "Critical discourse analysis is specifically interested in power abuse, that is, in breaches of laws, rules, and principles of democracy, equality, and justice by those who wield power" (Dijk 1993:255).

A natural corollary of power is resistance (Eamonn, 2004). It is quite natural for people to react whenever there is a real or perceived threat to any of their fundamental rights. US President Donald Trump is not the only one who has reacted against mass media, terming it as

"fake news". The real or perceived media angling invites similar kinds of attacks from politicians and political activists from all over the world. One of the reported reasons behind that is the ambiguity created due to confusion between media logic and political logic because newsworthiness is more important for media than the needs of, and standards set by, the politicians (Stromback & Esser 2014). As a result, political actors come up with counter-narratives in different forms. These narratives and counter-narratives are not confined to mainstream news media; these are, rather, spread to social media as well. The political actors' reaction can be quite damning if it slights the credibility of the newsperson since credibility is the most important attribute of any political journalist (McNair, 2011).

In addition to the traditional and unidirectional mass media, the dominant source of news and views during the last century, social media has emerged as an alternative interface for discursive practice during the last decade. To some, it poses the greatest challenge to mainstream media in our times (Crilley & Gillespie, 2019). Through the introduction of social media, the internet has decentralized the power of media to some extent during the last couple of decades. Hence, we have reached a point of hybridity in which there is an evident connection between the traditional media and digital media as far as concentration and diffusion of power with regard to politics are concerned (Chadwick et al. 2016; Al-Shammari, 2020).

Since social media platforms are widely used for political campaigning now, the masses have more say in that they can make political comments on tweets and posts. This was unavailable to them at such a mass scale during the TV-dominated era (Medina & Munoz, 2014). To some, social media has emerged as a substitute media with its "many-to-many dynamic of discursive practice" (KhosraviNik, 2017:582). Although some researchers believe that the participatory web has not delivered on its utilitarian promises (Morris & Ogan 2002) yet social media is challenging the mass media's longstanding monopoly by opening up newer vistas of real-time two-way mass communication, resulting in an inversion of elite control (Meraz 2009; Medriano & Bautista, 2020). This has led to a democratization of media to a great extent since the masses are now engaged in discursive practices that they hitherto did not enjoy.

Social media is more democratic, liberal, and freer than the mass media because for the most time, "national regulations on the political content of broadcasting do not, of course, apply to online media" (McNair, 2011:46). The masses have got more chances now to indulge in the discourse on politics with political journalists and commentators on social media platforms (McNair, 2011). In Pakistan, there are certain checks on social media in the form of cybercrime laws; however, these are confined to blasphemy and undue criticism of the institutions of armed

forces and judiciary. Despite that, one comes across a plethora of material on these subjects as well since the very participatory nature of social media allows people from all parts of the world to engage in discursive practices, and national laws do not apply to aliens.

Throughout the world, political parties spend a lot of time and effort in developing their social media teams, which flood the social media platforms with political campaign messages (Bright, et al. 2017). Facebook and Twitter are two of the most popular platforms in this regard. In fact, these have become a part of the socio-political landscape (Irawanto, 2019).

Twitter

Twitter is a platform that provides its users with great opportunities to communicate with each other. In addition, it affords the users chances to view and share information from all over the world (Gaffney and Puschmann, 2014). In fact, with its constantly updated streams of information from all over the world, Twitter has emerged as a public platform that helps in sharing information at rapid speed while also promoting democratic exchanges among the users (Sharma, et al., 2017). Twitter has been relevant not only during uprisings in the dictatorships, as was the case in the Arab Spring but also in the democratic setups where the focus has been on the political use of Twitter by politicians (Larsson and Moe 2013). Politicians as well as political activists use Twitter for political campaigning and canvassing (Small, 2011). Documentation of political activities, debates on political parties' manifestoes, and discussion on the party policies and plans are all documented on Twitter (Enli, 2017).

Although several studies have been undertaken on journalists' use of social media (McGregor, 2019; Enli and Simonson, 2018; Hedman, 2019; Mourão and Harlow, 2020), no significant research has been conducted till date on the interactions between journalists and political activists and the resulting discursive practices. The present study aims to fill the mentioned gap.

Method

Since social media presupposes interaction with no passivity or receptivity on anyone's end. Discursive practice emerges as a key term in this domain. Interaction, in Gee's (2015) words, is the "essence of discourse analysis" (p.1).

The technologically determinist approaches to CDA on social media rely mostly on the huge amount of data that has to be processed through the software. Such a practice deprives the researcher of the ability to view language as a part of a larger social context. Though these

approaches are easy in terms of collecting large amounts of data from social media platforms, they run the risk of taking this data out of context (Varis 2015).

As against the technologically determinist approaches, the socially-oriented approach is based on the premise that discourse is independent of the medium, in this case, social media platform on the web, and it is concerned not so much with what happens on social media but with how it influences and affects the political and social sphere (KhosraviNik & Sarkhoh 2017).

In this regard, discourse-centred online ethnography has recently emerged as means of systematic observation of linguistic and other semiotic material used in online platforms over a period of time, coupled with online actors' interviews (Androutsopoulos 2008). Ethnography is a way of learning and discovery through experience with the social actors in the field (Blommaert & Jie 2010). In online ethnography, the researcher is a member of the web platform under study.

An important aspect of CDA in social media research is the realization that it is not in the virtual world but the physical world that the researcher is interested in. However, this also comes with an acknowledgment that our analyses might be affected due to the availability of specific features of digitally mediated contexts (KhosraviNik & Unger 2016). Varis (2015) states, "From an ethnographic perspective, studying language means studying society and larger-scale sociocultural processes, and making a distinction between the linguistic and the non-linguistic is seen as a fundamentally artificial one" (p. 57).

In this backdrop, we continuously monitored tweets by 10 media persons and their interactions with political activists for four months. All these media persons had confirmed Twitter accounts, and each had at least 100,000 followers. The tweets were categorized in terms of their relevance to various themes. These themes included personal lives and ideas of the major political leaders, i.e. PTI chief Imran Khan and PML-N chief Nawaz Sharif, their political parties' policies in the past, parties' latent and manifest agendas, their promises to the electorate, selection of candidates for various constituencies, reported good governance and alleged bad governance during the last five years, and their attitude towards major issues like terrorism, human rights, women rights, education, health, and infrastructure. We documented these media persons' interactions with the political activists emerging from these tweets. Some of these tweets were in Urdu. These tweets were translated and back-translated to ensure validity.

This was followed by interviews with eight political activists, four each belonging to PTI and PML-N. We chose those political activists who tweeted, or responded to tweets of

media persons, at least ten (10) times every day during the data collection period. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Urdu and English as per the preference of the participants.

The names of the participants have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. The pseudonyms of the media persons and political activists are presented in the tables below.

Table 1

Pseudonyms of Media Persons

Sr. No.	Pseudonyms	Sr. No.	Pseudonyms
1	Anna	6	Francis
2	Brian	7	Gloria
3	Christopher	8	Henry
4	David	9	Ian
5	Emma	10	Jessica

Table 2

Pseudonyms of Political Activists

Sr. No.	Pseudonyms	Sr. No.	Pseudonyms
1	Alan	5	Eric
2	Betty	6	Farrell
3	Caroline	7	Garcia
4	Dorothy	8	Helen

Results and Discussion

A massive amount of data was available to us. However, our primary concern was the conflict of identities between the political activists and media persons emanating from their discursive orientations. More than anything else, we have been concerned with how the unknown political activists react to the political commentary of media persons and what referential and predicational strategies the two practices for representing each other. Although the social media teams of the PML-N and PTI have been engaged in these conflicts and identity-making at the institutional level, there are a few tweeps who represent their political identity but challenge the identities claimed by the media persons at an individual level.

Nomination Strategies

Reisigl and Wodak's (2009) discourse-historical approach (DHA) helps in identifying the discursive strategies used for naming and describing social actors. Reisigl (2017) terms of these strategies as nomination strategies. Such nominations serve not only as representative depicters for these actors but also as windows into the minds of the discourse producers. The discourse in question is replete with such strategies mostly by the political activists and sometimes by the media persons as well.

There was a marked difference in the use of nomination strategies not only between the media persons and the political activists but also between PTI activists and PML-N activists.

Nominations Strategies by Political Activists for Media Persons in General

The most frequent nomination strategy qualified media persons as *lifafa* journalists (pejorative for journalists who get money for promoting political parties or leaders). Interestingly, the term is used both as an adjective as well as a noun. *Watan firosh sahafi* (treacherous media person), *qalam firosh* (mercenary), b*ezamir sahafi* (a media person with no conscience), traitors, dirty journalism, paid journalism, *dalal*(pimp/s), media mafia, rogue media. *landy k sahafi* (fake media persons)**.** **"***Sahafi*? He is a Sell-out". Third-class, blackmailer, presstitute, *bayghrats (dishonourable and ignoble),* media thugs, *katoory* (puppies), *chootiya* (stupid), *ic beghrt ko bs jotay marny chahy* (This *ignoble* fellow deserves a good beating)*.* Terms like *lifafa* bracket all the media persons as a sell-out. Not only the activists belonging to the two political parties use it for the media persons but the media persons also use it for each other. Hence, it appears to be the most widely used delegitimizing term for journalists.

Activists across the party lines suggest that cash plays a major role in the media industry. "You pay them and you thrive; you refuse them and they start blackmailing you", said David, a PTI activist. Similarly, PML-N's Henry is of the view that "powerful forces, which work behind the scenes, pay some of the journalists to paint some of the politicians as anti-state and corrupt".

Nominations at Individual Level

In addition to the above nomination strategies employed to frame media persons as a group, certain nomination strategies are employed at the individual level as well. For instance, Anna, one of the media person that is quite critical of the PTI is labelled as *sarkari hajan (*a term used for a woman journalist who performed the obligatory pilgrimage to Makkah on

government's expenses). Alan, one of the PTI activists says about her, "I have not seen a person who is more shameless, barefaced, impolite, uncivil, miscreant, treacherous, disloyal, tainted, corrupt and ugly than you." This statement shows Alan's immense hatred for the media person who is critical of PTI.

When asked why he resorted to such invective against that particular media person, Alan replied, "These representatives of fake media deserve the same treatment as they have sold their conscience in exchange for monetary gains." Alan's comments should not be seen as an isolated viewpoint. In fact, other PTI activists shared his views as one of them, Betty, remarked, "Corruption is written all over their faces. These media persons deserve nothing less than that because they serve the corrupt politicians and mafias. They focus on the personal lives of our political leaders and try to project them as morally bankrupt. They should be treated in the same manner. They are big names with small mouths."

Another nomination strategy used to qualify media persons at an individual level is distorting the names. The political activists use a variety of distorted names for journalists expressing opposing or dissenting viewpoints. These nominations usually replace either the first or given name or the surname of the media persons with a word that rhymes with that name but amounts to slandering, or allegation, to say the least. Hence, terms like *lefafi*, referring to the claim that the media person sells his views to promote the payers' cause, dollar, riyal, dirham, *naqd* (cash), rishwat (bribe), *badnam* (infamous), and plot are used as alternatives to the real names of the media persons. The references to currency and money are the most recurrent ones.

PTI activists were not the only ones to employ such nomination strategies. The PML-N activists also came out scathing against the media persons that criticized their party. An example in this regard is the following tweet by Eric.

"The traitors like you should be stripped naked and burnt in the fire. You are a shameless person. You sell your soul. You are a womanizer, corrupt and bastard". Quite interestingly, both the PML-N and the PTI activists exploit patriotism and label the dissenting voices as unpatriotic and agents of the other party.

Predication Strategies

Predication strategies are used to attribute positive or negative characteristics to the social actors (Reisigl 2017). Hence, these can be termed as discursive characterization. Several instances were found in the tweets by activists across the political divide. There were allegations that the media persons use their power to form a public opinion against democracy,

religion, army, judiciary, and state. These were coupled with allegations of treason, corruption, and moral turpitude.

One of the PML-N activists, Garcia, employed a predication strategy against a media person in a harsh term saying, "Keep on barking against powerless politicians and keep on licking the boots of powerful people in the uniform."

In fact, there is a clear pattern in the use of such strategies by the followers of both parties. If followers of one party are lashing at one set of media persons, the followers of the other party are also using these predictive strategies against the media persons on the opposing side. It seems that the political parties promote such a culture of abuse to control the media persons. Hence tweets a PTI activist, Betty, directing her pejorative on one of the media persons: "You are the epitome of shamelessness. The more the people abuse you the more shameless you get. No doubt, some people fall into the ditch of ignorance." This tweet not only highlights Betty's anger at the media persons but also reflects her disappointment that the verbal onslaught is not stopping the media person from criticizing her political party. A renowned journalist, says, "Media cells teach them not only to use abusive terms but also to take pride in that. God have mercy on them!"

A tweet by Farrell titled "pimps' journalism" not only draws comparisons between the media persons and pimps but also between media on the whole and a brothel. The activist wrote, "They say when a prostitute's brothel gets deserted, it directly affects the pimps. This is precisely what has happened to media and media parsons after the ouster of the PML-N government."

In addition to deprecatorily labelling the social actors (Wodak & Meyer 2001) in individual terms, political tweeps also employ predicative strategies against media as an institution. The resentment and hatred against media appear to be so immense that there are calls for exterminating the media persons as is evident in Alan's tweet: "Forget about all the other stories. Ask for your price. When will they kill these journalists who like scruffy dogs are wagging their tales?"

However, media persons have also taken to these disparaging predicative strategies for framing political activists. Reminding a media person, Brian, how he "freely and unfairly" criticized the previous government of PML-N, and how he is condemned and trolled now for criticizing the incumbent PTI government, another media person, i.e. Emma, comments, "You are justified in your criticism today but dogs have been let loose on you now." This reaction to trolling comes from a media person whose interaction with the PTI activists has always been

marred by pejoratives. The predicative strategy adopted by her is meant to give vent to her own feelings about the PTI activists.

Though there are complaints by most of the media persons and analysts that the political activists indulge in verbal abuse, there are a few who do not respond in kind. These media persons simply make comments like the one made by Gloria: "Swearing, swearing and nothing but swearing; taunts and sneering…… This is what the PTI and PML-N media cells stand for". Gloria's tweet suggests that the political parties' media cells promote the culture of swearing and taunts, meaning thereby that there is institutional support to the trolls. It also shows that the political parties, not isolated activists, are challenging the media person's authority in their field.

However, there is another media person Henry, who says "A civilized person does not indulge in abusive language. If an uncultured person hurls abuses, one should turn a deaf ear to him/her. An ignorant person is inferior to even an animal because such a person is dominated by passions. An animal is deprived of reason. An ignorant person does not use his brain. He should be left to God."

Conclusion

It is quite clear that both the major political parties are very active in 'information warfare' on Twitter, and are quite vocal to occupy this online platform. There are marked similarities in the discursive strategies employed by these parties' social media teams as far as their interactions with the media persons are concerned. Since there is a realization that media persons have the power to shape public opinion, there appears to be more focus demonizing the media persons to discredit them. This is achieved not only through direct abuse but also through the use of metaphors and neologisms. Political activists with no political office or stake can easily get away with verbal abuse. However, such consistent verbal attacks, abuses, and allegations of financial corruption against media persons ultimately discredit not only the individual media persons but also the community because these attacks are made across the political divide and are directed against the entire media per se. It has been found that the political activists adulate the media persons who write in their favour but they lash at those who criticize their party or political leader. Hence, the only authentic report or tweet is the one that favours one's political party or leader. This leads researchers to a new direction. Politicians often accuse that the media discredits them. Are the discursive strategies employed by the political activists on Twitter an attempt by the political parties to discredit media? Although neither of the two mainstream parties owns such verbal onslaughts against the media persons,

yet one can discern not only a clear pattern but also cooperation among the tweeps of these parties against targeted media persons.

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