INFODEMICS IN PAKISTAN: POLITICAL POLARISATION, DIGITAL NARRATIVES, AND NATIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES

Dr Bilal Ghazanfar & Ameer Abdullah Khan*

Abstract

This study investigates the rise of infodemics in Pakistan as a multidimensional challenge that transcends public discourse and directly affects political stability and national security. Infodemics, characterised by the rapid spread of misinformation, disinformation, and manipulated narratives, have become a persistent feature of Pakistan's digital media landscape. Political parties, religious factions, and militant actors exploit social media platforms to influence public perception, manufacture polarisation, and erode institutional trust. Through qualitative analysis of political trends, digital behaviours, and institutional responses, the study demonstrates how infodemics undermine democratic legitimacy, weaken regulatory authority, and exacerbate security vulnerabilities. It argues that Pakistan's fragmented information environment, combined with low media literacy and weak institutional communication, has created fertile ground for sustained narrative disruption. The paper concludes that confronting infodemics in Pakistan requires a coordinated state response that integrates strategic communication, media regulation, institutional reform, and civil society participation.

Keywords: Infodemic, Political Polarisation, Disinformation, Religious Narratives, Security

Introduction

The unchecked circulation of misinformation, disinformation, and manipulated political content in Pakistan's digital sphere has become a defining challenge to both democratic stability and national security. This phenomenon, widely described by international health bodies and communication scholars as an "infodemic," is neither incidental nor merely technological. It is instead a deeply political development shaped by the convergence of political rivalries, religious contestation, and a fragmented institutional landscape.

*Dr Bilal Ghazanfar is *Editor at the Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies (CASS), Lahore. Mr* Ameer Abdullah Khan *Senior Research Associate at the Centre for Aerospace and Security Studies (CASS), Lahore.* The author can be reached at *info@casslhr.com.*

In Pakistan, the infodemic has evolved beyond a public health concern or a media issue; it constitutes a strategic arena where state and non-state actors contest legitimacy, mobilise identities, and destabilise public trust in institutions.

Political parties and religious factions increasingly employ digital platforms to shape public opinion by reinforcing selective truths, suppressing counter-narratives, and delegitimising adversaries. The speed and reach of these campaigns, particularly on platforms such as Twitter (now X), Facebook, and Snapchat, have outpaced the state's regulatory capacity. Hashtag campaigns, bot-amplified trends, and algorithmically curated feeds produce digital echo chambers that erode the possibility of shared political discourse. Over time, this has contributed to an environment in which truth is negotiated through repetition and affiliation, rather than evidence or institutional authority. Public trust in the judiciary, the election commission, the media, and the legislative process has declined sharply in parallel with the rise of unmoderated digital influence campaigns.[1]

Religious groups and militant actors have also capitalised on this environment to assert theological and ideological dominance through visual content, sermons, and meme-based mobilisation. These actors operate outside the boundaries of mainstream regulation but within the same platform architecture that enables political communication. The result is a fragmented, polarised, and vulnerable national information space, vulnerable to internal subversion and external manipulation.[2] In this context, the infodemic is no longer a side effect of digital openness; it is a weaponised information condition that generates political polarisation and systemic distrust.

This study hypothesises that infodemics in Pakistan function as strategic tools that deepen political and sectarian polarisation, erode institutional trust, and generate multi-dimensional security vulnerabilities. Unlike Western environments where regulatory, judicial, and media institutions may act as partial buffers against information disorder, Pakistan faces a deficit of credible mediating structures. The study contends that the absence of institutional resilience, combined with political incentives to distort information, renders the infodemic an enduring threat to governance. The analysis is based on a qualitative case study methodology that combines discourse and content analysis of digital narratives spanning 2018 to 2023.

Data sources include public hashtag trends, political party social media campaigns, viral religious videos, investigative journalism, and legal or policy documents. Platform-specific data were collected through keyword tracking, archived social media screenshots, and digital ethnography. Supplementary insights were drawn from interviews with journalists, researchers, and digital rights practitioners. Data were coded and thematically organised to map political alignment, institutional targeting, emotional tone, and engagement patterns.[3]

The central research questions guiding this investigation are: How do political and religious actors in Pakistan use digital media to shape public narratives? In what ways does the spread of misinformation contribute to the erosion of institutional trust and the volatility of public support? And what forms of regulatory and institutional response might be effective in addressing the long-term security implications of infodemics?

To answer these questions, the paper is structured into thematic sections. It begins by examining the relationship between infodemics and political polarisation, before analysing the role of political parties in manufacturing and circulating narrative content. Subsequent sections assess the platform-specific nature of information manipulation, the influence of religious factions, the erosion of institutional credibility, and the mobilisation potential of militant groups. The latter part of the paper considers public opinion volatility, reviews state regulatory efforts, and concludes with recommendations for institutional and civil society responses.
This study departs from frameworks that privilege abstract notions of epistemic decay. It instead foregrounds infodemics as a tangible political and security challenge in a state with weak regulatory mechanisms and high levels of societal polarisation. The aim is not merely to diagnose the problem but to contribute to the strategic understanding of information manipulation as a durable threat to Pakistan's internal stability.

Infodemic and Political Polarisation

In Pakistan, political polarisation has been both a cause and a consequence of the infodemic. The rise of social media as a primary arena of political communication has transformed the nature of political affiliation, making it more emotive, personalised, and adversarial. Digital platforms reward narrative intensity over factual coherence, thereby elevating provocative content and drowning out moderation.[4]

In such an environment, partisan identities are no longer formed through traditional ideological alignments or policy preferences, but through constant exposure to curated and emotionally charged information streams that depict opponents not as political alternatives but as existential threats.

Political leaders, party operatives, and digital influencers use platforms such as Twitter and Facebook not only to disseminate their messages but to construct alternate realities that reinforce group loyalty and vilify dissent. In doing so, they exploit the algorithmic architecture of these platforms, which amplifies outrage, repetition, and affiliation.[5] Political narratives are rarely grounded in evidence. Instead, they rely on anecdotal claims, rhetorical exaggeration, and the personalisation of institutional failures. As a result, digital polarisation intensifies not only disagreement but also mutual delegitimation: each side sees the other not simply as wrong, but as treasonous, corrupt, or irredeemably dangerous.

This dynamic was observable during the 2018 general elections and their aftermath, as all major parties engaged in narrative engineering to reinforce their respective positions. Supporters of the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) amplified claims of institutional betrayal and judicial bias when political decisions went against them. Conversely, when in power, the party's digital wing actively discredited opposition voices by framing them as agents of foreign agendas or beneficiaries of elite impunity.[6] In parallel, opposition parties used their online ecosystems to portray PTI as an authoritarian threat to democratic norms. These mutually reinforcing narratives deepened distrust in electoral institutions such as the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), judicial credibility, and even the neutrality of the military establishment.[7]

The net effect of these processes is not merely rhetorical. They result in the breakdown of institutional legitimacy and the transformation of public discourse into a field of factional warfare. Empirical studies of Pakistani social media content during electoral periods indicate a sharp increase in misinformation spikes, with the majority of viral content either unverifiable or deliberately misleading.[8] The consequences of this for democratic stability are profound. When political debate is supplanted by mutual accusations of betrayal, and when facts are subordinated to loyalty-based interpretations, the very basis of electoral legitimacy and governance is weakened.

Political Parties and Digital Narratives

In Pakistan, political parties are no longer passive actors in the information landscape; they are central architects of digitally mediated narratives. The country's major political factions have developed sophisticated online ecosystems, often referred to as "media cells", tasked with trend manipulation, narrative amplification, and reputational attacks on adversaries.[9] These structures do not merely serve communicative functions; they also operate as digital extensions of political strategy. Through coordinated content creation and dissemination, they shape public perceptions of elections, court decisions, opposition parties, and even the armed forces.

The Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) has arguably pioneered this model in the Pakistani context. By leveraging Twitter, Facebook, and WhatsApp networks, the party institutionalised digital outreach as a core pillar of its mobilisation strategy. During both its years in opposition and its tenure in government, PTI maintained a robust online presence aimed at reframing political debates through highly stylised, emotionally charged messaging.[10] Its media wing capitalised on crisis moments such as corruption verdicts, protest movements, or judicial reviews to push binary narratives of betrayal and redemption. These campaigns often featured infographics, selective news clips, and slogans that simplified complex political events into morally charged dichotomies.

Opposition parties have adopted similar tactics. The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) have used their online surrogates to counter official narratives by framing the PTI as authoritarian, incompetent, or beholden to hidden powers.[11] These digital responses are often amplified by sympathetic journalists, YouTube influencers, and party-affiliated pages, creating the illusion of grassroots backlash. The result is a digital arms race in which each faction seeks to dominate the public imagination by saturating online space with its version of reality.

This politicised information warfare has had measurable effects. In the 2022 constitutional crisis following the dissolution of the National Assembly, political parties framed judicial decisions not as legal determinations but as expressions of partisan loyalty.[12] Social media was flooded with allegations of foreign conspiracies, judicial collusion, and military interference, all with a limited evidentiary basis.

These narratives, though often speculative, gained traction because they were emotionally persuasive and algorithmically reinforced. Once such claims enter the public domain, they are rarely corrected, even when disproven, due to identity loyalty and the structure of digital affirmation.

Party-generated infodemic content also functions by creating epistemic insulation. Supporters are encouraged to reject information from rival sources or neutral institutions, thereby cultivating echo chambers where internal narratives are recycled without challenge.[13] Such environments weaken the role of investigative journalism and disincentivise fact-based debate, as evidence becomes irrelevant to audiences seeking moral or tribal confirmation. This not only fragments the information ecosystem but also diminishes the ability of institutions, such as the Election Commission or Supreme Court, to function as credible arbiters of political disputes.

The role of political parties in manufacturing and disseminating disinformation is thus not a secondary phenomenon but a central driver of the infodemic in Pakistan. Their calculated deployment of digital narratives deepens institutional mistrust, weakens policy discourse, and entrenches factionalism. Any meaningful reform of the digital information space must therefore begin with an assessment of how political actors operationalise infodemics as a routine instrument of political survival.

Platforms as Infodemic Accelerators: Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat

Digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Snapchat have become central to the production, circulation, and normalisation of infodemic content in Pakistan. Their design architecture incentivises emotional resonance over factual integrity, accelerating the spread of misinformation and entrenching polarised discourse.[14] Political actors, influencers, and religious groups exploit the affordances of these platforms, retweets, trending algorithms, filters, and closed groups to engineer attention, reinforce identity boundaries, and manipulate collective memory. Twitter, now rebranded as X, functions as the most visible battleground for political narratives in Pakistan. Its hashtag system allows parties and affiliated media cells to coordinate digital campaigns that mimic grassroots activity. These trends are often not organic but manufactured through bot activity, paid amplification, or influencer coordination.[15]

The use of trending hashtags such as #ImportedHakoomatNamanzoor or #VoteKoIzzatDo exemplifies how narratives are constructed through repetition and symbolic framing, often in the absence of substantive evidence.[16] Once a hashtag gains momentum, it achieves a performative legitimacy that compels traditional media to respond, further entrenching the narrative in public consciousness.

Facebook, with its large Urdu-speaking user base and group-focused architecture, enables more sustained narrative formation among segmented communities. Political and sectarian pages, many operating under misleading names, serve as incubators for disinformation, particularly during election cycles or institutional crises.[17] Unlike Twitter, Facebook allows for longer posts, embedded videos, and comment thread manipulation, enabling a multi-layered engagement model. Misinformation here often takes the form of emotionally charged videos, selectively edited news segments, or religious sermons repackaged to comment on contemporary events.[18] These posts generate extensive engagement within closed groups, creating internal feedback loops that are resistant to correction or external challenge.

Snapchat, though less politically dominant than other platforms, plays a growing role in shaping the perceptions of younger urban Pakistanis. Its ephemeral content and visual filters make it an attractive platform for identity signalling, humour-based political commentary, and stylised moral messaging.[19] Political parties and religious groups have begun using short-form content to bypass scrutiny and target younger audiences, often through influencers who embed political content within lifestyle videos. While harder to archive and track, Snapchat's private-sharing model poses distinct challenges for disinformation monitoring, particularly when used to spread sectarian or hyper-nationalist content in visually disguised formats.

These platforms also share common structural weaknesses. Algorithmic curation means that users are routinely exposed to content that reinforces prior beliefs, narrowing their informational exposure. The absence of local language moderation, especially in Urdu and regional languages, further impedes content filtering.[20] Additionally, regulatory bodies such as the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) lack both the technical capacity and institutional independence to impose effective checks without triggering accusations of political bias or censorship. Thus, platform design, user behaviour, and state incapacity coalesce into a digital ecosystem where infodemics are not anomalies but expected outcomes.

Understanding the role of these platforms is critical to any serious analysis of infodemics in Pakistan. They are not neutral carriers of information, but active participants in the construction and acceleration of polarised and misleading narratives. Without mechanisms for platform accountability, media literacy, and content transparency, the architecture of digital media will continue to be exploited for narrative manipulation and public opinion engineering.

Infodemics and Religious Faction

Religious factions in Pakistan have adapted quickly to the digital environment, using it not only to propagate theological interpretations but also to insert themselves into national political debates. Their engagement with digital platforms is not limited to proselytisation; it is increasingly focused on narrative construction and emotional mobilisation. Infodemic conditions, characterised by information saturation, trust deficits, and polarisation, have enabled these actors to recast political or legal events through a religious lens, framing institutional decisions as moral or spiritual betrayals.[21]

Groups such as Tehreek-e-Labbaik Pakistan (TLP) have pioneered the strategic use of social media to frame political grievances in theological terms. Through Facebook videos, WhatsApp broadcasts, and YouTube sermons, they link events such as Supreme Court rulings or blasphemy accusations to broader claims of religious persecution or state apostasy.[22] These messages, often presented by charismatic clerics, use emotionally resonant vocabulary, *izzat* (honour), *ghaddari* (treason), *and shaheed (martyr)* to mobilise rapid public reaction. When these narratives go viral, they produce both digital and physical consequences: mass protests, threats to state institutions, and violent confrontations.

Such campaigns thrive in the infodemic landscape, where audiences are less concerned with verification than with moral clarity. Messages framed in religious language are particularly resistant to correction, as disputing them can be construed as impiety or betrayal of faith.[23] Moreover, many of these groups operate outside formal regulatory oversight. Their pages, accounts, and YouTube channels are often restored after brief takedowns or reappear under alternate names.[24] Unlike political parties, which face media scrutiny or electoral regulation, religious factions wield a form of social authority that allows them to evade or delegitimise state narratives at minimal institutional cost.

The fusion of religious and political narratives creates a particularly volatile form of infodemic. It transforms abstract policy debates into moral crises and legitimises political opposition not on constitutional grounds, but through claims of divine alignment or religious duty. For instance, when the government introduced the Single National Curriculum (SNC), some religious actors portrayed it as a Westernising plot against Islamic identity, despite the policy's inclusion of Islamic studies.[25] This framing bypassed empirical critique and instead relied on emotional tropes of cultural invasion and faith betrayal. The SNC discourse exemplifies how even state-led reform efforts can be destabilised by moralised misinformation campaigns.

The infodemic dynamic also intersects with sectarian identities. Barelvi, Deobandi, Shia, and Salafi organisations maintain distinct digital spheres in which they defend doctrinal boundaries and engage in theological contestation. These conflicts are no longer confined to seminaries or printed literature but unfold in real-time on social media platforms. Here, sectarian misinformation, including fabricated hadiths, edited videos, or conspiracy theories, is circulated to reinforce in-group solidarity and out-group hostility.[26] In extreme cases, such content has contributed to targeted violence and the disruption of inter-sectarian cooperation.

Religious factions have thus become critical actors in Pakistan's infodemic ecosystem. They shape narratives, distort facts, and delegitimise institutions under the guise of defending religious values. Their influence is amplified by the emotive power of faith-based rhetoric and the institutional vacuum that allows digital misinformation to flourish unchecked. Confronting this dimension of the infodemic requires more than technical regulation; it demands credible religious counter-narratives, digital monitoring, and institutional engagement with theological discourse as a political force.

Infodemics and Security Challenges

The security implications of infodemics in Pakistan extend far beyond disinformation itself. As political, religious, and sectarian narratives are weaponised in the digital sphere, they generate real-world volatility, public unrest, and delegitimisation of the state's coercive and judicial institutions. Infodemics thus operate as a form of narrative warfare capable of mobilising crowds, inciting violence, and paralysing administrative authority without requiring conventional means of force.[27]

In this context, security challenges are no longer confined to kinetic threats or insurgency but include sustained efforts to distort public perception, weaken institutional credibility, and fragment national cohesion.

One of the most visible consequences of infodemics has been the erosion of trust in security institutions themselves. Social media campaigns regularly target the armed forces, police, and intelligence agencies, framing them as partisan actors rather than national custodians. [28] Accusations of selective accountability, extrajudicial actions, or political engineering, often lacking evidence but circulating widely, undermine public confidence in these institutions' neutrality. This perception gap is especially dangerous during times of political crisis or national emergency, when state legitimacy relies on rapid, credible communication.

Beyond reputation, infodemics pose operational security risks. During counterterrorism operations or communal disturbances, the rapid circulation of unverified images, doctored videos, or fabricated witness accounts can inflame tensions and disrupt response coordination. [29] Misinformation regarding alleged atrocities by security forces or rumours of sectarian attacks has triggered flash protests in urban centres and rural towns alike. In such moments, digital narratives act as force multipliers of unrest, bypassing traditional gatekeepers of public information, such as mainstream media or district administrations.[30]

Militant groups have also learned to exploit infodemic conditions. Organisations once reliant on clandestine networks now use digital platforms to disseminate recruitment propaganda, amplify grievances, and delegitimise state authority.[31] The collapse of trust in official narratives, partly fuelled by political disinformation, creates an opportunity structure for extremists to present themselves as alternative sources of justice and moral clarity. This convergence of political polarisation, digital misinformation, and ideological extremism has created an information landscape in which the state's narrative monopoly is severely eroded.

Pakistan's geopolitical context further complicates the nexus between infodemic and security. Cross-border influence operations, particularly from hostile intelligence agencies, have been detected using social media to amplify internal discord.[32] These campaigns often rely on existing fault lines, sectarian tensions, ethnic grievances, or political divides and inject tailored content to heighten confrontation.

In such cases, infodemics become instruments of hybrid warfare: low-cost, high-impact tools to destabilise adversaries without direct military engagement.

What makes these challenges particularly intractable is the absence of institutional resilience. Pakistan's regulatory agencies, such as the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), lack the analytical, linguistic, and forensic capabilities to identify and counter narrative threats in real time. Meanwhile, national security agencies are often reactive rather than anticipatory in their engagement with digital threats. The result is a security environment in which infodemics do not merely complicate law enforcement; they distort the very terrain on which security policy must be enacted.

Understanding infodemics as a national security issue, not merely a media or electoral one, is essential to building strategic capacity. The information battlefield has moved online, but its consequences are deeply physical: mass protests, administrative paralysis, communal violence, and eroded deterrence. Pakistan's response must therefore include not just technical regulation, but narrative strategy, institutional agility, and public trust-building as core pillars of security policy.

Militants and Social Media

Militant actors in Pakistan have integrated themselves into the country's fragmented digital ecosystem, exploiting the affordances of social media to spread propaganda, recruit sympathisers, and undermine the legitimacy of the state. Their activity is no longer confined to underground networks or obscure online forums. Instead, militant groups, ranging from sectarian outfits to ethno-nationalist insurgents, now operate in plain sight across mainstream platforms, camouflaging their messaging in religious, nationalist, or grievance-based rhetoric.[33] In doing so, they take advantage of infodemic conditions: information overload, institutional distrust, and algorithmic amplification that rewards emotionally charged content.

Unlike political parties or religious factions that operate within (or adjacent to) the formal political process, militant groups use social media for long-term ideological grooming. Their narratives are crafted to delegitimise the state, glorify martyrdom, and present violence as a justified response to structural injustice.[34] This messaging often piggybacks on real grievances, such as enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, or economic marginalisation, and recasts them within frames of occupation, oppression, or religious persecution.

By doing so, militants blur the boundary between activism and extremism, pulling susceptible individuals into radical worldviews under the guise of moral resistance.

The Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), for example, maintains digital channels that release statements, videos, and communiqués almost immediately after attacks. These materials are stylised with religious symbolism, emotive language, and slick production values.[35] Similarly, Baloch insurgent groups operate WhatsApp broadcast lists and Twitter handles to circulate videos of attacks, grievances against the state, and propaganda targeting the Pakistan Army.[36] These actors rely not only on their own followers but on the broader ecosystem of state-critical influencers and sympathisers to amplify their message, often unknowingly. The digital diffusion of such narratives weakens the state's capacity to frame events in its own terms.

Militants also exploit gaps in platform governance. Despite periodic takedowns, extremist content resurfaces through proxy accounts, private messaging groups, and alternative platforms such as Telegram. The lack of effective content moderation in Urdu, Pashto, Balochi, and other regional languages compounds the challenge.[37] While global platforms invest heavily in monitoring English-language extremism, they devote comparatively fewer resources to South Asian contexts, allowing dangerous content to persist undetected. This structural asymmetry creates an environment where militants can operate with a high degree of digital impunity.
A particularly insidious dimension is the indirect endorsement of militant narratives by some political actors or influencers during moments of heightened polarisation. When public figures insinuate, excuse, or fail to condemn acts of militant violence, especially if directed at institutions deemed partisan, they contribute to the erosion of the taboo against political violence.[38] In such an environment, militant rhetoric does not appear alien or fringe; it becomes one among many competing stories in a saturated information space.

The use of social media by militants, therefore, poses a layered threat. It is not only about direct recruitment or propaganda. It is about narrative infiltration, perception shaping, and the cultivation of political cynicism. When citizens consume content that consistently frames the state as abusive, corrupt, or anti-Islamic, the legitimacy of counterterrorism efforts is diminished. This undermines not only operational capacity but also the broader social contract between state and society.

If left unaddressed, this form of narrative warfare will continue to delegitimise the state's monopoly on force, widen societal fissures, and weaken public resilience to extremist ideologies. Strategic communication, digital counter-radicalisation, and narrative inoculation must therefore become core components of Pakistan's internal security doctrine.

Public Support and Narrative Alignment

In Pakistan's digital ecosystem, public support is increasingly manufactured and measured through narrative alignment rather than policy performance. The viral spread of emotionally resonant but factually questionable content fosters a political environment in which support for parties, movements, or even institutions is contingent on their capacity to dominate the information space.[39] This logic transforms the digital public into an arena of symbolic warfare, where identity affirmation, grievance expression, and institutional blame become central to political mobilisation.

Infodemic narratives are often tailored not simply to persuade but to create moral dichotomies, depicting one side as righteous victims and the other as irredeemably corrupt, foreign-controlled, or faithless.[40] These narratives are engineered to generate loyalty through indignation, bypassing critical engagement. In this context, public support is less a reflection of deliberative democracy than the success of digital conditioning. A follower's willingness to amplify a hashtag, share a video, or discredit an institution online becomes a substitute for civic participation.

The result is a paradox: while digital platforms enable unprecedented public expression, they also dilute substantive political engagement. Complicated policy decisions, such as those involving IMF negotiations, curriculum reform, or judicial appointments, are collapsed into digestible but misleading narratives of betrayal or heroism.[41] This shift incentivises populist rhetoric and penalises nuance, weakening both public discourse and institutional legitimacy.

Crucially, state institutions have not adapted effectively to this environment. Their communication strategies remain reactive, bureaucratic, and ill-suited to the speed and affective nature of digital media.[42] In contrast, political and sectarian actors craft messages with emotional precision, tailoring language, imagery, and platform use to their core audiences.

This asymmetry allows narrative entrepreneurs to outpace the state in shaping perception, even when their claims are demonstrably false. Public support, therefore, becomes a volatile and contingent resource, easily mobilised but shallow in durability. This volatility has concrete effects. It pressures courts to "perform" popular justice, incentivises lawmakers to take symbolic rather than substantive positions, and compels bureaucrats to delay or reverse decisions under fear of online backlash.[43] In extreme cases, it creates flashpoints for collective action, as witnessed during anti-France protests led by religious factions or during political confrontations framed as battles for national dignity.

The state's failure to counter or pre-empt these dynamics contributes to an erosion of vertical legitimacy. Citizens interpret institutional silence or inaction as either guilt or irrelevance, further reinforcing oppositional narratives.[44] The vacuum is then filled by influencers, clerics, or vloggers whose authority derives not from constitutional mandates but from their ability to reflect popular mood.

Infodemic-fuelled public support thus represents both an asset and a liability. It can rapidly shift the momentum of political campaigns, pressure institutions, or internationalise domestic issues. But it is also fragile, easily manipulated, and often disconnected from institutional norms or legal boundaries. Without mechanisms to ground public discourse in verifiable information and civic responsibility, digital public opinion becomes a weapon rather than a deliberative force.

Regulatory Responses and Institutional Limitations

The Pakistani state has attempted to counter the infodemic through a combination of legal frameworks, administrative controls, and content moderation directives. Yet these efforts have largely failed to restore trust or establish narrative authority. The regulatory landscape is reactive, fragmented, and often perceived as politically motivated, undermining its legitimacy and amplifying suspicion among civil society and media actors. Far from stabilising the information environment, existing mechanisms have often deepened polarisation and triggered fresh cycles of disinformation. The cornerstone of Pakistan's digital regulation is the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) 2016, intended to criminalise cyber offences, including hate speech, fake news, and defamation. However, critics argue that PECA has been selectively enforced, disproportionately targeting journalists, activists, and opposition voices while failing to address coordinated disinformation campaigns.

Vague definitions within the law, such as "false information" or "anti-state content", have allowed for expansive interpretation, contributing to a perception that regulation is a tool of suppression rather than a safeguard for factual discourse.

Attempts to expand regulatory power, such as the controversial PECA Amendment Ordinance of 2022, faced sharp resistance from legal bodies, journalist unions, and rights organisations. These episodes have exposed the tension between digital governance and political freedom in Pakistan's hybrid democracy. When regulatory agencies act without transparency or institutional independence, their interventions, however well-intentioned, are interpreted as extensions of state partisanship.

The Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), the main content regulator, also faces structural limitations. Despite its mandate to block unlawful content and coordinate with platform providers, the PTA lacks the technical capacity to conduct real-time moderation across multiple languages and dialects. Its takedown requests are often delayed, inconsistently applied, or overridden by platforms prioritising global moderation protocols. Moreover, the PTA's close alignment with executive authority raises concerns about its neutrality, especially during politically sensitive periods.

Efforts to engage platforms directly have also faltered. While global technology companies have entered data-sharing agreements with the state and occasionally complied with takedown requests, their moderation systems remain opaque and externally governed. Pakistan's voice in platform policy decisions, especially around regional language moderation, misinformation labelling, or AI-driven content removal, remains minimal. This imbalance leaves Pakistani regulators unable to shape the very platforms that dominate public discourse.

Institutional limitations are not only technical but also strategic. The state lacks a centralised, real-time narrative response framework capable of countering misinformation. Government departments operate in silos, and official communication is often slow, verbose, and lacking emotional resonance. In contrast, political and sectarian actors deploy narrative framing with immediacy and clarity, outpacing the state in both reach and impact.

In the absence of credible institutional responses, regulatory interventions are often viewed with suspicion. Bans, content takedowns, and account suspensions are interpreted not as public interest safeguards but as power plays in a contested digital arena. This perception further delegitimises state authority and creates space for alternative actors, journalists, influencers, clerics, or foreign platforms to define reality for vast segments of the population.

The failure of regulatory frameworks to stabilise the information space is not merely a legal or technical issue; it reflects a deeper institutional fragility. Without transparency, political neutrality, and a coherent narrative strategy, regulatory efforts are unlikely to restore credibility or stem the tide of the infodemic. What is required is not simply stronger laws or faster takedowns, but a rethinking of how the state communicates, engages, and competes in the digital public sphere.

Toward Strategic Communication and Civic Resilience

Addressing the infodemic in Pakistan requires a shift from reactive censorship to proactive narrative construction. The crisis is not merely informational but civic, institutional, and strategic. Misleading content thrives not only because it is produced but because it circulates in a vacuum of trust, legitimacy, and coherence.[45] A state response focused exclusively on takedowns or legal penalties cannot resolve the deeper issues of perception, identity, and authority. Instead, what is needed is an integrated model of strategic communication and civic resilience.

Strategic communication must begin with narrative coherence across state institutions. At present, government messaging is fragmented, inconsistent, and often delayed. Ministries, regulators, and law enforcement bodies issue conflicting statements or fail to coordinate during crises, allowing adversarial actors to define events first.[46] A centralised communication framework, supported by dedicated media analysis units, multilingual content teams, and real-time response capabilities, could allow the state to anticipate, counter, and reframe disinformation more effectively.

Equally critical is the development of emotionally resonant messaging. Political and religious actors dominate the digital landscape because they understand the affective structure of online engagement: humour, anger, shame, and pride are powerful tools of narrative mobilisation.[47]

State communication, in contrast, often adopts a bureaucratic tone, failing to inspire or connect with ordinary users. Investing in narrative craft, without abandoning factual accuracy, is essential to compete in the digital attention economy.

In parallel, media literacy must be institutionalised across educational curricula and public information campaigns. Pakistan's young and increasingly connected population is exposed to massive volumes of unverified content without the tools to critically engage with it.[48] Short-format media literacy modules, designed in local languages and adapted for platforms like TikTok and YouTube, can equip users with basic verification skills and raise awareness about manipulative tactics. Civil society organisations have already piloted such efforts with measurable success, but these need state backing and curricular integration to reach scale.

Religious institutions and clerics should also be engaged, not as adversaries but as stakeholders in narrative formation. Many religious leaders possess community trust that state officials lack.[49] Their involvement in counter-narrative campaigns, especially on issues such as sectarianism, pandemic misinformation, and anti-state propaganda, can lend moral legitimacy to factual corrections. However, this engagement must be managed transparently and equitably to avoid perceptions of co-optation.

Strategic partnerships with social media platforms are also vital. While content takedown agreements exist, Pakistan remains marginal in global moderation policy.[50] The state must advocate for greater transparency in algorithmic decisions, more investment in regional language moderation, and deeper data-sharing arrangements for real-time threat detection. Such cooperation, however, should be based on democratic principles, avoiding overreach or politicisation that would further damage platform trust.

Lastly, civic resilience must be built from the ground up. This means strengthening local journalism, protecting independent fact-checkers, and expanding access to reliable public information. It also means recognising that disinformation cannot be eradicated entirely, but its effects can be mitigated by empowering citizens, reforming institutions, and building a credible narrative alternative. Infodemics flourish where governance fails; their cure lies not in silencing voices but in restoring a social contract rooted in truth, dignity, and institutional reliability.

Conclusion

Infodemics in Pakistan represent a structural challenge to political stability, institutional legitimacy, and national security. They are not peripheral phenomena but central to how power, identity, and trust are negotiated in the digital age. Political parties, religious factions, and militant groups all exploit fragmented information channels to assert control over public perception, erode adversaries' credibility, and mobilise emotional communities of support. In doing so, they transform online platforms into contested arenas where truth becomes secondary to alignment.

The state's current responses, legalistic, reactive, and often politicised, have failed to stem the tide of the infodemic. Attempts at content takedown or regulatory expansion have been perceived as partisan, undermining their efficacy and legitimacy. Meanwhile, platform governance gaps and linguistic blind spots leave critical vulnerabilities unaddressed. In this vacuum, misinformation becomes ambient and omnipresent, blurring the lines between journalism, propaganda, and ideological mobilisation.

This paper has argued that the infodemic in Pakistan cannot be understood solely in terms of information flows. It must be located within broader contexts of political polarisation, religious mobilisation, institutional weakness, and societal fragmentation. The solution, therefore, lies not in silencing digital expression but in restructuring how narratives are produced, contested, and institutionalised.

Strategic communication, media literacy, and inclusive civic engagement are essential components of a long-term response. So too is the development of institutional agility: the capacity of state bodies to respond quickly, credibly, and consistently to disinformation. Without such reform, Pakistan will remain vulnerable to digital destabilisation, where each political crisis is amplified into a legitimacy crisis, and every institutional decision becomes a battleground of belief.

Endnotes

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