



Constructing Social Reality: A Discourse Analysis of TTP's Text on Social Media

JHSS
185-200

©The Author(s) 2024
Article reuse guidelines:
ojs.uop.edu.pk/jhss/Copyright
Vol. 32 (2), 2024

Pervez Khan¹

Abstract

The Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has used the Internet and online media forums to propagate their messages and to advance their agendas. TTP, Like Al-Qaeda and the Afghan Taliban, has used online platforms to propagate its messages and secure public support for its organization. This study investigates how TTP as an organization constructs its social reality through online blogs and defines the 'Self' and the 'Other.' I have used Laclau & Mouffe's (1985) Discourse Theory to analyze the TTP's text posted on the blog site www.umarmedia.wordpress.com. The article analyzes blogs posted in October 2014, December 2014, and June 2015, a significant moment in time when Pakistan launched its military offensive "Zarb-e-Azb" in Pakistan's Northwestern Pashtun regions. The analysis reveals the strategies used by the TTP in constructing its social reality and articulating the identities of the 'Self' and the 'Other.' The TTP's discourse articulates the Pakistan Army as the 'Near' enemy, an extension of the Western 'Far' enemy, which has waged a full-scale war on the tribal Muslims. The TTP constructs the social reality of Muslims facing existential and cultural threats at the hands of the enemy. Moreover, the narrative of victimhood not only prompts the TTP's cause for revenge but also justifies violence to survive against the enemy, which is both powerful and ruthless. Analyzing the TTP's text with context is important for understanding the militant's worldview and building counter-narratives. Moreover, it can be productive for predicting the trajectory of militant communication, which Pakistan and its allies can use to their strategic benefit.

Keywords: Discourse, Taliban, Social Construction, Laclau & Mouffe

¹ The author is pursuing his Ph.D. in Film Studies at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, USA. pervez.khan@siu.edu

Introduction

Since 9/11, the United States-led NATO invasion of Afghanistan has had severe consequences for Pakistan. After becoming the United States' ally in the "war on terror," Pakistan's change of heart against the strategic Afghan Taliban prompted fierce reactions from religious and extremist groups within the country. This prompted the loosely affiliated groups in Pashtun settled and tribal regions to ally against the Pakistani state, consequently resulting in the escalation of militancy. The tribal areas, which were strategically used in the Afghan-Soviet war, became the new battleground for Pakistani security forces. The hardcore Jihadist group TTP, formed after the Lal Masjid operation in 2007, has since waged a "Holy war," wanting to impose Shariah across Pakistan. Pakistan, in response, has launched several military offensives to uproot the escalating militancy in the regions. The United States also has deep strategic involvement in these regions and is notoriously known for its aerial drone program, which has sparked a strong reaction from the locals.

Noor Behram, a Waziristan native who has documented the impact of these aerial drone strikes, believes that these drone strikes are not only killing local civilians but also injuring an untold segment of the population, which is causing radicalization (Shah & Beaumont 2011). The TTP tapped into these sentiments and realized the potential of online and social media platforms. Martinez-Torres (2001) states, "The transition from a conventional guerrilla war to an informational war was possible because information technologies had already created new spaces of discussion and diffusion of information through electronic networks" p 347. Thus, along with the physical war, the virtual space became the battleground, making it the war of ideas.

Literature Review

Communication cannot exist in a vacuum, and that is the reason the Jihadist organizations are looking for tools and mediums to communicate with the masses. Al-Qaeda, the global Jihadist organization, has long relied on the Internet as a medium to propagate its messages (Thomas, 2003). Bockstette (2009) highlights that Taliban and Jihadist groups emphasize communication strategies to meet their short- and long-term goals in which the mass media and the Internet play a significant role. Today, many other Jihadist organizations are embracing the use of technology and use social media and online social networks to propagate their agendas, radicalize youth, cause online recruitment, and generate money for their cause (Briggs, 2014; Conway, 2006; Torok, 2013; Winter et al., 2020). Following Al-Qaeda's pattern, the TTP maintains its online presence and disseminates information

through such platforms. Since billions of users are interconnected through social networking sites and social media, the TTP is likely to pose a threat by propagating Jihadist propaganda, radicalizing youth, and causing online recruitment.

Studies suggest that jihadist groups have effectively used communication platforms to propagate their messages and legitimize their media content (Awan, 2007; Karzai, 2009; Weimann, 2010). Rachel Briggs (2014) argues that radicalization and recruitment in terrorist organizations are likely to increase over time because of the Internet's capacity to aid in the process of self-radicalization. She highlights how the Internet can prompt and influence some individuals to act independently without help from terrorist organizations. Briggs's (2014) discussion furthers our understanding of individuals acting with or without the help of a terrorist organization and invites debate on the concept of 'Lone wolf' and 'Loners.' According to Pantucci (2011), Lone Wolf refers to an "individual pursuing Islamist terrorist goals alone, either driven by personal reasons or their belief that they are part of an ideological group (meaning a group of individuals who all claim to believe or follow a similar ideology: in this context, those who might be described as either members or followers of Al Qaeda or adherents to Al Qaedism)" (p. 9). He argues that Loners, on the other hand, are individuals who commit or plan an act of terrorism without any real connections with extremists in natural or online settings, mainly through passive consumption of radical material online or in society at large. Briggs (2014) identifies that extremist and terrorist groups are copying the style of established media organizations to build their credibility and lure people toward their content. Weimann (2010) also acknowledges that terrorist's use of advanced technology and sites such as Facebook have changed the way these groups communicate online. He argues that the interactive nature of the Internet and virtual spaces like chatrooms and social networking sites help these terrorist groups assume an offensive position, which provides them an advantage to lure more people to their sites.

Winter et al. (2020) argue that extremists, like ordinary people, use the Internet for social and political activism. Their online activity, in this sense, must, therefore, be seen as both social interaction and political engagement. Wilson et al. (2012) consider "Facebook as an ongoing database of social activity with information being added in real time" p. 204. They argue that Facebook is an excellent area to study because it provides observable data that can help understand human behaviors. Wilson et al. (2012) discuss social media platforms as "observable" and "concrete" data being added in real time, which gives us a lens to look at these online texts as ongoing social activities that can

predict human behaviors. In my study, I focus on the content posted by TTP in their online blogs, which is concrete, observable data added in real time. It is, however, essential to understand that the militant and Jihadi content is not a new phenomenon in the socio-cultural scene of Pakistan. The militant press publications during the Soviet-Afghan war and the Kashmir conflict in the 1990s amplified jihadi narratives and armed resistance.

Before the Internet, the militant outfits in Pakistan used print publications to propagate their messages effectively. Rana (2008) highlights that these jihadi print publications not only glorified mujahideen and condemn the US and its allies but have played a significant role in attracting the young population to join the jihadi outfits. He corroborates that religious and political parties invested in this jihadi print publication, which emerged as an alternative media published on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. Rana (2008) finds that the primary purpose of these publications is to glorify Islam and Jihad at the same time criticizing Pakistan's role in aiding the United States in their strategic wars. He suggests that the findings of his study on jihad print publications can be extended to understand similar ideological online content.

Al Abd (2022) has found that the TTP has used Twitter to advance its propaganda and spread its agendas against the state of Pakistan. He argues that despite many accounts of TTP activists being barred, they keep making new accounts to propagate online. Zahid et al. (2020) used Critical Discourse Analysis to analyze 46 videos and TTP's book, *Inqilab-e-Mehsud South Waziristan*. They find that the 'Muslim' vs. 'Infidel' identity discourse is central to the TTP leadership in their fight against Pakistan's counterterrorism efforts. Zahid et al. (2020) explore that TTP discourse is built on binaries such as us vs. them, believer vs. nonbeliever, and Muslim vs. infidel, construct their enemy into a single entity, the Pakistani state. The article identifies TTP's master narratives in which "the imperial West and their ally, Pakistan, form an evil nexus against Islam and Muslim" (p. 516). Zahid et al. (2020) analyze TTP's discursive strategies and their use of historical recontextualization that helps them legitimize their narratives by drawing parallels to the early Islamic period. Although Zahid et al. (2020) analyze Taliban rhetoric and persuasive strategies, their study lacks a socio-political context based on a specific time, which can help predict TTP's communication pattern over time.

To address this gap, I analyzed TTP blogs posted during the military operation Zarb-e-Azb and analyzed blogs posted in October 2014, December 2014, and June 2015. The data helps our understanding of the issue and predicts the trajectory of TTP's communication based on concrete, observable data in a specific context. Thus, building upon this argument, this study will analyze

blogs posted by TTP, their content, outreach (Global or local), and communication strategies.

For this study, I followed Jan (2015) in analyzing and deconstructing the TTP's text on social media blogs. His book "*The Muslim Extremist Discourse: Constructing Us vs Them*" is among the pioneer studies where militant text has been critically analyzed using Laclau & Mouffe's (1985) Discourse theory. Jan's (2015) the study interrogates the publications of Jihadist and religious political parties that publish their newspapers in Urdu. It provides valuable insights into how militant and jihadist organizations construct socio-political reality within their text. Thus, following Jan (2015), this research analyzes TTP text with context on their social media blog.

The findings of this study would interest scholars in Journalism & Communication Studies, Information Technology, and Strategic and Discourse studies. It provides an in-depth analysis of how online text can construct social reality with real-life consequences. Previously, scholars have identified the presence of militant/terrorist groups in online settings. Still, they lack an in-depth analysis when it comes to exploring how these jihadist groups construct their social reality online. This research provides valuable tools and techniques for understanding communication patterns. Moreover, following a particular communication pattern can help predict a militant's worldview and trajectory.

This study is also essential in modern warfare, where online social platforms have become the new battlefield. The advancement in technology and sophistication in communication techniques has enabled the banned outfits to propagate their messages in the digital sphere quickly. Thus, by understanding the TTP's worldview, communication patterns, and online text, this study is a valuable contribution to the GWOT and Pakistan's long fight against militancy and online radicalism.

Research Questions

- What kind of content is posted by TTP in their blogs?
- What communication strategies/tools are TTP adopting to strengthen their campaign? (use of videos, audio, pictures, multimedia)
- How do they construct their messages, and what social reality are they trying to establish in the "Global War on Terror" context?

Method

Data Collection

I collected data from the word press blog www.umarmedia.wordpress.com and copied three months of posts from the website using the Firefox add-on tool “fireshot” and saved it in three different folders onto the computer. The entire data was saved in Portable Document Format (PDF) for better-quality viewing.

To analyze blogs posted on umarmedia.wordpress.com, I selected three time periods. Since archive data on umarmedia.wordpress.com became accessible in October 2014, I analyzed blogs posted in October. During this month, the Pakistan Army claimed to have achieved success against the Taliban in the military operation “Zarb-e-Azb” (Haider, 2014). Therefore, it was essential to examine the text posted by the TTP when they were in a defensive mode. Similarly, the TTP claimed responsibility for the attack on the Army Public School, Peshawar, on December 16th, one of the worst attacks on any educational institution in Pakistan, which claimed the lives of 144 people, mostly children (Briggs, 2015). Throughout December, the TTP posted online to claim an upper hand against law enforcement agencies. Last, I examined the texts posted in June 2015. Since the military operation Zarb-e-Azb was launched against the Taliban and their strongholds on June 15, 2014, it was essential to analyze the texts posted by the TTP on their blog site after one year of the operation. The first period (October) helped us understand the text when the TTP was in a defensive mode; the second period (December) focused on text when the TTP was in an offensive mode, whereas the third period (June) helped us identify what kind of text the TTP was posting after nearly ten months of the military operation.

Theoretical Framework

The Discourse Theory of Laclau & Mouffe (1985) is used to analyze the data collected from umarmedia.wordpress.com. The analytical tools for data analysis are identity, nodal points, chain of equivalence, antagonism, and hegemony. Two fundamental goals drove data collection, which led to the subsequent data analysis. The first was to explore the content posted by TTP, and the second was to learn how they constructed their social reality through text in the context of the “war on terror.” The corpus for this analysis comprises blogs posted on umarmedia.wordpress.com by the TTP.

Analytical tools

As narratives organize discourse, this study first explored the narratives of the TTP in their text. The narrative is often described as the spoken or written account of events, myths, and stories having some historical legacy. According to Hodges (2008), humans organize their happenings and experiences mainly through narratives. Halverson et al. (2011) consider narrative as a “coherent system of interrelated and sequentially organized stories that share a common rhetorical desire to resolve a conflict by establishing audience expectations according to the known trajectories of its literary and rhetorical form” p.14. In the second step, I explored major themes within these narratives and looked at the linguistic tools the TTP uses to articulate their messages. Moreover, I used several critical terms of the Discourse Theory to analyze the Taliban text. I used ‘nodal points,’ ‘master signifiers,’ ‘identity,’ ‘antagonism,’ ‘chain of equivalence,’ and ‘articulation’ as critical analysis tools.

Nodal points are a key to analyzing the text. For instance, if ‘Islam’ is the nodal point, then signs such as ‘democracy,’ ‘banking,’ and ‘lifestyle’ would draw their meaning by referring to Islam. If the nodal point is changed to the ‘West,’ then the entire meaning acquires in the context of Western perspective and forms an entirely different discourse. Similarly, master signifiers and identity is the key to understanding discourse. For instance, ‘man’ is the master signifier, and various discourses offer different contents to fill this signifier. Master signifiers and a chain of equivalence help establish identity relationally. For instance, if ‘man’ is equated with ‘power,’ ‘bravery,’ and ‘wrestling’ in a chain of equivalence, thus the establishing discourse will identify the real man who wrestles and is both powerful and brave. Therefore, a cluster of signifiers with a nodal point at its center helps generate an identity. In cases where two identities clash and create an obstacle for each other, the term ‘antagonism’ is used. Laclau & Mouffe’s (1985) concept of antagonism is frequently used when there is a conflict between two discourses or identities. Finally, articulation gives meaning to the elements that must be linked together. The structured reality resulting from the articulatory process is discourse.

DISCUSSION

According to Laclau & Mouffe’s (1985) theory, all social realities are constructed in a discourse. The data analyzed reflects how the TTP constructs its identity and the social world in relation to others. The discussion below broadly reflects on how various themes help build narratives and how narratives form the militant discourse.

TTP on backfoot

A total of 11 posts were posted on the Umar media blog from 20th October to 28th October 2014. Most of the text in October posts is in Urdu, whereas English, Pashto, and Arabic were also used. The TTP uses text and graphics to propagate its messages in all these posts. From their first post on 20th October, TTP establishes an antagonistic relationship with the Pakistan Army. The post begins with the text, “We accept the responsibility of the remote-control blast in Salarzai, Bajaur.” The message further reads, “In the attack on 18th October, FC (law enforcement agency) vehicle was targeted, in which two FC personnel were killed while two injured”. In this text, a derogatory word in the Urdu language, “murdaar” (carrions), often used for dead animals, was used for the two security personnel killed in the attack. In addition to the text, the graphics in the post depict a man with his face completely covered in a turban cloth while holding a rifle in the right hand and the Holy Book of Islam in the left hand. The man dressed in black also wears a white logo of Allah Akbar (God is the greatest) on his shirt, and a white flag is also visible in the post. The white flag is a universally accepted meaning of surrender and peace.

In their initial text (October), TTP constructs multiple identities of its enemy as ‘Infidel,’ ‘Apostate,’ and ‘Impure.’ Later, these numerous identities collapse to form an enemy, i.e., the Pakistan Army, law enforcement agencies, members of the volunteer peace force, and anyone who challenges TTP’s ideology. The construction of the enemy’s identity as an infidel, apostate, and impure helps create TTP’s own identity. TTP’s identity is built by placing itself in relation to the Other. For instance, the Other is infidel, which means the Self is fidel or faithful.

Similarly, the Other is apostate and impure, which constructs the Self as faithful and pure. Constructing the identity of the enemy as an infidel causes the identity of the Self to be built in religious terms where the Self is faithful and pure against an enemy, which is an infidel, a disbeliever, commonly referred to as kafir in the Arabic language. Constructing enemies as kafir or infidel provides strong religious sanction and bias as the infidels or disbelievers have been frequently mentioned in the Quran and the Hadith, who are in a constant war against Islam and Muslims. This makes the fight against an enemy a Holy war. The identity of the Self is constructed purely in religious terms, which is in antagonistic relation to the Other.

In its text, “We give a message to the infidel forces united in the name of peace to stop fighting Sharia,” TTP establishes its identity in religious terms where they are fighting a holy war to implement Sharia. The identity

constructed through difference in relation to the Other causes ‘antagonism.’ Thus, the ‘antagonism’ defines who they (TTP) are and what they are up against (army). Although ‘antagonism’ and ‘recognition’ are opposed, the clash of identities results in mutual recognition. The TTP thus establishes itself as a group of true Muslims that want Sharia to be imposed against the enemy, which is out there to eradicate it. The leading cause of social antagonism is that TTP wants its extreme version of Sharia to be imposed across the country against the spirit of the democratic institutions of Pakistan. Although Pakistan’s constitution is made by keeping Islam in the main loop, the country’s political institutions and laws are considered an extension of the West. This also brings the antagonism of TTP to a level where targeting Pakistani institutions is regarded as holy or noble, as Pakistani institutions are not Islamic, i.e., making it Islam (Us) vs Them.

The resurgence of TTP

A total of 20 blogs were posted in December on umarmedia.wordpress.com. The posts continued with the same theme of ‘antagonism’ with the Pakistan Army, civilians, and the government, as observed in October. The text posted in December holds critical significance because of the messages and the nature of actual life attacks. Apart from accepting responsibility for various attacks on ‘enemies,’ which includes civilians, the Pakistan Army, and law enforcement, the dominant themes that emerge are in the backdrop of two significant events. One is Pakistan’s education activist ‘Malala Yousafzai’ receiving the Nobel Peace Prize, while the second is an attack on ‘Army Public School’ (APS).

TTP tries to construct the image of Malala Yousafzai as a symbol of the West, influenced by Western democracy and a threat to Islamic civilization and way of life. In the APS attack, they justify their revenge and attack on children by playing victims themselves. Thus, the dominant theme in text posted in December 2014 is ‘cultural attack on Islam,’ ‘victimhood,’ and ‘revenge.’

When Child activists Malala Yousafzai and Kailash Satyarthi received Nobel Peace Prize awards, TTP on December 11th posted a title, “Malala,” the Precious Weapon of Western Civilization.” This title carries a deep meaning, as Malala is brought into the chain of equivalence with weapons. There is also an additional link to a PDF file for the detailed version of this post. The post carries a photograph of Malala Yousafzai standing with Kailash Satyarthi and a woman during the Nobel Peace Prize event. The faces of both the woman and Malala are covered in black, while the image of Kailash Satyarthi remains unchanged. The blackening of Malala’s face indicates that showing the faces of women in Islam is forbidden and a symbol of darkness and shame. The

tradition of blackening the faces as a sign of disgrace exists in predominant rural cultures, including countries like Pakistan.

In a post on 18th December, TTP posted about the APS attack. The post carries an image of the APS school building, and the text on the picture gives reasons for the attack on the school in minor points. In the text, they claim that the attack was “revenge” and that “95 percent of them were the children of (apostate) Army”. The post of 18th December ends with a tribute to the suicide attackers of the APS attack. The text reads, “O Martyrs, we are indebted to you ... it is because of you we can live with pride!” Similarly, on 17th December, the TTP held the Army and security agencies as the reason behind the attack.

In the (December) text, the themes of ‘antagonism,’ ‘victimhood,’ ‘revenge,’ and ‘cultural attack’ on Islam build up TTP’s narrative where “the war between Islam and its enemies continues for centuries. Islam is under attack, and they (West) pose a serious threat to our values and way of life. Muslims today are facing an existential threat from the enemy (army)”. The narrative here defines two enemies, i.e., the near enemy, which in this case is the Pakistan Army, while the second is the far enemy, i.e., —the West, which has waged a cultural attack on Islam. The West is articulated as ‘evil’ and ‘demonic,’ as their text reads, “the demonic forces of evils got military domination; they apply all of their resources to cause humans to rebel against Allah.”. By establishing the West’s military might, they construct the West without human morals in the text as “They [are] trying to destroy moral values of human.” TTP constructs the West as having solid military power but without human morals, posing a threat to Muslim’s way of life. Democracy is articulated as dark and evil, and its principal organs, such as media, NGOs, Western knowledge, and democratic parties, are articulated as the pillars of the dark system. They bring media, NGOs, Western knowledge, and democratic parties into a chain of equivalence in relation to the West. It has real-life implications. In TTP’s worldview, Media for its access to the masses, NGOs for its influence and outreach, and Western knowledge through academics and intellectuals can corrupt Muslims and pose a severe threat to their Islamic identity. The cultural threat is further elaborated by articulating ‘Malala Yousafzai’ as a symbol of the West, promoting Western values and education. This construction has serious consequences, as it legitimizes and prompts action against the enemy. Therefore, killing NGO workers or media personnel justifies them that they were working on the agendas of the West.

Similarly, TTP targeted educational institutions such as schools and universities because they consider the modern teachings against Islam.

Educational institutions in TTP's worldview are the breeding centers for an anti-Islamic mindset. Media persons, NGO workers, academics, intellectuals, and even young teenage girl Malala Yousafzai are constructed as an enemy, where the existence of the Self can only be ensured by eliminating the Other. TTP's discourse uses words like 'revenge' and 'avenge' to signify the ongoing war with the Other. The revenge is justified after the Self is constructed as a 'victim.' Sentences like "the genocide of brave and self-respecting Mehsud does continue" signify the victim narrative, which helps not only in gaining sympathy but also prompts immediate revenge. The revenge is legitimized, constructing a reality where existence is only possible by eliminating the Other. TTP constructs the Self as a 'victim' against the enemy, which is killing tribal people and their families. This construction of reality had real-life consequences in the shape of an attack on an Army Public School that killed over a hundred children. Thus, constructing the Self as victims who are facing destruction at the hands of the Pakistan Army legitimized their action against the school children as an act of revenge. The social reality TTP constructed against the enemy, which is killing tribal people and their children, had real-life implications in the shape of the brutal attack on the Army Public.

The conflict continues

In (June) text, themes such as 'antagonism' and 'victimhood' build a narrative as "Pakistan Army and the government are against Islam and are killing the tribal people; they are brutal and without moral Islamic values. Therefore, a fight against the Westernized Army and un-Islamic government is necessary". To establish this narrative, the TTP carefully constructed the Pakistan Army in a chain of equivalence with the West. This was done by proving that the first two Generals of the Pakistan Army were British Generals, i.e., General Sir Frank Walter Messervy and General Sir Douglas David Gracey. Demonstrating that British Generals laid the foundations of the Pakistan Army and questioning the role of non-Muslim Generals in leading the Muslim army constructs a reality where the Muslim forces were led by the infidels, making them controversial and un-Islamic. Moreover, the identity of General David is constructed as Jewish, under the caption, "The Jewish Douglas David Gracey, the General of Impure Army from 1948 to 51."

Bringing Jews into the discourse carries profound implications. Constructing the identity of the enemy as Jewish brings the past into the present, where the enemy has been a traditional enemy of Islam from the days of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This textual construction means a compromise cannot be made with the enemy at any cost. Thus, they bring the Pakistan Army into a chain of equivalence with the West, infidelity, and Jews. This careful

construction of the enemy's identity gives moral support to the TTP's cause for action. It legitimizes their fight against an un-Islamic enemy, which is under the influence of the West.

TTPs use references from the Holy Quran and the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as their discursive tools. This validates and sanctions their text. As mentioned in the analysis, the reference to Quranic verse serves as intertext; this validates the text and serves as a 'closure.' This gives TTP religious sanctity that cannot be challenged or argued. TTP realizes the importance of such communication tactics, as they utilize religious text to validate their cause without the fear of being challenged. In addition to this, reference to the Holy text also triggers 'master narratives,' which, according to Halverson, Goodall, and Corman (2011), are trans-historical narratives that are ingrained in a particular culture. Extremist groups such as TTP use 'master narratives' from the Quran and Hadith to bring the past into the present, which validates their course of action.

TTP constructs its social reality by adopting various discursive tools. Identity helps them define the Other in relation to the Self. They believe that the existence of the Self is only possible by eliminating the Other. Thus, revenge and attack on the enemy become a social reality constructed in the text. Similarly, the violent course of action is justified through hegemonic intervention and the use of intertext. The reference to the Holy text serves as a closure, as it cannot be challenged.

Thus, TTP constructs a world in which they are in a constant state of war with the enemy, which poses an existential threat, and survival can only be ensured by revenge and eliminating the Other. This construction comes with real-life implications in the shape of attacks on the Pakistan army, security forces, and the children in Army Public Schools. It confirms the central premise of Laclau & Mouffe's (1985) discourse theory, which states that all social realities are constructed in discourse.

CONCLUSION

This research has examined how Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan constructs its social reality in the context of the GWOT and the military operation *Zarb-e-Azb*. According to Laclau & Mouffe (1985), all social realities are constructed in discourse; therefore, online communication is vital to understanding a militant's worldview.

Analyzing three months of data shows how militant discourse evolved each time. In October 2014, the theme ‘antagonism’ remained dominant, in which TTP is in constant antagonistic relationship with the Pakistan Army. The theme ‘antagonism’ also continues in December, but several other themes are added, further evolving the militant’s worldview. In December, ‘antagonism’ is followed by themes such as ‘cultural attack on Islam,’ ‘victimhood,’ and ‘revenge.’ In a cultural attack, TTP constructs Malala Yousafzai as a precious instrument of the West, who is trying to promote Western values, hence a threat to Islam. Similarly, democracy, education, NGOs, media, and the government are drawn along with the identity of the West after constructing Pakistan as a country without Islamic values and systems.

TTP constructs its image of being victims, facing an existential threat at the hands of the Pakistan Army. This further helps the TTP elevate their cause for ‘revenge.’. The attack on the Army Public School killed 144 people, mostly children between the ages of 12 and 16, and is justified by TTP as an act of revenge against the atrocities committed against the tribal Pashtuns. Thus, by constructing their image as victims, they legitimized violence. December discourse is a classic example where themes such as ‘antagonism,’ ‘cultural attack,’ ‘victimhood,’ and finally ‘revenge’ have real-life implications. The discursive construction of a victimized Self with the evil Others continues in June 2015 as well. The identity of the Pakistan Army is drawn as an extension of the West, which is ruthless.

Similarly, constructing their own identity as true Muslims vs the Evil Others, they also use religious text, which validates their actions. Religious text not only works as a validation tool but also serves as a closure because of the sanctity of the Holy text.

In three months of data, which began in October 2014, the dominant theme is ‘antagonism,’ which defines the enemy and constructs a reality of ongoing war with the enemy. Similarly, in December, ‘cultural attack,’ ‘victimhood,’ and ‘revenge’ are the dominant themes that emerge. The fear of destruction at the hands of the ‘near enemy,’ which is the Pakistan Army and the government, and the ‘far enemy,’ which is the West, prompts them to a course of action based on revenge. These different themes suggest that TTP’s discourse is evolving. Themes such as ‘cultural attack,’ ‘victimhood,’ and ‘revenge’ and by constructing the ‘evil’ identity of the enemy against the ‘victim self,’ TTP constructs a social reality where tribal Muslims are in a constant state of war with the enemy which is both Westernized and un-Islamic. They build a world in which Muslims are faced with the fear of annihilation, making revenge a necessity to survive.

The three months of data also reveal the sophistication of TTP's communication strategies. In their initial posts, they claimed responsibility for the attacks. Later, they posted texts drawing enormous appeal as victims, which helped them justify and legitimize their cause of action. In later stages, TTP used references from the Holy Quran, which served as a validation tool and helped bring the past into the present, which they used to their strategic advantage. Analyzing the data over three periods reveals that TTP is not just posting random text; it has adopted sophisticated communication techniques that construct a social reality with real-life consequences.

References

Al Abd, S. (2022). Social Media as a Threat to National Security: A Case Study of Twitter in Pakistan. *Margalla Papers*, 26(2), 96–107.

Awan, A. N. (2007). Virtual jihadist media: Function, legitimacy and radicalizing efficacy. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 10(3), 389–408.

Bockstette, C. (2009). Taliban and jihadist terrorist use of strategic communication. *Connections*, 8(3), 1–24.

Briggs, B. (2015). *Remembering the Peshawar school massacre*. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2015/12/16/remembering-the-peshawar-school-massacre>

Briggs, R. (2014). Radicalization: The role of the internet. *Policy Planners' Network Working Paper*, London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue. https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/StockholmPPN2011_BackgroundPaper_FOR20WEBSITE.pdf

Conway, M. (2006). Terrorist Use of the Internet and Fighting Back. *Information and Security*, 19, 9.

Haider, M. (2014, October 9). *With army chief, PM Nawaz makes maiden visit to North Waziristan*. DAWN.COM. <http://www.dawn.com/news/1136829>

Halverson, J., Corman, S., & Goodall, H. L. (2011). *Master narratives of Islamist extremism*. Springer.

Hodges, A. (2008). *The 'war on terror' narrative: The (inter) textual construction and contestation of sociopolitical reality*.

- Jan, F. (2015). *The Muslim extremist discourse: Constructing us versus them*. Lexington Books.
- Karzai, H. (2009). Understanding the role of the media in facilitating the spread of the extremist message in Afghanistan. *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*, 4(1), 76–86.
- Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. Verso.
- Martinez-Torres, M. E. (2001). Civil society, the Internet, and the Zapatistas. *Peace Review*, 13(3), 347–355.
- Pantucci, R. (2011). *A typology of lone wolves: Preliminary analysis of lone Islamist terrorists*.
- Rana, M. A. (2008). Jihadi print media in Pakistan: An overview. *Conflict and Peace Studies*, 1(1), 1–18.
- Shah, S., & Beaumont, P. (2011, July 17). US drone strikes in Pakistan claiming many civilian victims, says campaigner. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jul/17/us-drone-strikes-pakistan-waziristan>
- Thomas, T. L. (2003). Al Qaeda and the Internet: The danger of “cyberplanning.” *The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters*, 33(1), 13.
- Torok, R. (2013). The Syrian Calling: Western Jihad Recruitment and Martyrdom [PDF]. *4th Australian Counter Terrorism Conference, Edith Cowan University*, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.4225/75/57A2EBOA8AF7C>
- Weimann, G. (2010). Terror on Facebook, Twitter, and youtube. *The Brown Journal of World Affairs*, 16(2), 45–54.
- Wilson, R. E., Gosling, S. D., & Graham, L. T. (2012). A review of Facebook research in the social sciences. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 7(3), 203–220.
- Winter, C., Neumann, P., Meleagrou-Hitchens, A., Ranstorp, M., Vidino, L., & Fürst, J. (2020). Online extremism: Research trends in internet activism, radicalization, and counter-strategies. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence (IJCV)*, 14, 1–20.

Zahid, Z. M., Khuram, I., & Sial, T. A. (2020). Critical Discourse Analysis of Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan: An Intertextual Recontextualization. *Pakistan Social Sciences Review*, 4(II), 503–524. [https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2020\(4-II\)41](https://doi.org/10.35484/pssr.2020(4-II)41)

