

SPECIAL REPORT

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Losing Facts to Fiction: Nationalism, Misinformation, and Conspiracy Theories in Pakistan

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A man reads a morning newspaper at a market closed due to government COVID-19 restrictions in Peshawar, Pakistan, on May 1, 2021. (Photo by Muhammad Sajjad/AP)

Contents

Introduction	3
Belief in Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories	9
Who Believes in Misinformation?	13
Downstream Effects of Belief in Misinformation	18
Efficacy of Corrections	20
Summary of Findings and Policy Recommendations	21

Summary

- In Pakistan, belief in misinformation and conspiracy theories and disbelief in true information is a significant challenge, with potentially damaging consequences for interstate relations, attitudes toward minorities, and political behavior.
- A nationally representative phone survey found widespread misperceptions and belief in conspiracy theories about Pakistani state military capability, domestic minority groups, and the country's international reputation.
- Surveys and focus groups demonstrated disbelief in true information. The research suggested suspicion of traditional media and reliance on social media to determine what is true and false.
- Political knowledge was positively associated with belief in some forms of misinformation and conspiracy theories.
- Nationalist narratives had little impact on belief in many forms of misinformation but increased belief in unverified information about domestic minority groups.
- Many Pakistanis are aware of the prevalence of misinformation, but survey results suggest that simple corrections of misinformation do not effectively counter negative downstream social and political beliefs.



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ABOUT THE REPORT

This report utilizes surveys and focus groups to understand patterns of belief in misinformation and conspiracy theories in Pakistan, and to explore the consequences of such belief. It provides policy recommendations on how to counter such misperceptions while promoting trust in true information.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Supporters of Imran Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party protest in Islamabad, Pakistan, on April 3, 2022. Khan dissolved parliament ahead of a no-confidence challenge and claimed there was a conspiracy to topple his government. (Photo by Rahmat Gul/AP)

Introduction

Misinformation and conspiracy theories have become staples of mainstream politics in numerous countries around the world—democracies and autocracies alike. Pakistan is no exception. Narratives relying on unverified or false information persist in the public sphere, corresponding at times with harmful social and political attitudes and behaviors. Misinformation about the polio vaccine, for example, has been associated with violence against public health workers and has set back efforts to eradicate polio in Pakistan.¹ In recent years, local efforts to combat the COVID-19 pandemic were complicated by a deluge of conspiracy theories about the virus itself as well as the efficacy and intent of the vaccine.² The facts underlying even well-known and high-profile cases are regularly called into question. Malala Yusufzai, the Nobel Prize-winning activist for girls' education, has long been the subject of numerous conspiracy theories casting doubt on her identity and the circumstances surrounding her shooting by the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan in Swat Valley in 2012.³ Misinformation has also been weaponized to instigate ethnic and religious conflict. For example, rumors that individuals belonging to minority religions or sects have engaged in blasphemy against Islam have triggered vigilante violence.⁴

Most recently, a conspiracy theory has been at the heart of political turmoil in Pakistan. After facing a no-confidence motion in Parliament in April 2022, former prime minister Imran Khan alleged that the United States was orchestrating a regime change with the assistance of local collaborators, a claim based on little evidence. On Twitter, the hashtag

Misinformation and conspiracy theories—tinged with nationalist sentiment—persist in an environment shaped by the increased use of social media, prevalence of nationalist and populist rhetoric, and general distrust in political elites, state institutions, and international actors.

#ImportedHakoomatNamanzoor (imported government unacceptable) began trending. While public opinion is divided strongly along partisan lines, data from Gallup Pakistan show that as of June 2022, 46 percent of the Pakistani public believed that the US had a role in Khan’s ouster (up from 36 percent in April).

Such misinformation and conspiracy theories—tinged with nationalist sentiment—persist in an environment shaped by the increased use of social media, prevalence

of nationalist and populist rhetoric, and general distrust in political elites, state institutions, and international actors. Powerful state and nonstate actors in Pakistan are sometimes themselves involved in the deliberate spread of false information—what scholars call disinformation.⁵ Such narratives may be used to bolster the state’s power and support, diminish the power and support of perceived anti-state groups, or shore up particular political worldviews. Some campaigns promote nationalist sentiment blended with misinformation to counter foreign influence operations, while others smear analysts and activists critical of national security narratives.⁶

Motivated by the salience of misinformation and conspiracy theories in the Pakistani context, this report seeks to analyze both the causes and consequences of belief in false information, particularly that related to nationalistic claims about Pakistan’s capabilities and image. Research has found that nationalism affects a range of preferences, including propensity for conflict, foreign policy preferences, and attitudes toward ethnic minorities.⁷ As such, nationalistic forms of misinformation may contribute to a hawkish public and limit the room for dissent within a state.

This report describes findings from research using a mixed-methods approach executed over a period of two years and including surveys and focus groups. It first explores baseline belief in misinformation and conspiracies across three specific areas: state prowess, domestic minorities, and Pakistan’s relationship with other state actors and international institutions. It next explores key factors thought to correlate with such misperceptions, specifically political knowledge, social media exposure, and nationalist sentiment. The report also looks at the consequences of misinformation for social and political attitudes, and at whether correcting misinformation disseminated on social media can curb its spread. It concludes by offering policy prescriptions on how to counter the spread of misinformation and conspiracy theories, both in general and specifically in Pakistan.

BACKGROUND AND PAKISTANI CONTEXT

In recent years, scholars have increasingly sought to probe the causes and consequences of misinformation, and policymakers have explored ways to counter its weaponization. Given this interest in false information, numerous different terms have been used to try to capture related phenomena: misinformation, disinformation, conspiracy theories, fake news, misperceptions, rumors, fifth-generation warfare, and propaganda, to name a few. The analysis in this study focuses on two of these categories: misinformation and conspiracy theories. The definition of misinformation used in this study is a “claim that contradicts or distorts common understandings

of verifiable facts.”⁸ Conspiracy theories, on the other hand, are distinct from misinformation in that they are often unverifiable. Conspiracy theories also tend to include a belief that a hidden group of powerful individuals and/or political entities have control over the behavior of a group of people or some other aspect of society.⁹ This study is particularly interested in examining belief in conspiracies related to fifth columns—domestic groups or actors who cooperate with external rivals to undermine the state.

Misinformation and conspiracy theories overlap with but are distinct from disinformation, which is the deliberate spread of misinformation; they are also distinct from propaganda, information that may or may not be true but is nonetheless used to propagate certain viewpoints at the expense of others.¹⁰ Disinformation and propaganda—which often comprise doctored or fabricated images and videos shared on social media platforms, including Twitter, WhatsApp, and Facebook—can contribute to the spread of misinformation.¹¹

In recent years, there have been several examples of large-scale disinformation efforts in South Asia. In December 2020, the Brussels-based nongovernmental organization (NGO) EU DisinfoLab revealed that an Indian conglomerate and a major news agency had together run a 15-year-long disinformation campaign seeking to discredit Pakistan and to influence the European Union and United Nations.¹² Indeed, social media–driven misinformation is frequently discussed by political elites and policymakers in Pakistan. Military officials frame it as a central component of so-called “fifth-generation warfare”—that is, warfare focused on “information and perception” that aims to influence the behavior and beliefs of ordinary citizens through various stripes of messaging.¹³ However, at times, efforts to counter such messaging themselves utilize disinformation. Facebook has reported coordinated inauthentic activity involving the spread of misinformation by actors linked to the Pakistan Army’s public relations wing.¹⁴

The proliferation of misinformation and conspiracy theories raises questions both about how damaging such information actually is as well as about who is relatively more susceptible to it. Scholarship in political science provides insights into why people believe misinformation and the avenues through which it spreads, though the extent to which these findings generalize to contexts like Pakistan’s is an open question.¹⁵ Studies have varyingly highlighted motivated reasoning, elite cueing, and routine cognitive limitations as playing a critical role in belief transmission.¹⁶ Research also shows that beliefs drawing on misinformation can be sticky at times, and that corrections often fail to improve the accuracy of people’s factual beliefs or to change attitudes—and in select cases even backfire by hardening people’s belief in the misinformation.¹⁷

Perhaps most significantly, misinformation has proliferated in a global context of low trust in state and international actors.¹⁸ In several contexts where misinformation is commonplace, state authorities are widely perceived as corrupt, due either to poor public service delivery or to fundamental questions over the legitimacy of the state apparatus. Major external powers and international organizations have similarly been tainted by historical acts and policies. In Pakistan, for example, the CIA used the cover of an international NGO to run a fake vaccination campaign; the actual goal was to trace Osama bin Laden by collecting the DNA of his family members hiding in Pakistan. The truth emerged after the May 2011 bin Laden raid.¹⁹ The resulting mistrust has contributed to the salience of conspiracy theories and indeed is an important point to consider when debating the rationality of such beliefs.²⁰

False information that aims to heighten nationalism, overstates a country's capabilities, or casts doubts on the actions of foreign actors or of rights-seeking domestic minority groups may have damaging effects. It may serve to complicate interstate relations, potentially promote hawkish behavior, and foster negative attitudes toward those considered to be outside of, or working against, the national project. As researcher Salma Shaheen writes, "The role of disinformation during India-Pakistan crisis is of vital importance as the charged nature of the relationship makes it highly susceptible to manipulated information."²¹

Indeed, even though belief in misinformation can have consequences for the attitudes and behaviors of people who consume it, scholarly literature on such effects remains limited. This omission matters for contexts like Pakistan's, where misinformation is often linked to damaging consequences—even if the causal relationship remains unclear. For instance, rumors of blasphemy have often preceded violent acts, such as the brutal killing of university student Mashal Khan in 2017.²² Members of the marginalized Ahmadi sect have also been attacked following allegations of blasphemy.²³ Women's rights activists have similarly found themselves facing attacks and threats of violence, reportedly triggered by doctored and manipulated videos and images. The annual Aurat March (Women's March) has attracted particular attention; videos uploaded to YouTube allege that the march has foreign funding and is intended to disrupt Pakistan's traditional family system.²⁴ Systematic research focusing on Pakistan is important to understanding the potentially damaging relationship between misinformation and such negative downstream behavioral outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a mixed-method approach to explore both the causes and consequences of belief in misinformation in Pakistan. First, together with the Pakistan Institute of Public Opinion (an affiliate of Gallup International in Pakistan), a phone survey was carried out among 2,373 respondents. The survey, conducted in December 2020, was limited to cell phone users because concerns around the COVID-19 pandemic made face-to-face survey work a health risk. Random digit dialing was utilized to achieve a nationally representative sample of the cell phone–holding population. However, the sample is less representative of the general Pakistani population than it would have been if conducted in person. In particular, it underrepresents women, in part because women are less likely than men to own cell phones, and in part because cultural norms mean that women are less likely to answer phone calls from numbers they don't recognize.²⁵

Second, building upon the insights of the first survey, an additional in-person survey of 1,500 Pakistanis was carried out in December 2021. By this time, changes in the COVID-19 situation substantially reduced the risks associated with a door-to-door survey. This survey was administered by Gallup Pakistan and relied on a random, population-based sample in all provinces in Pakistan (Balochistan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Sindh). Specifically, polling sites were selected from a random sample of census blocs. Within each sampled bloc, households were randomly selected. Within each household, the Kish grid method was used to identify individuals above the age of 18 (the relevant age of majority in Pakistan) to interview. Descriptive statistics of the two survey samples are provided in table 1.

TABLE 1. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR SURVEYS

	Phone-based survey of national cell phone–holding population Dec. 2020–Jan. 2021	In-person representative survey Dec. 2021–Jan. 2022
Age		
18–29 years old	47%	37%
29–49 years old	42%	51%
49 and above	12%	12%
Gender		
Male	84%	50%
Female	16%	50%
Province		
Punjab	54%	56%
Sindh	22%	23%
Kyber-Pakhtunkhwa	17%	16%
Balochistan	4%	7%
Partisanship		
Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI)	30%	20%
Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N)	20%	34%
Pakistan People’s Party (PPP)	8%	16%
Education		
No formal schooling	15%	26%
Primary	9%	14%
Middle	14%	16%
Secondary (matriculation)	25%	23%
Intermediate	14%	11%
College/university	15%	6%
Master’s/professional degree	7%	2%
Main news source		
TV news stations	46%	52%
Internet (blogs, websites)	22%	7%
Social media (Facebook, Twitter)	11%	10%
Major newspapers	5%	5%
Consumes at least one form of social media (WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, or Facebook)	68%	51%

Note: At the time the survey was fielded, the PTI was the governing party, with the PML-N and PPP the primary opposition parties. Due to rounding and omitted “don’t know” and “refused to answer” responses, percentages do not add up to 100 percent.

TABLE 2. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR FOCUS GROUPS

	Number of participants
Focus group location	
Islamabad	7
Karachi	12
Lahore	15
Peshawar	16
Gender	
Male	29
Female	21
Age	
18–30	31
30–35	16
Other	3
Primary language spoken^a	
Pashto	16
Punjabi	15
Urdu	9

Note:

a. The table lists the top three languages spoken by respondents; smaller numbers of respondents spoke languages not listed here.

Third and finally, six focus groups were organized that included a total of 50 residents of the country’s major urban centers—Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar. Four of the focus groups were conducted among university students; participants in the remaining two focus groups were a random sample of residents in the city. The study recruited respondents from universities because this population was of special interest, given its use of social media. To address the concern that data from a single university might not prove representative, the study recruited from various universities within each city to draw on respondents from different ethnic, linguistic, and political backgrounds. In addition, the two nonuniversity focus group samples were intended to provide information on the extent to which views and opinions were shared across different strata.

The surveys allowed measurement of belief in nationalistic misinformation and conspiracies at the national level. The surveys also made it possible to embed experimental vignettes that probed plausible causes of belief in misinformation and their downstream effects. The focus groups, which were designed and conducted after the results of the first survey, were intended to probe those survey findings further and to explore the reasons for the results. In turn, the focus groups were leveraged to design the second survey, which sought to assess social and political attitudes and the potential of corrections to counter adverse downstream outcomes of misinformation. Table 2 provides descriptive statistics of the focus group participants.

Belief in Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories

The surveys and focus groups found high levels of belief in misinformation and high levels of disbelief in true information. This result is generally unsurprising given the landscape of fake news in Pakistan, documented in previous literature and research in the country. Descriptive data are provided below to establish these general trends.

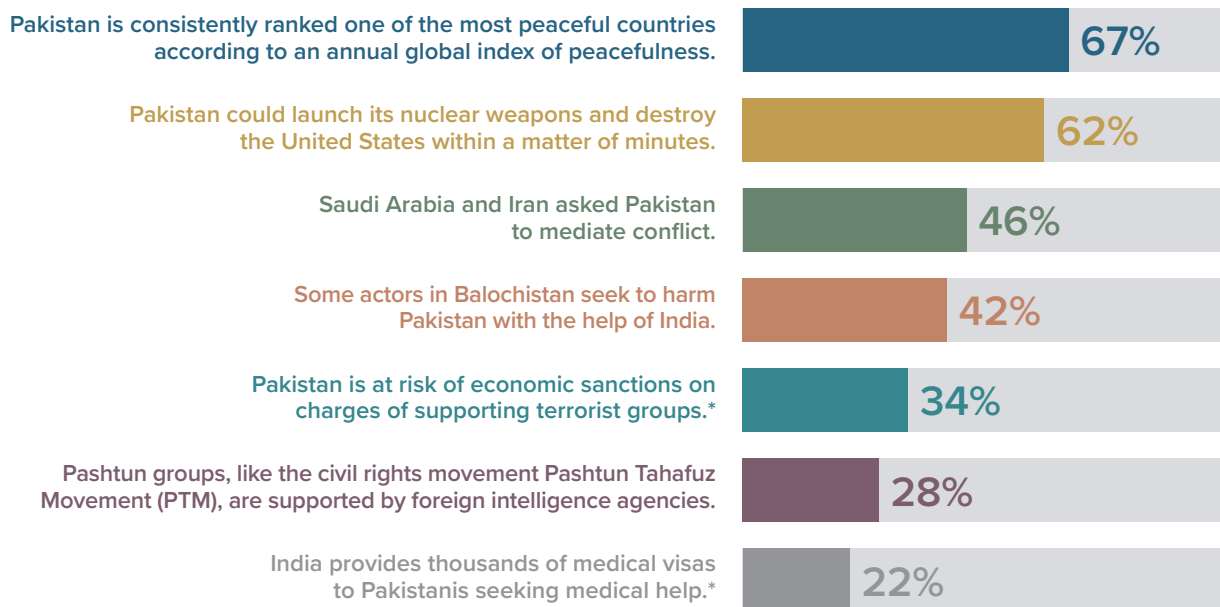
The first survey, which was conducted by phone, collected information about respondents' belief in a number of statements on three topics: (1) state capability and external adversaries, (2) domestic minority groups, and (3) Pakistan's international reputation. The statements were developed from examples of misinformation and conspiracy theories commonly appearing on social media, ranging from YouTube videos intended to showcase Pakistan's military prowess to tweets accompanied by hashtags (such as #PakPositive) meant to advance a positive image of the country through (often fabricated) news stories and personal experiences.²⁶ The authors also scoured Pakistan's social media and relied on qualitative fieldwork to identify a set of true statements that appeared to be contested.

Accordingly, outcome measures fell in three categories. First, respondents were asked whether they believed in the accuracy of indisputably false claims amplifying Pakistan's state power and international status, such as "Pakistan could launch its nuclear weapons and destroy the United States within a matter of minutes," and "Pakistan is consistently ranked one of the most peaceful countries according to an annual global index of peacefulness." Second, the study asked about true but often contested claims related to relationships with neighboring states. These included, for example, "Pakistan is at risk of economic sanctions on charges of supporting terrorist groups," and "India provides thousands of medical visas to Pakistanis seeking medical help." Finally, respondents were asked their opinions of unverified claims sometimes propagated by state actors, such as allegations that rights-seeking minority groups are supported by foreign intelligence agencies.²⁷ Respondents' belief in the accuracy of these statements was measured on a four-point scale, with higher numbers indicating greater belief in the statements and lower numbers indicating lesser belief in, or rejection of, the information. Figure 1 shows the percentage of those expressing a "strongly agree" (4 on the scale) or "somewhat agree" (3) view on a given claim as a percentage of total responses.²⁸

Table 3 demonstrates that respondents held fairly high levels of belief in various types of misinformation related to international and domestic affairs, and relatively high levels of disbelief in true information. For example, nearly 62 percent of respondents believed that it was either "somewhat accurate" or "very accurate" to say that Pakistan's nuclear capabilities were such that it could destroy the United States within a matter of minutes—a statement nuclear weapons experts view as categorically false given the limited size of Pakistan's arsenal and its ability to deliver those weapons to US targets. (Excluding respondents who answered "don't know" or who chose not to answer, 77 percent believed the statement was somewhat or very accurate.)²⁹ Two-thirds (66.84 percent) of respondents expressed "somewhat" or "strong" agreement with the false statement that Pakistan is consistently ranked one of the most peaceful countries by

FIGURE 1.

Belief in true, false, and unverified information (phone survey)



Note: Statements marked with an asterisk were assessed as true by almost all experts at the time of the survey; the other statements were either false or unverified. The figure shows the percentage of respondents who believe the proposed statement was “somewhat accurate” or “very accurate” (“don’t know” responses and refusals to answer are included). Percentages have been rounded to whole numbers.

an annual global index of peacefulness—a figure that rises to 84 percent when “don’t know” responses and nonresponses are excluded.³⁰

Belief in misinformation did not just manifest as greater belief in statements that painted Pakistan in a positive light; respondents were also less likely to believe information that painted neighboring India in a positive light. Among respondents who answered the question, 67 percent labeled as not very accurate or not at all accurate the statement that India had provided medical visas to Pakistanis seeking medical assistance. Given Pakistan’s historical mistrust of India, this should not be surprising. Respondents expressed similar skepticism about the claim that Pakistan faced a threat of multilateral sanctions due to the charge of supporting some terrorist groups. Separately, focus group participants also expressed a general disbelief in the veracity of many other narratives, contesting, for example, the events surrounding the shooting of Malala Yusufzai. Numerous focus group participants referred to it as a “drama” that was orchestrated to tarnish Pakistan’s international image.

A police officer escorts health workers who administer the polio vaccine in Peshawar, Pakistan, on February 28, 2022. Misinformation about the vaccine is associated with violence against public health workers. (AP Photo/Muhammad Sajjad)



Survey respondents also showed some distrust of rights-seeking groups representing ethnic minorities. Respondents were asked about two types of conspiracies commonly found on social media and promoted by state actors: the first holds that Pashtun groups, like the civil rights movement Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), are supported by foreign

intelligence agencies, and the second holds that actors in Balochistan seek to harm Pakistan with the help of India.³¹ Nearly 42 percent of respondents reported belief in the charge against political actors in Balochistan, and nearly 28 percent reported belief in the allegation that PTM is supported by foreign intelligence agencies.

Focus group participants similarly showed receptivity to conspiracy theories about the role of foreign nationals in supporting domestic minorities. One participant explicitly noted India's role in stoking subversive behavior in Balochistan:

I recently read this news that India spent 57 billion [rupees] on its fifth generation war. . . . Or the hybrid war. So all of these things are included in it. India is committing such acts in order to destroy Pakistan. I also heard this news that there is an Urdu radio channel in Balochistan that is not present in the rest of Pakistan. It was created in Balochistan by India to hype Balochistan's public to stand against Pakistan. So we can call India responsible in that sense.

These concerns about foreign support of domestic rights-seeking minority groups appear to be shared by a sizable percentage of respondents.

The survey responses may have been partly due to respondents lacking knowledge about the topic raised in a certain statement. For example, some respondents may not have been familiar with nuclear weaponry, and thus found it reasonable that a far-fetched statement about Pakistan's nuclear capability was true. And indeed, a fairly high percentage of respondents opted not to respond to questions because they were not certain (see table 3). Nonetheless, what is noteworthy is that respondents—in large numbers—were more likely to believe information that emphasized Pakistan's capabilities, military or otherwise, and also more likely to believe statements casting India, other foreign powers, and domestic minorities in a negative light.³²

TABLE 3. BELIEF IN TRUE, FALSE, AND UNVERIFIED NATIONALISTIC INFORMATION (PHONE SURVEY)

	Consider statement strongly or somewhat accurate	Consider statement strongly or somewhat inaccurate	Don't know or refuse to answer
Pakistan could launch its nuclear weapons and destroy the United States within a matter of minutes.	62%	18%	20%
Some actors in Balochistan seek to harm Pakistan with the help of India.	42%	29%	30%
Pashtun groups, like the civil rights movement Pashtun Tahafuz Movement (PTM), are supported by foreign intelligence agencies.	28%	34%	38%
Pakistan is consistently ranked one of the most peaceful countries according to an annual global index of peacefulness.	67%	12%	21%
Saudi Arabia and Iran asked Pakistan to mediate conflict.	46%	18%	36%
India provides thousands of medical visas to Pakistanis seeking medical help.*	22%	44%	34%
Pakistan is at risk of economic sanctions on charges of supporting terrorist groups.*	34%	38%	28%

Note: Statements marked with an asterisk were assessed as true by almost all experts at the time of the survey; the other statements were either false or unverified. Due to rounding, percentages do not add up to 100 percent.

It is worth noting here that belief in the accuracy of particular false or unverifiable statements did not always correlate with belief in the accuracy of others. That is, correlates of belief in various statements varied partly by the nature of the statement. For example, Baloch respondents were less likely than other ethnic groups to believe in the accuracy of statements alleging Indian support of Baloch separatists, but were not less likely overall to disbelieve false information. Similarly, those individuals who believed that Pakistan's contributions to the world were well recognized were more likely to believe that Pakistan had been deemed a peaceful country and less likely to believe that countries were considering economic sanctions against the state for its support of militant groups. Finally, holding a hawkish position on India was one of the primary predictors of not believing that India gives medical visas to Pakistanis in need of medical assistance. Being a hawk was not a significant predictor of belief or disbelief in other types of (mis)information, however. This can be taken as evidence of motivated reasoning—a process through which emotional biases lead to beliefs or justifications based on their desirability rather than their accuracy and validity.³³ The next section analyzes three correlates of belief in misinformation and conspiracies.

Who Believes in Misinformation?

Why might individuals believe misinformation or disbelieve true information? Which types of individuals are more susceptible to such false beliefs and misperceptions? This section outlines three major predictors of belief in misinformation that appear supported by data from the surveys and focus groups: nationalist sentiment, political knowledge, and sources of media.

NATIONALIST SENTIMENT

Analysts and journalists frequently note that nationalist sentiment and rhetoric are rife in many countries around the world and tend to coexist with misinformation. In 2019, a BBC report concluded that nationalism was a driving force behind belief in fake news in India.³⁴ The current study assessed the effect of nationalism on belief in misinformation in two ways.

First, it established the baseline levels of nationalism in Pakistan. Both the in-person and phone surveys were leveraged to this end; each asked questions capturing nationalistic tendencies, building on scholarly studies measuring nationalism in the United States.³⁵ The in-person survey asked respondents the extent to which they believed statements such as “The world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like Pakistanis,” “Generally speaking, Pakistan is a better country than most other countries,” and “It is very important to me that Pakistan be viewed favorably by people of other countries.”

The results suggest that baseline nationalist sentiment in Pakistan is considerable (though in line with levels in the United States and likely less than India³⁶)—and plausibly intersects with exposure to misinformation. Figure 2a shows findings on nationalist sentiment from the in-person survey. Around one-third (34 percent) of respondents fully agreed (10 on a 1–10 scale) that the world would be a better place if people from other countries were more like Pakistanis; 47 percent agreed that Pakistan was a better country than most other countries; and finally, 53 percent said it is important to them that Pakistan be viewed favorably by people of other countries. In the phone survey, shown in figure 2b, 79 percent of respondents expressed maximum anger toward Pakistan’s enemies (10 on a 1–10 scale) and only 4 percent said they felt no anger (1 on a 1–10 scale).

Second, the phone survey sought to assess if nationalism contributes to higher (or lower) belief in misinformation. This was done through an embedded survey experiment: Respondents were randomly assigned to a control or one of three treatment conditions, which exposed respondents to Pakistani nationalist narratives and then assessed their belief in different types of true, false, and unverified statements (listed in table 3). In the control, no information was provided to respondents, and the outcome measures (belief in the true, false, and unverified statements) were asked directly. Across the three treatment groups, the prompts emphasized different elements of national superiority: material prowess in the face of external threat, internal cohesion with minority and majority groups working for the nation together, and legitimacy of the country in the eyes of international actors. Each of these prompts sought to make Pakistani nationalism salient to the respondent by making distinct nationalist appeals.

FIGURE 2A.

Agreement with nationalist statements (in-person survey)

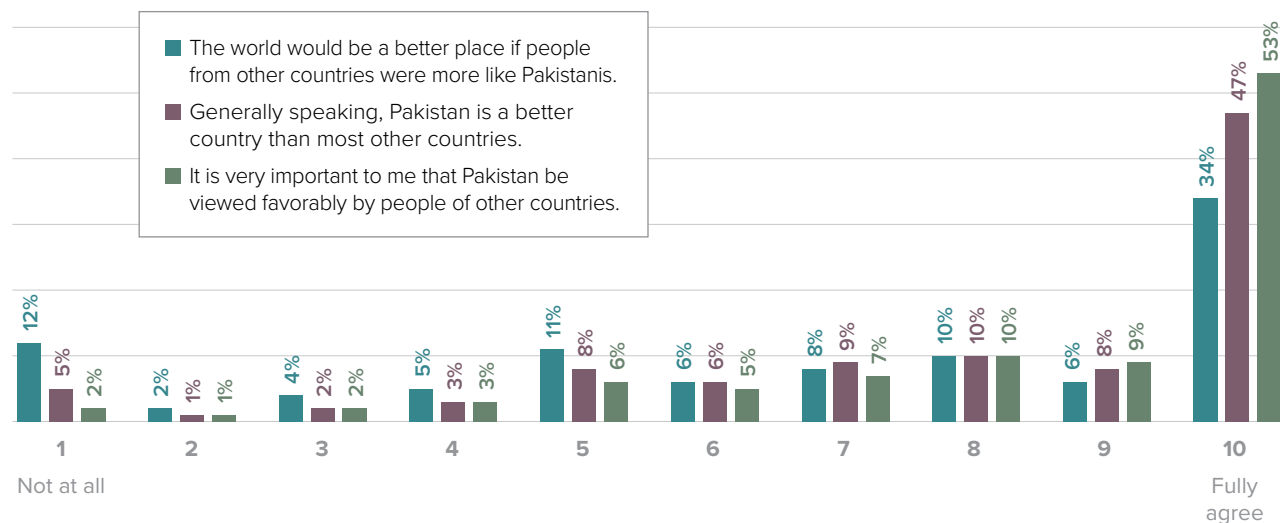
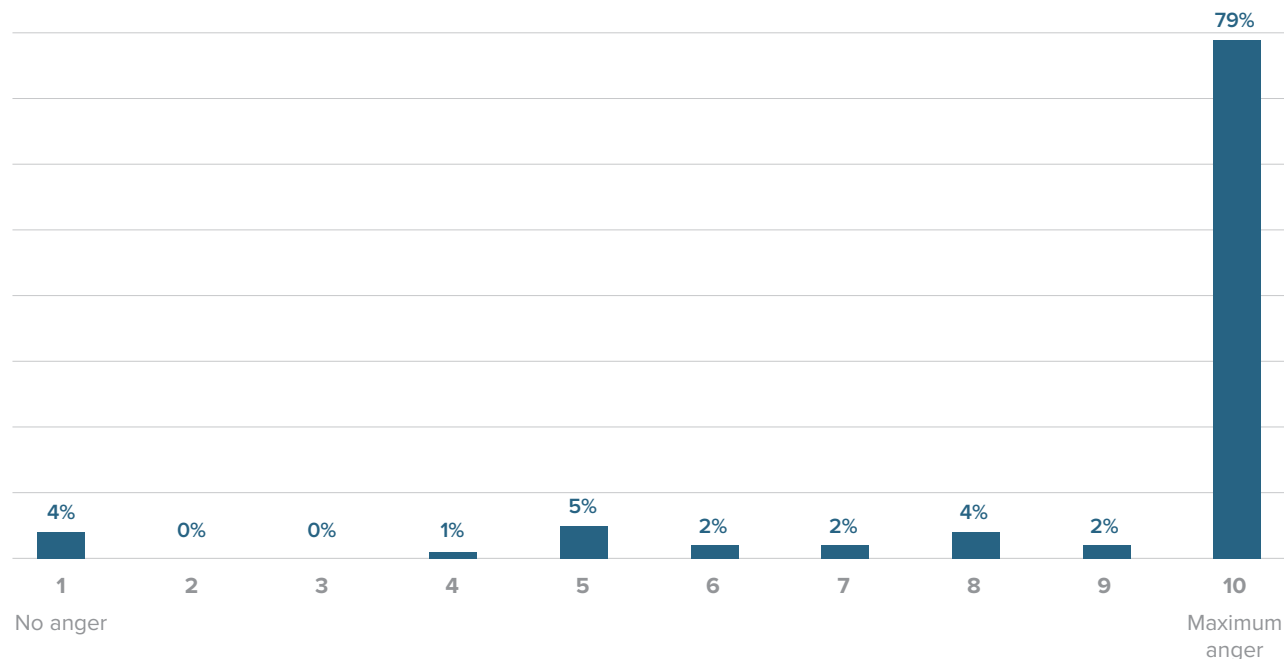


FIGURE 2B.

Anger toward Pakistan's enemies (phone survey)



Notes:

Figure 2a: Respondents indicated their agreement on a 1–10 scale, with 1 indicating no agreement at all and 10 indicating full agreement.

Due to omitted “don’t know” and “refused to answer” responses, percentages do not add up to 100 percent.

Figure 2b: Respondents indicated their anger on a 1–10 scale, with 1 indicating no anger and 10 indicating maximum anger. Due to omitted “don’t know” and “refused to answer” responses, percentages do not add up to 100 percent.

The results indicated that nationalism prompts increased belief in certain statements but not all. The analysis detected no statistical relationship between nationalism and belief in misinformation about either state prowess or the country's international legitimacy. But it did find a statistical relationship between nationalism and belief in unverified claims about foreign support for rights-seeking minorities. That is, when exposed to nationalist rhetoric, respondents were more likely to believe in conspiracy theories alleging foreign support of rights-seeking ethnic minority groups. Troublingly, this was the case even among those respondents who received the nationalist prompt emphasizing internal unity and cohesion among minority and majority groups. These results suggest that nationalist messages can result in greater support for narratives casting minority rights-seeking groups as subversives.

POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE

Scholars have identified political knowledge as an important variable mediating belief formation on political issues.³⁷ Motivated by this body of work, the current study assessed whether political knowledge correlates with belief in misinformation and conspiracy theories. It evaluated political knowledge using two different measures in the phone survey. First, respondents were asked to name two countries that neighbor Pakistan. Second, they were asked to name the president of Pakistan. Only about 10 percent of the sample knew the answers to both questions, but 44 percent knew the name of the president; to ensure a sizable subsample, the latter question was used to create the subset of politically knowledgeable respondents. Results remain consistent regardless of which measure of political knowledge is used.

Compared with their less knowledgeable counterparts, politically knowledgeable individuals were more likely to believe that Pakistan was consistently ranked one of the most peaceful countries in the world, less likely to believe that Pakistan was at risk of economic sanctions, and more likely to believe in foreign intelligence support for rights-seeking ethnic groups. Table 4 breaks down the responses to the first two statements: 79 percent of high-knowledge respondents found the false statement about peace ranking to be somewhat or very accurate, compared with 61 percent in the low-knowledge category; similarly, a larger percentage of high-knowledge respondents relative to low-knowledge respondents believed the statement about Pakistan being at risk of economic sanctions to be inaccurate. These results were robust to the inclusion of numerous demographic controls, such as age, gender, province, and education, as well as other variables such as partisanship.³⁸

The focus groups provide further evidence that political knowledge doesn't necessarily lower belief in misinformation and can in fact increase it. Most focus groups were composed of university students, a high-education sample. While the focus group discussions cannot indicate whether this sample was more likely than a less-educated sample to believe in misinformation, they nonetheless shed light on the way in which knowledge appears to intersect with a greater distrust of some official narratives. For example, in discussing the COVID-19 vaccine, some participants referenced their scientific background and education as providing a basis for their considered distrust of the vaccine. According to one chemistry graduate student, "Pfizer, or whichever vaccine has messenger RNA, they can later also change our DNA." Another participant said, "We used to memorize the difference between active and passive immunity in ninth grade. So it is difficult to trust [the vaccine] for those who have studied general science."

TABLE 4. BELIEF IN MISINFORMATION AND TRUE INFORMATION BY LEVEL OF POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE (PHONE SURVEY)

	Consider statement strongly or somewhat accurate	Consider statement strongly or somewhat inaccurate	Don't know or refuse to answer
Low political knowledge			
Pakistan is consistently ranked one of the most peaceful countries according to an annual global index of peacefulness.	61%	15%	24%
Pakistan is at risk of economic sanctions on charges of supporting terrorist groups.*	36%	31%	33%
High political knowledge			
Pakistan is consistently ranked one of the most peaceful countries according to an annual global index of peacefulness.	79%	9%	11%
Pakistan is at risk of economic sanctions on charges of supporting terrorist groups.*	40%	39%	21%

Note: Statement marked with an asterisk was assessed as true by almost all experts at the time of the survey. Due to rounding, percentages do not add up to 100 percent.

This finding is consistent with some existing work on Pakistan—as well as work in other contexts, including the United States—showing that greater levels of political knowledge do not inoculate against the appeal of fake news.³⁹ It is also consistent with motivated reasoning as an explanation for belief in misinformation and conspiracy theories: according to this explanation, more politically knowledgeable individuals often use their knowledge to justify their positions, rather than to reassess them. On the other hand, this finding contrasts with work showing that a low educational level—often used as proxy for political knowledge—is positively correlated with belief in misinformation.⁴⁰ Regardless, this finding raises questions about the nature of the educational curriculum in Pakistan and points to the need for further research on why certain subsets of individuals are more susceptible to belief in misinformation.

NEWS SOURCES: SOCIAL MEDIA EFFECT?

Understanding the appeal of fake news requires understanding the manner in which citizens process information, including what sources they use to access news and how they determine whether news is trustworthy. Because social media has emerged as a central outlet for both accessing and assessing information of all types, including political information, the study examined the effect of social media exposure on belief in misinformation.

While the plurality of respondents in both surveys said that they received news from TV news stations, sizable percentages also received it via the internet (blogs and other websites) and social media (see table 1). Only 5 percent of both survey samples identified major newspapers as their primary source of news, even though many focus group participants suggested that long-standing newspapers, such as Dawn or Jang, were particularly trustworthy sources.⁴¹



People in Karachi, Pakistan, read newspapers carrying headlines about India-Pakistan tensions on February 28, 2019. (Photo by Fareed Khan/AP)

Respondents also reported using social media frequently. Among phone survey respondents, nearly 58 percent used Facebook, 63 percent WhatsApp, and 47 percent YouTube. Smaller percentages used Twitter (17 percent) and TikTok (30 percent). The percentages were slightly smaller in the in-person survey but remained generally consistent. Finally, respondents also relied on word of mouth and conversations with neighbors and colleagues for information. Female focus group participants from Karachi, for example, said that they often received their news when they were out at the market, shopping for food or household items.

More significantly, analysis showed no meaningful correlation between levels of belief in misinformation and exposure or lack of exposure to social media. People who did not frequently use social media appeared to be similarly susceptible to belief in misinformation as those who did.

At the same time, there is evidence that social media plays an important role in helping validate information that respondents consume from traditional sources. The focus groups suggest that many respondents viewed social media as more reliable primarily because they saw it as a more egalitarian form of news production and consumption than traditional forms of media, which many viewed instead as propagating elite narratives. Focus group participants said that they relied on social media for news because they considered it more likely to be unvarnished

and less likely to be used to fit a particular (elite-driven) narrative. One focus group participant, for example, a female student based in Islamabad, said, “I would like to say that YouTube has better information compared to traditional media. Journalists have their personal channels where they themselves say that we are restricted by PEMRA [the government entity that regulates print and electronic media] and other reasons. Which is why they cannot openly talk about their views there and what they observe.” Another echoed this perspective, stating, “I mostly use Twitter because it has correct news.”

Focus group respondents were generally aware of the presence and spread of conspiracy theories and misinformation and were quick to state that they seek to triangulate between different news sources before deciding whether a particular story is accurate. Some said that while they recognized that misinformation was often posted on social media, they were able to decipher the “true” nature of events from comments that social media users posted in response to the news. One respondent said: “When videos are uploaded to Facebook, we watch them. And they get thousands of comments under them. There would, however, be ten people challenging [the video], saying that this is not the complete video so here watch the complete video. Some attach screenshots saying that this is the reality, the video uploaded is a fake video.”

Downstream Effects of Belief in Misinformation

Countering belief in misinformation and the spread of fake news is preferable on normative grounds; state authorities, political parties, and the media owe the people they serve true information. But another reason to advance true information and counter fake news is to prevent harmful social and political preferences and behaviors. These can range from exclusionary beliefs and behavior at the individual level, such as intolerance toward societal out-groups, to more extreme behaviors such as participation in violent acts. In the Pakistani context, this concern is especially salient. Many Pakistani analysts and journalists have assessed misinformation as one important contributor to vigilante violence and growing intolerance toward religious and ethnic minorities.

The second survey, conducted in person, was leveraged to assess the possibility that misinformation can have an effect on social and political behaviors. It contained an experiment followed by various attitudinal questions about acceptance of minorities, rights of women, support for punishing dissident leaders, and foreign policy preference toward Pakistan’s archrival India. The treatment cue randomized a specific type of misinformation, called here nationalistic misinformation: it exposed respondents to nationalist sentiments in the form of tweets advancing a positive image of Pakistan from a Twitter account purporting to belong to a Western individual and later found to have been a fabricated account. This intervention is distinct from respondents’ exposure to the nationalist narratives, whose effect on belief in misinformation is reported in the “Nationalist Sentiment” section above.

The treatment was designed on the basis of real tweets that surfaced in 2021 from the account of one Katherine George, which primarily shared posts lauding Pakistan’s natural beauty,

Results suggest that there may be less reason than previously thought to be concerned about the downstream impact of nationalistic misinformation, or at least the nationalistic misinformation from fake accounts or anonymous handles.

tourism opportunities, and treatment of women. It was soon revealed, however, that the account was fake; it used pictures from a Polish woman traveling in Pakistan and added false statements to her images.⁴² This incident came on the heels of a growing trend of Western travel influencers getting caught up in Pakistan's politics and becoming part of a broader campaign—amplified by coordinated social media activity—to laud Pakistan's culture, politics, and

society, ostensibly to dispel negative perceptions of the country.⁴³ The hashtag #PakPositive encourages users to share such a “positive image” of the country through news stories and personal experiences on Twitter. At times, as was the case with the Katherine George account, such messages rely on misinformation. At other times, they are aimed at countering the messaging of rights-seeking groups. During the 2021 Aurat March, for example, social media activity of Western individuals celebrating Pakistan's treatment of women challenged the narrative of march organizers that women suffered hardship in the country.⁴⁴

The survey experiment exposed approximately a third of the respondents to tweets from the Katherine George account that promoted a positive view of Pakistan—the nationalistic misinformation treatment group. Another third of the respondents received the same tweets but with additional social media screenshots indicating that the account was fake—the correction treatment group. The final third of the respondents served as a control group and received a placebo with screenshots of tweets showcasing nonpolitical news. The analysis found that people in the control group had similar preferences on key social and political behaviors as those in the nationalistic misinformation treatment group—that is, the consumption of nationalistic misinformation appeared to have little statistical impact on downstream views.

These results suggest that there may be less reason than previously thought to be concerned about the downstream impact of nationalistic misinformation, or at least the nationalistic misinformation from fake accounts or anonymous handles. At the same time, there are limits to generalizing this result to the downstream effect of all forms of misinformation.

The focus group results in particular caution against dismissing the damaging effects of misinformation. Participants linked some important behavioral choices to misinformation cues to which they had been exposed, most clearly in response to misinformation related to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, some focus group participants explicitly linked misinformation and vaccine denial. According to one participant:

“[Misinformation is] worrisome because recently [the government] said that from Monday onwards, secondary school children will not be allowed to enter schools if they are not vaccinated. And then Facebook videos showed that they vaccinated a child in Layyah but he passed away. So when such videos and such situations surface, I started worrying about getting my younger sister vaccinated and whether I should delay it for a week.”

Overall, then, the analysis offers a mixed set of results about the effects of misinformation on harmful political and social attitudes. Future research should continue to assess the causal link between misinformation and pernicious social and political attitudes.

Efficacy of Corrections

A rich and burgeoning literature has explored the role of corrections in curbing the spread of misinformation. In Pakistan, some interventions seeking to correct misinformation have focused on improving digital literacy. For example, a recent randomized controlled trial in Lahore found that video-based educational messages about how to decipher false information worked only when accompanied with personalized feedback based on individuals' past engagement with fake news.⁴⁵ Other research has found that attaching warnings or labels, such as “disputed” or “rated false,” to news stories and headlines makes respondents view them as less accurate.⁴⁶

The focus group participants in the current study had a general understanding that fake news was common both from traditional sources and on social media and that corrections were often available if they sought them out. For example, when focus group participants were shown various social media memes, they were quick to shoot them down as fake news. Most explained that they frequently verified news that they saw on one website or heard on mainstream broadcasts with other information that they read. Indeed, most respondents appeared to approach *all* news with skepticism.

As described in the previous section, the in-person survey explored a particular case of correction of fake news (the Katherine George Twitter account) and its effect on downstream social and political behaviors. Analysis showed that people in the control group had key social and behavioral preferences that were similar to those of the correction treatment group, that is, the treatment of corrected nationalistic misinformation had no tangible statistical impact. This result suggests that correction of the fake news variant may have little impact on people's downstream social and political attitudes and behaviors. This finding is generally consistent with an emerging corrections literature from Western countries highlighting the stickiness of misinformation despite corrections, a phenomenon referred to as the continued belief effect.⁴⁷ At the same time, it is encouraging that this study shows no evidence of the correction backfiring by worsening social and political attitudes, which has been found in some contexts.

Individuals taking it upon themselves to assess the veracity of news suggests that misinformation and disinformation are not only very common but are also recognized as a problem in society. However, it also suggests a general distrust of most news and news sources, indicating that getting citizens to believe accurate information is a distinct, albeit related, problem. That is, even if respondents correctly deem a specific piece of news to be false, they are not necessarily more likely to believe what is true. Increasing trust in true information, particularly when it does not accord with an individual's biases, is thus a different challenge from correcting specific misperceptions. While the latter may appear to be a corollary of the former, interventions and policy proposals to increase trust in true information are likely to be different from those that decrease belief in false information. Increasing trust in true information may be a particularly acute problem in contexts where public trust is low and state and nonstate actors have histories of misrepresenting facts to the public.



Police officers guard a barrier outside a central jail in Haripur, Pakistan, on February 7, 2018, during court proceedings regarding the 2016 lynching of 23-year-old university student Mohammad Mashal Khan, who had been falsely accused of sharing blasphemous content on social media. (Photo by Aqeel Ahmed/AP)

Summary of Findings and Policy Recommendations

This study has sought to analyze both the causes and consequences of belief in misinformation and conspiracy theories in Pakistan, particularly those focused on nationalistic beliefs. This section summarizes the findings (described in detail above) and offers six key policy recommendations based on them.

The study sought to establish baseline levels of belief in misinformation and conspiracies concerning domestic minorities, state prowess, and Pakistan's relationship with other state actors and international institutions. It found that a sizable percentage of respondents believe false or unverified information—particularly information that paints Pakistan in a positive light—and disbelieve true information. This finding has broader implications for social and political life because nationalism has been found to affect a range of preferences, including propensity for conflict, foreign policy preferences, and attitudes toward ethnic minorities.

Baseline belief in misinformation about national capabilities and rejection of true information about major adversaries are particularly high, which suggests that misinformation likely provides important fodder for hawkish foreign policy and domestic security policy preferences.

The study also looked at three key factors thought to correlate with belief in misinformation and conspiracy theories: political knowledge, social media exposure, and nationalist sentiment. It found evidence in favor of two of those factors: political knowledge positively correlates with belief in misinformation and conspiracy theories, and exposure to nationalist narratives can increase belief in conspiracy theories that paint rights-seeking minority groups as subversives. In contrast, it finds that exposure

to social media does not correspond with higher belief in misinformation. Nonetheless, there is evidence that respondents tend to rely on social media to arbitrate the veracity of news obtained from traditional media sources, suggesting a worrisome potential route for exposure to false information.

In probing the consequences of misinformation for social and political attitudes, the study found that the baseline level of negative social and political attitudes, which could precede pernicious behaviors, was already considerable. It found further, however, that experimental exposure to nationalistic misinformation—misinformation combined with nationalist rhetoric—does not appear to increase support for harmful social and political preferences. This finding coexists with the finding that nationalist narratives may increase belief in certain forms of conspiracy theories and may therefore be damaging.

Finally, the study found that corrections of facts incorrectly attributed to specific people were often ineffective at altering downstream attitudes; however, there is some evidence indicating interest among Pakistanis in receiving corrections.

The data should nonetheless be assessed with an eye to its limitations. As noted earlier, the phone survey underrepresents women. Additionally, given the high levels of baseline nationalism in the data, it is possible that the experimental interventions did not have a large effect on some outcome measures due to ceiling effects. Finally, the surveys saw sizable percentages of respondents who did not know or chose not to respond to these questions. While this nonresponse percentage is in line with work on misinformation in other contexts, it should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings.

These findings have six major policy implications.

First, policymakers need to be aware that belief in misinformation and conspiracy theories and rejection of true information are strongly prevalent in Pakistan. In particular, baseline belief in misinformation about national capabilities and rejection of true information about major adversaries are particularly high, which suggests that misinformation likely provides important fodder for hawkish foreign policy and domestic security policy preferences.

Second, policy and public diplomacy efforts to address belief in misinformation and conspiracy theories should focus on countering politically powerful misinformation beliefs. In particular, programming should target politically knowledgeable populations and examine their networks of information.

Third, it is important that interventions aimed at mitigating damaging nationalist narratives do not rely on narratives of national cohesion as an ideal, since, as the study results indicate, even this form of nationalism has the potential to promote belief in certain conspiracy theories. Protecting

vulnerable domestic minority groups from the consequences of nationalism and misinformation requires delicate diplomacy more than highly visible programming, which can be counterproductive.

Fourth, the study results suggest that the Pakistani public is concerned about the spread of misinformation and has an appetite for corrective approaches. This is good news. Moreover, the fact that the public has developed mechanisms to assess reliability of information presents an opportunity to correct misinformation. Easy-to-navigate digital literacy campaigns are likely to have traction among the Pakistani public and should be promoted in universities and colleges.

Fifth, the finding of low levels of trust in official and mainstream media points to the need for programmatic support to help these outlets regain public trust. This task remains a challenging and important one. Official and mainstream media are subject to editorial oversight and are the source of the most credible information. One possibility is for official and mainstream media to better leverage social media and use their online presence to aggressively correct misinformation.

Sixth and finally, public authorities should be mindful that while censorship provides an easy way to control the narrative on topics of contemporary concern, citizens may conclude over the medium and long term that mainstream news sources are not trustworthy and rely more on social media, which is more difficult to monitor.

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