

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Computational Propaganda in Pakistan: Political Manipulation through X (Twitter)

Abdul Samee <sup>a</sup> Noman Ahmed Ansari <sup>b</sup> Raza Butt <sup>c</sup>

**Abstract:** This paper examines computational propaganda use in creating political narratives in Pakistan via platform X. The research compares the strategies adopted in Pakistan, which are the rivalry among mainstream political parties of Pakistan viz-a-viz Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), Pakistan Muslim League Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan People Party (PPP) and Jamat-e-Islami (JI), which is against established models in Russia and the U.S. The results indicate that the digital environment of Pakistan has been transformed into a hybrid between the Russian state-sponsored model and the Macedonian commercial model. PTI uses an industrialised approach that is marked by the centralised Cyber Forces, and the use of automated bot networks and hiring of party-funded influencers that include paid teams. PML-N has an organic latency, and it is based on institutional engagement, which is reminiscent of traditional grassroots campaigning in the U.S. Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) is an extremely organised ideological model of volunteerism, whereas the Pakistan People Party (PPP) exhibits a combination of individual activists and paid groups during large-scale campaigns. The study finds that commercialisation of dissent, whereby political participation is motivated by money, as opposed to ideology, forms a digital mirage that misrepresents the opinion of the masses and weakens democratic transparency.

**Keywords:** Computational Propaganda, Pakistan, PTI, PML-N, JI, PPP, Veles Model, Gig Economy, Political Manipulation, Hashtags, Bots

### Introduction

The digitisation of political discourse has transformed social media platforms from neutral communication tools into active theatres of information warfare (Farooq et al., 2025). As suggested by Brian E. Weeks (2015), the knowledge, opinions, and actions of individuals are shaped by the news and information that is shared on Social Networking Sites. This study examines how, by means of computational propaganda, political narratives are shaped in Pakistan on the X platform specifically, and what that shift means for democratic accountability and public trust.

Spanning the decade from 2022 to 2025, the research contrasts the domestic strategies of PTI, PML (N), JI, and PPP with global precedents set by Russia and the U.S.

Political communication through the media plays a major role in the participation of voters in political programs; with their social media teams using trends, hashtags and quick reactions to breaking news to bring attention to their voters towards them (Shabbir & Haider, 2023). The consistency between politicians' media portrayals and social media use underscores its significant impact on public mobilisation and opinion formation (Shabbir & Haider, 2023).

The central inquiry of this research is to understand the nature of popularity in the digital age. Is the dominance of specific narratives on X a reflection of genuine public will, or is it a manufactured outcome of industrialised propaganda?

<sup>a</sup> MS Scholar, Riphah Institute of Media Sciences, Riphah International University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

<sup>b</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of Media & Communication Studies, Rawalpindi Women University, Rawalpindi, Punjab, Pakistan.

<sup>c</sup> Senior Lecturer, Independent College, Dublin, Ireland.

By analysing the use of automation (bots, engagement softwares, etc), paid hashtags, and paid labour (bloggers, influencers and proliferation teams), this study aims to understand the implications of such computational propaganda strategies on democratic processes and their consequent effects on public opinion in Pakistan.

### **Defining Computational Propaganda**

Computational propaganda is described as the deliberate dissemination of misleading information through the use of algorithms and automation, and human editing (Programme on Democracy and Technology, n.d.).

The artificially inflaming trends that drive the agenda-setting theory aid in explaining the impact of making it seem that some particular narratives have a majority of supporters. This forms a bandwagon effect where people embrace a particular line of thought just because it seems to be popular.

Theoretical models like Agenda-Setting can indicate that, through artificial amplification of a trend, political actors can pseudo-create a consensus, generating a bandwagon effect whereby users, on top of a narrative, join in merely because it seems to be good.

### **Global Paradigms: Russia, USA and the "Veles Effect"**

Existing literature identifies three distinct models of manipulation:

#### **1. The Russian Model**

Coordinated disinformation is used by state-funded troll farms such as the Internet Research Agency (IRA) to control the mood in people, with the implications of such actions growing beyond intra-state to internationally.

Practically, this model is deeply dependent on the existence of troll farms, bot networks and even disinformation campaigns that are supported by the government in order to reinforce pro-regime stories and to silence opposition. According to scholars, Russia was the first country to combine the old methods of propaganda with digital tools, employing algorithm-enhancing amplification and fake accounts to inundate social media with misinformation or polarising content. The Russian model, in turn, is ideologically motivated and institutionally backed, and its activities are often state-connected or related to affiliated agencies. This enables mass control over the flow of information in elections, protests and international crises, to influence domestic opinion as well as foreign perceptions. The strength of the model lies in the fact that it is a unified tone and coordinated inauthentic action, which appears to support an illusion of mass agreement and undermines trust in sovereign media and democratic institutions.

#### **2. The Anglo-American Model**

This model is defined by data-driven micro targeting within pluralistic systems. This was famously illustrated by the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which demonstrates precision influence operation within competitive democracies (Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018).

Furthermore, evidence from the UK suggests that the impact of such coordination is decisive. Reports indicate that British voters would likely not have voted to leave the EU in such large numbers without the coordinated action of far-right networks assisting the Leave EU campaign (Robert, 2018).

#### **3. The Veles (Macedonian) Model**

As documented by Wired (2017), this model represents the commercialisation of fake news. Teenagers in Veles, Macedonia, did not rig the 2016 US election for ideological reasons, but for profit, generating sensationalist clicks to harvest AdSense revenue. This shifted the paradigm from ideological propaganda to transactional disinformation.

## **The Pakistani Gap**

While local studies identify trend manipulation (Kausar et al., 2021), there is a gap in connecting the Pakistani experience to the Veles model. This research argues that Pakistan has adopted a Gig Economy of Dissent, where the transactional nature of Veles meets the political objectives of Russia.

## **Theoretical Perspectives**

The main theories that will guide this research are Computational Propaganda Theory, Agenda-Setting Theory and the idea of Bandwagon Effect. Woolley and Howard (2017) define computational propaganda as the use of data analytics and disinformation on opinions and elections through the use of bots, trolls, and automation, an algorithmic manipulation of information. In comparison, the Agenda-Setting Theory assumes that the media and political players never instruct the audiences on what to think but, in a big way, define what they regard as important (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

This framework, combined with automated amplification on social media, describes how artificially generated trends can create the perception of a consensus, which can affect the social actions of people and how they vote. This assists the masses to comprehend how digital forums are used to determine, amplify and shape their views concerning the selfish interests of political parties.

## **Methodology**

To examine the difference in digital approach between PTI, PML-N, JI and PPP, this paper has used a Qualitative Comparative Case Study design. The study has applied the secondary analysis of data through the synthesis of forensic reports in academic journals, investigative journalism, public records on social media recruitment and trend watching of what is trending on X.

## **Data Selection**

The analysis focuses on two key indicators of computational propaganda:

### **1. Automation & Coordination:**

Bot networks, high-frequency tweeting (100+ tweets/day), and synchronised hashtag campaigns were also present.

### **2. Financial Incentivization:**

Facts of party money being spent on influencers, social media teams and gig workers pushing trends.

Comparative Framework:

They are overlayed on the features of the Russian (State/Industrial), American (Organic/Institutional) and Macedonian (Commercial/Transactional) models to identify the global models being reproduced within the Pakistani domestic setting.

## **Results**

The results show that the prevalent patterns of computational propaganda in Pakistan in 2014-2025 have peculiar features of a sharp power system between the mentioned political agents.

### **1. PTI: The Industrialised and Transactional Model**

The policy of PTI is a hybrid of Russian and Macedonian models.

#### **▪ The Cyber Force (Russian Parallel)**

Similar to the IRA, PTI has a centralised command structure. The case study of the 2022 Imported Hukoomat campaign through forensic analysis showed that the propagation of messages was carried out using automated bot networks that were used to create artificial volume (Lashari et al., 2024).

Nevertheless, the automatization of this volume is not one-sided; Kausar et al. 2021) discovered that human accounts are the key factors driving political trend manipulation in Pakistan as opposed to scripts. This circumstantial data confirms that a Gig Economy exists, with actual people being used to artificially amplify stories.

#### ▪ **The Paid Influencer (Macedonian Parallel)**

More importantly, the study singles out the monetisation of support. It is reported that the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government, led by PTI and under the monthly state stipends, recruited more than 1300 social media influencers (The Friday Times, 2022).

This is similar to the Veles model, where the motivation behind posting is financial. The manipulation works at two levels: algorithmic amplification and economic control. A paid workforce willfully creates trending topics.

### **2. PML-N: The Organic and Institutional Model**

However, PML-N exhibits patterns closer to traditional U.S. campaigning.

#### ▪ **Organic Latency**

PML-N's digital footprint is significantly lower and lacks the coordinated swarm behaviour of PTI. Their trends correlate with physical events (rallies, press conferences) rather than automated schedules.

#### ▪ **Human-Centric**

The absence of a large-scale bot farm or state-paid influencer program suggests that PML-N's online engagement is largely organic. While less effective at winning the Twitter Narrative war, this model reflects a tangible constituency base that exists outside the digital ecosystem.

### **3. Jamaat-e-Islami (JI): The Ideological and Volunteer-Driven Model**

JI has one of the strongest organically coordinated digital teams in Pakistan.

#### ▪ **Ideologue-Based:**

- Participation is voluntary and conviction-driven, not transactional.
- Through a highly disciplined X team, JI can push any hashtag onto the national panel without bots or paid bloggers.
- Their engagement is steady, not artificially inflated with the use of consistent, non-spiky trend patterns.
- JI's model resembles ideological digital activism movements in Turkey and Egypt rather than Russian or Macedonian systems.

### **Pakistan People's Party (PPP) - The Hybrid and Intermittent Transactional Model**

PPP historically lacked a formal digital structure. Its early digital footprint depended on volunteer activists, leftist commentators, and ideological supporters acting independently. Recently, PPP has begun forming digital teams, but the organisation remains inconsistent. For major campaigns or narrative battles, PPP relies on hired hashtag teams, showing periodic use of transactional labour. PPP, therefore, sits between organic volunteer mobilisation and outsourced computational propaganda.

### **Hashtag Analysis**

Right from #امپورٹڈ\_حکومت\_\_نامنظور in 2022, to #رہائی\_کا\_واحد\_راستہ\_مزاحمت in 2025, a detailed analysis of such hashtags has revealed multiple indicators of computational propaganda aligned with PTI's digital strategy. The trends demonstrated synchronous posting patterns, sudden volume spikes, copy-paste content, repetition of identical slogans, and orchestrated narrative timing.

Accounts pushing the hashtag showed recent creation dates, generic “South Asia” location metadata, abnormal tweet frequency, limited personal information, and rapid username changes.

These traits align with global botnet behaviour and account-farm structures. Crucially, signals of paid trend pushing were observed. Digital workers were compensated per tweet, retweet, or comment. Coordinated instructions circulated within PTI-aligned groups, directing members to post hashtag tweets at specific times. These hashtags reflected an engineered computational propaganda campaign aimed at manufacturing visibility and simulating mass support, rather than organic political sentiment.

Discussion

The Commercialisation of Political Warfare

The greatest discovery of this paper is that the Wired (Veles) understanding can be applied to Pakistani politics. In Veles, offshoring rigging was the by-product of unregulated capitalism; in Pakistan, it has turned into a political policy.

Hiring of paid influencers fosters a mercenary digital culture. Like teenagers in Macedonia exploiting American polarisation in a bid to make money, Pakistani paid workers exploited household polarisation to get a financial profit.

The model developed by PTI is an ideal example of the Gig Economy of Dissent, because it is based on paid digital workers who spread political stories not because they subscribe to a particular ideology, but because they are paid to do it.

This propaganda of transaction renders the viewer unable to differentiate a real political revolution from a payroll list.

The Digital Mirage and Democratic Risk

This commercialisation creates a Digital Mirage. Although the fact that PTI is dominating on X is often flaunted as an indication of large-scale popularity, this measure is proven to be largely misleading.

Public support that has been artificially pumped up by treasury funds and hyped with auto bot networks breaks the democratic feedback loop. The effect is the creation of a produced reality in which the voices of paid-off operatives are more audible than the true voice of the masses. The imitation of political discourse, rhetoric and hashtags through artificial amplification by PTI gives the impression of a social agreement. Trend rankings or volume of tweets are not measures that can be seen as true democratic input.

Table 1

Party Comparisons

Party	Dominant Model	Nature of Digital Force
PML-N	Organic + Institutional	Human-driven, event-based
PTI	Industrialised + Transactional	Centralised structure, bots, paid teams
JI	Ideological + Volunteer-Based	Highly coordinated, unpaid, disciplined
PPP	Hybrid + Intermittently Transactional	Activists + hired teams during campaigns

Democratic Implications

Automation, ideology, commercially engaged digital labour, and weak institutions in Pakistan combine to make it very susceptible to digital manipulation. False consensus threatens the democratic legitimacy, misleads the electorate and falsifies the national discourse.

### **Comparison with Global Models**

The case of Pakistan is not similar to that of Russia, as the manipulation is competitive (Party vs. Party) as opposed to monolithic (State vs. People). Nevertheless, in contrast to the United States, Pakistan has no institutional controls, like a strong independent media or a defamation statute, to counteract these fake stories. The immense amount of content generated by bots frequently overloads the process of independent verification, which creates a weaker information ecosystem.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study recognises the ethical issues that surround the study of computational propaganda, including the potential danger of reinforcing the use of manipulative tactics or justifying the use of deceptive methods. There is a cautious approach to put findings in the perspective of the critical lens, which accords primacy to democratic transparency and accountability to the people. In revealing the influence of financial incentives and automated networks on political speech, the research paper is not meant to repeat or support such techniques, but to add to the constructive discussion on how to protect digital spaces against exploitation. Other than that, this has not been accompanied by any bias to draw conclusions on the premise of personal prejudice against the party of choice in order to retain the research purpose sufficiently.

### **Conclusion**

The research indicates that the concept of Computational propaganda in Pakistan has come to terms with a complex spectrum and has become a sophisticated tool of political control, characterised by the distinction between the Industrialised and Organic politics, in the broad sense.

According to the study, PTI supposedly prevails with the help of industrialised and paid networks; PML-N is based on traditional organisational patterns; JI has the disciplined groups of ideological volunteers; and PPP is based on a mix of activism and paid teams.

This paper demonstrates how the digital world is not a mirror of popular opinion but a competitive environment that is formed by resources, organisation, ideology and financial incentives.

The paper repeats the need to acknowledge the role of social media in political discourse, primarily c. It suggests prospective studies of the Gig Economy of Propaganda, and in particular, how the monetisation of trolling affects the long-term creditworthiness of the democratic institutions in the hybrid regimes.

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