Digital Media and Strategic Communication in Pakistan: Analyzing the Role of Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) in National Security

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ABSTRACT

In the digital age, information warfare and digital diplomacy have become pivotal in shaping national security. This research investigates the role of the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) of Pakistan in utilizing digital media for crisis communication. The study explores how ISPR's engagement on platforms like Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram has influenced public perception during national security crises. It examines the strategic use of digital media in countering misinformation, managing crises, and reinforcing national security narratives. Through content analysis and case studies, the research identifies the effectiveness of ISPR's strategies and offers recommendations for enhancing digital communication in the context of fifth-generation warfare (5GW). This research contributes to understanding military-led communication in the digital era and provides insights into best practices for global military PR strategies.

Keywords: Digital Media, Crisis Communication, National Security, Inter-Services Public Relations, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

The current digital era has brought a substantial change in the way information is spread and crisis communications are managed. The growth of digital media has profoundly transformed the terrain in

which governments, military organizations, and national security agencies can function, with advantages as well as new threats. By this logic, social media platforms — originating from the US or elsewhere — will always be important for all government organizations, more so in times of national crisis. These platforms facilitate the distribution of immediate alerts, paid engagement with the community, and shape stories on a national and global scale (Coombs 2007). On the national security level, these digital tools are critical means of controlling information flows, fighting adversarial narratives, and maintaining public confidence in times of crisis. Due to several challenges in terms of internal as well as external security, Pakistan started realizing the significance of using digital media efficiently & effectively to manage its national Security communication. ISPR (Inter-Services Public Relations), the official publicity wing of the Pakistan military, has led this digital transition from the front. In the past, ISPR only had to deal with media relations through traditional newspapers, as well as television and radio.

Nevertheless, as the world moved onto digital platforms, ISPR smartly adapted by incorporating social media platforms of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram in its communication strategy. This evolution from traditional to digital has opened ways for ISPR to reach out to the public directly, clear up misconceptions, provide necessary information on time, and also make appeals on national unity during nationwide crises like military operations, terror attacks, and diplomatic skirmishes (Ali & Khan, 2021). With digital platforms, the ISPR has managed to increase its visibility and critical influence significantly both within Pakistan and abroad. ISPR has been using strategically crafted campaigns, embedded with real-time updates, to communicate the official military narrative and dispel myths created by our adversaries. This is especially important in times of national security crises, when controlling the narrative is vital to providing the public with accurate information and refraining from conspiracy theories or propaganda (Yousaf, 2020). Yet the rise of digital platforms creates new dynamics and bottlenecks— most notably, that of misinformation and disinformation. Access to a global information stream has increased the danger of hostile manipulation of public opinion through digital channels, especially when security threats and military aggression are on the agenda.

Crisis communication is a core function of the Department of Information (DOIN) used to inform and influence audiences in times of national security incidents. The research will evaluate the role of ISPR's digital campaigns in influencing public opinion, fighting misinformation, and furthering national security stories. This research will critically analyze case studies of the Pulwama-Balakot crisis, Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad, and other landmark national security events to provide an insight into how the ISPR uses digital platforms for crisis management and its utility in tackling contemporary challenges within modern warfare. It will also analyze these communication narratives in the light of global military public relations practices and assess to what extent these communication strategies are shaping Pakistan, a national security state increasingly being contested digitally (Qazi, 2021).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The blurry line between information warfare and traditional warfare further illustrates the significance that scholars have afforded to the nature of digital media in communication about national security. Researchers highlight that the nature of warfare changed in the digital age, as, alongside military and economic attacks, we now witness cyber-influence and cyber-information components that are accessorize to national defense strategies. Together with this, information warfare, cyber threats, and propaganda are now considered core features of contemporary battle, as state and military organs utilize digital platforms to fight for public opinion at home and abroad (Qazi, 2021; Abbas, 2020).

National security communication has emerged as an important field where digital media, in this context, is a powerful tool. Around the world, governments and military institutions have been using social media

platforms like Facebook, other websites [3], and online news portals to communicate with the public directly, especially in times of crises. The change has mirrored the rise in relevance of media management and controlling the flow of information at a time when digital communication has become an elementary tool for constructing both national and international narratives. Consequently, national security strategies must evolve beyond the boundaries as fights are not only on the ground but also impinge on information space (Abbas, 2020). This concept is even more important for countries like Pakistan, which has serious security concerns inside and outside the border; therefore, it is necessary for a country to organize its entire digital media strategy in order to remain stable and as one nation.

The rising power of the digital media is closely associated with fifth-generation warfare (5GW) that makes use of misinformation as a foremost instrument for the demolition of states and managing public perceptions (Qazi, 2021). The battles are not just those of countries unleashing military might upon one another — they are wars of words, images, and lies on the digital front. In this situation, the information weaponizes and control of digital platforms enables military institutions to weaponize certain perceptions among not only the domestic audience but also the international one. ISPR has taken an important step in the case of securing Pakistan's national security against foreign propaganda targeting people's weakened trust in the government and defence-related organizations by considering regulating the digital environment, as reported in Qazi (2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of this study is focused on the foundational theories that help explain ISPR's digital media strategies in constructing national security narratives and crisis communication. Though purely speculative at this point, these theories may provide context to the findings of the study and more insight into how ISPR's communication strategies relate to broader communication, public relations, and national security contexts. The following theoretical perspectives guide the research:

Framing Theory (Entman, 1993)

Framing Theory is essential to our understanding of how ISPR constructs its national security narratives by way of digital media campaigns. The organization of media content in order to impact public understanding or interpretation is called framing (Entman, 1993). In the ISPR, military framing emphasizes some issues of national security (military preparedness, counter terrorism effort, and unity) and neglects others (disinformation). Exercising selective framing focuses the public on main topics and is used to keep all together in one consistent narrative. Leveraging framing theory, this study examines how ISPR uses digital content to frame national security issues in a manner likely to evoke emotions and to garner support or mobilize the population.

For instance, in the Pulwama-Balakot crisis, ISPR was able to showcase Pakistan's kinetic responses as measured and defensive, presenting a cohesive message of national unity and strength via video clips and narratives shared widely through social media. ISPR presented these events in a manner that would help them rally the public, create national morale, and challenge adversarial narratives. The framing strategy used by ISPR has serious implications for how national security crises can be defined for both domestic and international viewers.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007)

ISPR through SCCT Lens Coombs (2007) explains that SCCT indicates that the communication strategies should target differently depending on the nature of the crisis and how the public perceives them towards

the involved organization. These involve strategies for responding to a crisis, like "bolstering" and "corrective actions.

For both ISPR, in crises like Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad or Defence Day campaigns, for example, a mix of bolstering and corrective actions was used. For instance, ISPR employed positive messaging regarding Pakistan's counter terrorism operations, its military strength, and popular solidarity, which falls in line with SCCT's reinforcing strategies. Finally, the SCCT framework asserts on corrective actions which can help in managing disinformation by providing real-time information and combating adversary narratives, thus reminiscent of crisis management theory.

Digital Patriotism (Elsheikh, 2022)

Digital Patriotism is an emerging concept in the context of military communication. Elsheikh (2022) defines digital patriotism as the use of digital media to cultivate national pride and loyalty, often through emotional and multimedia-driven content In the situation of ISPR, its digital patriotism is confidential in the sentimental tales, musical tributes, and nationalist symbols that limn its campaigns like Defence Day and the Pulwama-Balakot crisis. These campaigns use the medium of visual media and music to arouse fights on an emotional level, thus renewing and amplifying the ties between the nation and the military. Digital patriotism is consistent with the study, which reveals that ISPR discourse during crises attempted to appeal to public sentiment and uphold national identity.

Information Warfare and Fifth-Generation Warfare (5GW) (Qazi, 2021)

Fifth-Generation Warfare (5GW) is a fairly obscure theoretical framework that provides the most comprehensive perspective of digital media in modern conflicts. Qazi (2021) writes that 5GW is defined by a focus on information warfare, as "shaping the battlefield regarding perception and controlling feedback of data" becomes not tactics but operational strategies. Military institutions such as the ISPR have adjusted to this reality in the digital age, taking to social media platforms and using digital tools to control information, counter disinformation, and influence national narratives.

Their use of 5GW techniques — such as disseminating disinformation during crisis events (e.g., the Balakot airstrike) — indicates that ISPR has played multiple roles as a part and parcel of 5GW. ISPR, therefore, uses information warfare to protect national security by shaping digital narratives, fighting against the spread of misinformation, and advancing Pakistan's cause in international media. It also provides a framework for understanding the digital media strategies of ISPR within the context of contemporary war, which is now fought not just in physical realms but digital and informational ones.

Public Diplomacy and Military PR (Nye, 2004)

Public Diplomacy is another key concept used to analyze ISPR's role in managing national security communication. Nye (2004) defines public diplomacy as the use of communication to influence foreign public's and shape international opinion. In the case of ISPR, the organization's efforts to communicate directly with both domestic and international audiences during national security crises can be seen as a form of public diplomacy Through the lens of digital media platforms, as ISPR projects the Pak military might and peace-making strides to International narratives for diplomatic leverage.

Applying this theory, one might understand ISPR as practicing digital diplomacy through its representation of the global security events in social media, framing Pakistan's stand on global issues. ISPR even externalized its operations during the Pulwama-Balakot crisis, where we saw it utilizing social

media not just to sway domestic public opinion but also to sell Pakistan's broader image and diplomatic standing on an international scale.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze how ISPR utilizes digital media for crisis communication in Pakistan.
2. To explore the role of digital media in fifth-generation warfare, focusing on information, propaganda, and misinformation.
3. To evaluate the effectiveness of ISPR's digital media campaigns during key national security crises.
4. To investigate how ISPR's digital communication strategies affect public trust in state institutions.

Significance of the Research

This research is significant for several reasons, particularly in the context of understanding the evolving role of digital media in national security and crisis communication. The increasing reliance on digital platforms for military communication reflects broader shifts in global security dynamics, where information warfare is now seen as an integral part of modern conflict. As the new battlefield is increasingly digital, having a clear, managed communication structure within the military has become vital. The study is of significant importance when seen from the lens of strategic use of digital media by military organizations, especially the Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) in Pakistan, and how effective these types of communication strategies are at times, under national security crises.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative research design to explore the role of ISPR in crisis communication through digital media. The study employs content analysis, case studies, and interviews to collect and analyze data.

Content Analysis: A purposive sample of 10 ISPR digital media campaigns was analyzed from platforms like Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. The content was examined for key themes, messaging strategies, visual communication, and public engagement metrics.

Case Studies: Selected case studies from significant national security events, such as the Pulwama-Balakot crisis, Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad, and Defense Day campaigns, were analyzed to evaluate ISPR's digital strategies during crises.

Interviews: Interviews with ISPR officials were planned to gather firsthand insights into the organization's digital media strategies. Approval for the interviews was pending at the time of writing.

Sample Size

Content Analysis: 10 high-engagement digital media campaigns by ISPR, spanning national security crises over the last 5 years.

Case Studies: Three major crises (Pulwama-Balakot, Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad, and Defense Day campaigns).

Data Analysis Plan

Data collected from content analysis, case studies, and interviews will be analyzed using thematic analysis. Framing Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) will guide the analysis of ISPR's strategic messaging and crisis response strategies. The analysis will focus on identifying

recurring themes such as national unity, counter terrorism, misinformation countermeasures, and public engagement.

RESULTS AND DATA ANALYSIS

Content Analysis Results

A purposive sample of 10 ISPR digital campaigns was analyzed from platforms including YouTube, Twitter (X), Facebook, and Instagram. These campaigns spanned events such as military operations, national crises, and public morale-building initiatives.

Table 1: Strategic Messaging Themes

Strategic Messaging Themes	Percentage (%)
National Unity and Patriotism	80%
Counter-Terrorism and Military Strength	60%
Tributes and National Days	50%
Disinformation Counter-Narratives	40%
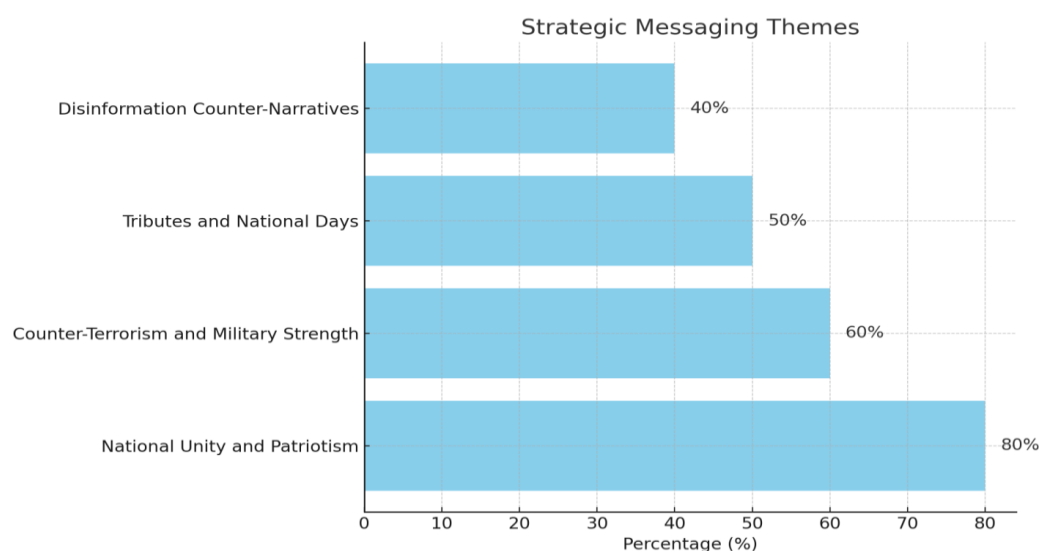
Interpretation

National Unity and Patriotism (80%): The above-mentioned analysis of the digital campaigns done by ISPR places a lot more focus on national unity and patriotism, which are the basic stepping stones to build an understanding that the nation comes first in times of chaos or meltdown. This mirrors the military plan to mobilize its populace and have a feeling of being good for something, national security-wise.

Counter-Terrorism and Military Strength (60%): This theme was used to project the strength of the military against terrorism or threats, thereby calming down public unrest about how vulnerable their life could be. ISPR makes sure to underline these aspects in a way that brings across the message of how well the military has defended our national security.

Tributes and National Days (50%): These campaigns pay respect to our soldiers and patriotic days. They contribute to upholding the image of the army as a savior of this country. Consequently, they become important to maintaining a collective sense of national pride and respect towards military forces.

Disinformation Counter Narratives (40%): This refers to the work of the ISPR attempting to tackle fake news/dis-informer, and disinformation with a special emphasis on security-related crises. Disinformation is an essential component of the digital communication strategy, which has to be countered to reach and inform the public correctly with government-authorized data.

Table 2: Multimedia Use

| Multimedia Type	Percentage (%)
Video Content	90%
Infographics/Animated Content	30%
Hashtags and Slogans	Commonly Used
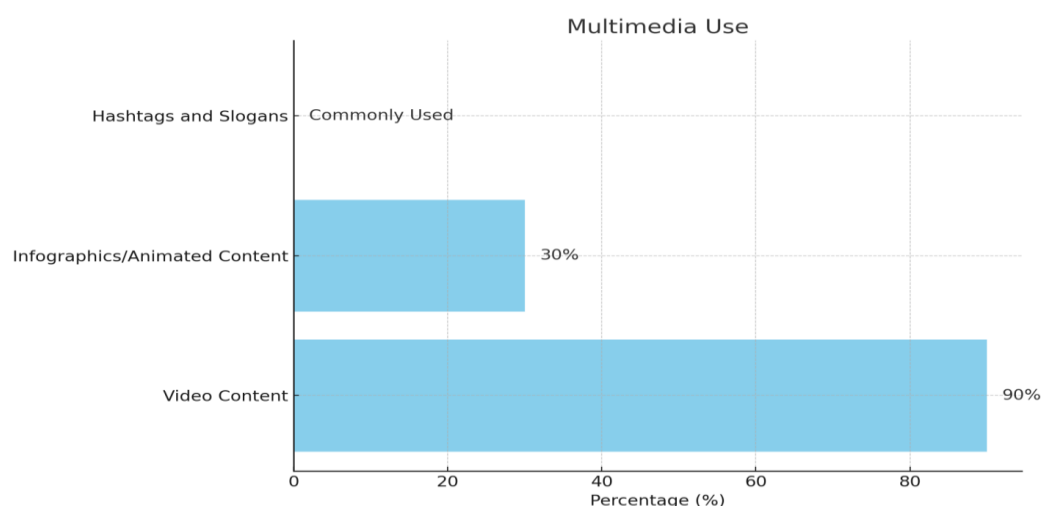
Interpretation

Video Content (90%): This is the biggest indicator of the use of video and is represented as a primary major content in the ISPR strategy. Videos are a powerful source of expression, emotion, next to update; hence, it is a popular ISPR tool, especially when it comes the moments of national travails.

Info-graphics /Animated Content (30%): While video content dominates the ISPR communications toolbox, info-graphics and animations remain critical constituents. Their unique value is in bringing together complex information and rendering it as visual snapshots, which are easy to understand. Strategic use of these types of media at regular intervals can provide video answers clearly and clarify messages.

Hashtags and Slogans (Frequently Used): Hashtags and slogans play an important role in improving the visibility on social networking sites, especially Twitter and Instagram. They often make ISPR's messages join-able in bigger discussions online, enabling the program to have a wider reach and boost engagement.

Table 3: Engagement Metrics

Engagement Metric	Findings/Interpretation
Average Likes/Shares per Post	Increased during crises (e.g., Balakot airstrike)
Emotional Appeal Posts	Higher audience interaction
YouTube Videos (Musical Tributes)	Over 1 million views within days of release
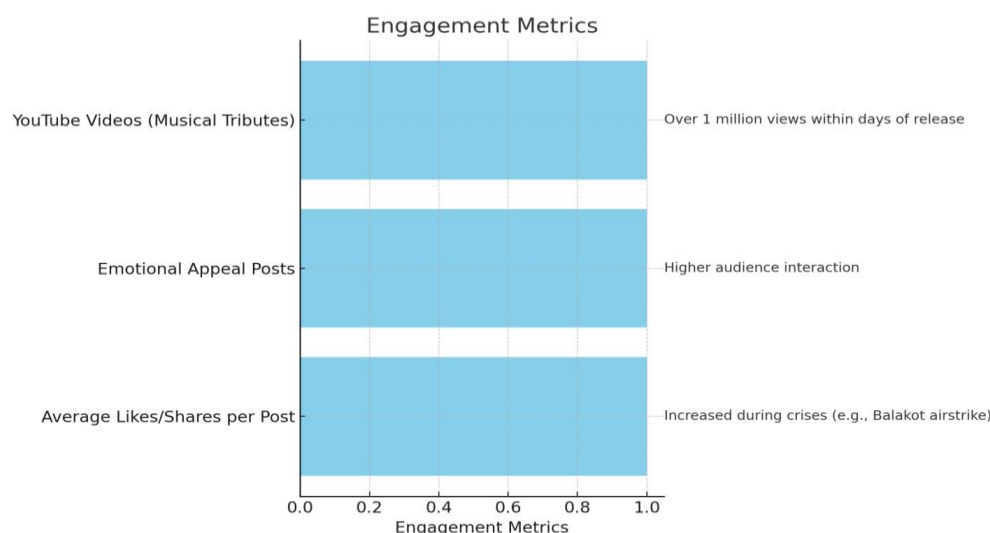
Interpretation

Average Likes/Shares per Post: Engagement levels go up when the country is at a flashpoint, such as during the Balakot airstrike, indicating that ISPR's messaging correlates well with what people want to hear when there are fears for national security. This increased interaction is a test of the public heartbeat, seeking information and comfort during crucial times.

Emotional Appeal Posts: On average, more emotional posts (like a tribute to soldiers) just generally racked up higher interact from the audience. And this is an important lesson for PR professionals because of the way in which emotional appeal can really drive home a message — it boosts morale in times of adversity.

YouTube Videos (Musical Tributes): YouTube videos, especially musical tributes, surpassed 1 million hits within days of being posted, suggesting the tremendous power of such rich media content in striking a chord with the masses. It is heartening and patriotic in many ways to see this aspect of digital storytelling, along with visual and emotional elements that will help us foster nationalism and patriotism.

Case Study Interpretation

Case Study 1: Pulwama-Balakot Crisis Response (2019)

Objective	Details
Counter India's Narrative	Showcase military preparedness and Pakistan's stance during the conflict.
Analysis	ISPR's press briefings and videos were strategically released to present Pakistan as measured and peace-seeking, while also capable of defense.
Impact	International media cited ISPR's videos, boosting Pakistan's digital

diplomacy.

Case Study 2: Operation Radd-ul-Fasaad

Objective	Details
Demonstrate Ongoing Counter-Terrorism Success	Provide updates and documentaries building long-term public trust in military efforts.
Analysis	Consistent updates and documentaries built public trust over time.
Interpretation	Framing theory applies—terrorism was framed as a threat to all, requiring unity.

Case Study 3: Defence Day Campaigns

Objective	Details
Build Morale and Public Support	Emotional storytelling through soldier family interviews and national songs.
Analysis	Very high public interaction; content shared across all provinces and overseas communities.

Thematic Interpretation

Using thematic analysis, four core themes emerged from the content:

Themes	Description
1. Heroism & Sacrifice	Emphasizing military and civilian martyrs as national heroes.
2. Resilience & Strength	Framing Pakistan as stable and unshaken in crises.
3. Truth vs. Disinformation	Actively correcting misinformation, especially cross-border.
4. Public Mobilization	Encouraging unity, discipline, and citizen vigilance.

These themes align with SCCT strategies, especially "rebuild" (restoring confidence post-crisis) and "bolstering" (reminding the public of past good deeds).

DISCUSSION

Comparison with Previous Studies

The results of this study modestly harmonize with previous research into military communication with a focus on fifth-generation warfare (5GW). Qazi (2021) and Abbas (2020) have emphasized the growing importance of media in recent conflicts, with wars mostly being fought via narratives and perception management, not by traditional battlefield skirmishes. Interactions between ISPR, the PR machines of NATO, and the US. The research establishes that Pakistan Inter-Services Public Relations (ISPR) makes highly effective use of digital platforms to weave a homogenous national narrative, as do other military powers like NATO and the United States' own Pentagon (Kumar, 2019).

It is known that, compared with traditional media solutions, ISPR's digital approach is more youth-friendly and receptive to emotions on innovation platforms, which the study uses. The approach is multimedia-heavy and reflects "digital patriotism," a hallmark of many military campaigns in the Middle East, as identified by Elsheikh (2022). The most striking feature of ISPR's digital communication is the superb use it makes of visual appeal, bearer images, and emotional appeal by videos, music, and other presentation content, setting itself apart from traditional military communication models, which tended to

be bureaucratic, more formal, and often static. The significance of the ISPR capability to mobilize audience sympathy and its use of hashtags and imagery in contemporary narrative, which essentially represent the seminal elements underpinning transformation within a rapidly evolving media-scape.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY, PRACTICE, AND POLICY

Theoretical Implications: This article gives confidence to the existence of a specific type of Framing Theory, one that suggests national security threats are framed strategically such that fear and patriotism evoke emotional patriotic responses in order to mobilize collective action. The ISPR portrays security threats as existential dangers to national unity and survival, thus creating urgency and solidarity in the public mind. The study also confirms that the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), in which organizations employ various strategies to handle crises and public opinion, is correct. In crisis, perhaps "corrective" and even "bolstering" strategies work well together – use corrective measures to counter the misinformation or bolstering strategies with reminders of Pakistani successes without creating complete denial.

Practical Implications: For military communication agencies in developing countries, this research recommends that these agencies follow ISPR's model to create public trust and fight back against disinformation. Using digital platforms and multimedia content, ISPR has been able to keep the public in the loop, which is an example useful for other nations that are having similar security challenges. Similarly, the strategic nature in which multimedia integrates with emotions also underlines the vitality of multimedia use in digital crisis communication as a whole and especially its advantages to foster emotional engagement and real-time updates. Use of culturally significant symbols such as national songs or visuals from military operations furthers the effectiveness of these strategies in engaging citizens.

Policy Implications: The study also suggests the importance of media transparency and how a delicate balance between state-controlled narratives can influence public trust. While national security agencies like the ISPR need to regulate information, there must be more transparent criteria regarding whether digital content crosses the line from public interest messaging into state propaganda. Additionally, the study points to the potential benefits of civil-military collaboration in enhancing democratic communication, particularly in times of crisis. Improved collaboration between military bodies and civilian media outlets could foster more transparent and accurate communication, ensuring the public is well-informed without undermining democratic values.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study, however, can contribute a great deal to the understanding of ISPR's digital media strategies; it is still necessary to consider limitations. Secondly, not all internal strategy documents created by ISPR were handed over to us, so we did not gain full access to their workings and a more institutional perspective on how decisions are made. Secondly, despite efforts, the study was not able to incorporate interviews with ISPR officials — interviews remained pending at the time of writing, which limited prior access to first-hand insights on those who implemented ISPR digital communication strategies.

As such, the study focused on digital media platforms, so it is difficult to get a comprehensive view of normal mass media strategies or broadcast communication internationally, which could have added to holistically understanding ISPR. Additionally, while the study compared the foreign military institutions in theory, in practice, there are few complete empirical data available for comparison due to access constraints and resource availability from other countries.

While limited by time and resources, this study gives new insights into how the Pakistani military uses digital media for communication and tells us how defence professionals in the nuclear age should communicate during crises.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the modern era, ISPR needs to improve its digital media infrastructure (including AI tools for real-time monitoring of misinformation and sentiment analysis), be much more responsive in dozens of languages during crises, ensuring timely & correct communication. To avoid a situation like this happening again, an up-to-date and transparent social media policy should be put in place that outlines how sensitive content is managed, and ways to interact with the public in a crisis, as well as guidelines for when working with media outlet.

To improve crisis communication, ISPR needs also to craft protocols to neutralize fake news by authentic visuals side by side with real-time updates. This will help ISPR to improve its communication strategies further, ensuring transparency and credibility by involving independent media and academia. Training ISPR personnel in digital communication, crisis management, and ethical considerations on a perpetual basis will benefit the message delivery and audience engagement.

ISPR should be open to public, media feedback. In fact introduction of feedback mechanisms on public and media input would not only improve ISPR communication and set right the gaps. ISPR must ensure the highest level of national security priority, and at the same time, should transparently conduct activities that make sure to repose trust, not to create a perception of propaganda. A comparison with international best practices will allow the formulation of appropriate benchmarks for evaluating the strategies used by ISPR in a digital age. Finally, the authors suggest that an ethical framework needs to be created to strike a balance between controlling information and upholding digital media practices based on citizen rights, placing ISPR among other countries with transparency.

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