



PIPS Policy Brief Counter-Violent Extremism

Working Group 7

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Media Engagement Programs

Summary

- This brief summarizes the findings of the seventh working group's meeting on Counter-Violent Extremism (CVE), which explored how media can be engaged in CVE programs so that it neither glorifies extremists nor propagates radicalizing messages.
- The rise of militancy went parallel to proliferation of media. Media can play a significant role in reducing the appeal of violent extremist ideologies.
- The group also discussed so-called "militant media", asking to regulate it.
- The trend of "fake news", factually-incorrect news, and their readily acceptance by many is indicative of the trend of rising extremism.
- The media-regulatory body PEMRA is bound to follow certain legal requirements, which, if met, can properly, help curb extremism. For example, every channel entering into license is bound to dedicate 10% of the content to public sector; such public sector messages shall be shaped against extremism.
- Entertainment industry often creates and/or supports stereotypes of non-Muslims.
- Members called for strengthening monitoring of entertainment programs, and also highlighted the need to sensitize script-writers.
- Participants underscored the need for maintaining professional standards in the field of journalism.
- Part of the reason why media propagate hate speech is because of the way media industry is set up. Responsive to ratings, media has to cater to what sells.

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Background

On April 24, 2017, Pak Institute for Peace Studies (PIPS) convened meeting of the eighth working group on Counter-Violent Extremism (CVE), exploring how media can be engaged so that they do not print/broadcast radicalizing content.

This was the seventh in a series of 10 planned meetings on CVE; below are summaries of the previous sessions:

- The first working group, which met on March 20, 2017, deliberated about the mechanism for shaping a religion-based narrative that counters those of extremists.
- The second group, which met on March 27, 2017, discussed the mechanism for reintegrating militants willing to shun violence and denounce *takfeer* (the practice of declaring fellow Muslims out of creed of Islam).
- The third group, meeting on April 3, 2017, pondered upon the need for a national dialogue to address critical politico-philosophical issues in the country, especially those producing extremism, and whether a revised social contract could provide answers.
- The fourth group, which met on April 10, 2017, discussed the implementing mechanism of National Action Plan, the country's counter-terror plan announced in January 2015.
- The fifth working group, meeting on April 17, 2017, brainstormed as to how extremism revolves around lack of equal status and physical services to all citizens. The group observed that on the one hand, areas excluded from the mainstream provide space to violent extremists, on the other hand, they often target religious minorities, an excluded group.
- The sixth working group, meeting on April 18, 2017, exploring the way youth are being radicalized in the country, and what can be done in the first place that they don't fall for extremist provocations.

The themes of these working-group meetings are largely driven from the CVE model PIPS proposed in 2016. A group of scholars, experts, and practitioners had, in a series of meetings, brainstormed over different components of a Pakistan-specific CVE model, one of them being engaging the youth.

The meeting was convened to orient media in ways extremists thoughts do not propagate out of the media. Noticeably, extremist thoughts are often conveyed through print and broadcast media and in recent times, through cyber spaces. Even extremists are at times able to convey their messages, gaining support base, and young militants are recruited directly on cyber spaces. Meanwhile, entertainment programs in the electronic media are also known for stereotyping non-Muslims, thereby contributing in radicalizing its viewers. At the same time, attempts to regulate media to check militancy risk fear of infringing on civil liberties. The group discussed the way out.

Key considerations

- The group understood the critical role of media in propagating and, thereby, curbing extremist content.

Interestingly, it appeared as if rise of militancy went parallel to proliferation of media in Pakistan. Extremists were the first to use latest technology of their times. In the 1990s, messages of militant groups like Al-Qaeda were sold in audio-cassettes. The influx of private media in 2000s also saw the wider spread of extremist messages.

At times, the state's own duplicitous policy is reflected in how media portrays different terrorist attacks. While the Pakistani media condemn attacks inside Pakistan, some Urdu outlets often glorify similar attacks in Afghanistan as "*fidayeen*" (sacrificial) in nature, implicitly highlighting the "Taliban's success". Media should ask critically, if the Taliban get successful in Afghanistan, why they not be successful in Pakistan? Such critique is often missing, one said.

Media can even curb extremist tendencies. If by no other means, by openly condemning militant attacks, media can help eliminate environment of fear.

A member shared that when social and mainstream media started showing that Mashaal Khan, a student lynched over blasphemy allegation by fellow students in Mardan, was wrongly killed, the entire picture started to alter. Media, it was advised, should show success stories or role models too, no matter from which background.

- Members of the group debated the interplay between media and society.

Some argued it is not the media to be blamed, but the society. Media is merely a mirror. At times, media tend to relay what people want to see or read. In this context, a reader has the editorial policy; if the entire society has sympathies for extremists and violent radicals, blaming media is wrong. But others disagreed,

arguing while society has its problems, media tends to exaggerate them. Media are also opinion makers, a role that is rarely highlighted.

All in all, they agreed that media-society relation is a two-way street; the two affect each other.

- Even if the subject being talked about is not militant outfits, still, some media coverage tends to radicalize people's behavior. For instance, it asks people to take action, glorify those who take law in their hand, denounce the entire system as corrupt or flawed, among other things. Even day-to-day political contests are presented in Islamic terminologies. Such messages serve the militants' purpose.

One participant argued that controversial developments in the region and world do affect viewers in Pakistan.

- Many members attributed the criticism at media, in relaying controversial content, to the dynamics of media industry. Media is an industry and like any industry it caters to ratings. That is why it tends to show issues in a stereotypical fashion because that attracts the people. Because electronic media is largely based in urban areas, which have developed their own religious sensitivities including in terms of radicalism, the content is similar too. This is especially true for entertainment industry.

Media personnel also get influenced by the jihadis, another participant said. Those who are banned are invited as guests in evening shows, where they try to strike a chord with audience. Why so, especially if the state says it is confronting militancy? Even spokespersons of extremist outfits are now into the reporting field; they get these jobs because they have access to the outfits, enabling them to conduct interviews. At times, non-serious scholars are invited.

- Members stressed upon the need for maintaining professional standards in the field of journalism, at all level, starting from universities all the way to the newsroom. They suggested that journalists be sensitized against extremism, and tools like style guides be produced.

Members wondered if media have shaped any editorial policy in this regard. Unless that is known, it cannot be known for sure how the content emanating from particular outlet cannot be stopped or ignored.

One participant called for inculcating reading habit among journalists. Nothing is stopping them from reading books.

- Members noted that the debate on the media regulation to check extremism largely discusses current affairs shows, to the complete denial of entertainment programs. This is despite the fact that even today drama is the main source of entertainment in the country, one said.

Entertainment industry often stereotypes non-Muslims. At the same time, religious content is increasing on dramas, thereby squeezing the space for non-Muslims.

Members called for strengthening monitoring of entertainment programs, especially sensitizing script writers.

State-run entertainment channel was particularly pointed out as brainwashing people with a particular viewpoint. In the old days, a member shared, a drama once showing a Hindu pandit as supporting Kashmiri freedom movement, was objected to; later on, the character of pandit was altogether removed.

- The group also discussed the media of the militants or the militant media. One member, recalling analysis of the militant media, shared their media have clear editorial policy; their outreach is limited but impactful, some having circulation of 20,000 copies. Their content is often full of verbosity, but even arguments are presented in emotional, sensational language. It was asked if such media can also be regulated.
- The group lamented that regional media is not as vibrant as Urdu newspaper; investing in those outlets can also steer people away from external radicalizing thoughts toward indigenous ideas resistant to militancy.
- When it comes to the electronic media, the group shared the media-regulatory body, or Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), is bound to follow certain legal requirements, which, if met, can properly, help curb extremism. According to PEMRA's rules, every channel entering into license is bound to dedicate 10% of the content to public sector; such public sector messages shall be shaped against extremism. Similarly, channels can be monitored against the veracity of the news they broadcast. Such monitoring is critical in the current context. All in all, these guidelines should be followed.

The group also discussed how different age groups are denied programs of their age. Members recommended that PEMRA allocate dedicated timeslots to different age groups, especially children and young people.

The trend of “fake news” is indicative of the trend of rising extremism. This can be checked too, including by PEMRA which has some monitoring mechanism too.

The 10% time TV channels are to show for public interest, be directed against extremism, some suggested.

A PEMRA representative said the authority’s decisions are often challenged in the court; there are channels operating on stay orders. Questions are then asked from PEMRA. Even now, 500 actions are being taken stay order now.

- As to the radicalizing content on the internet, the group was told that a law has been passed that bans all sorts of criminal activities on the internet. The bill is hailed by the government, but digital rights activists fear part of the bill can be invoked to infringe civil liberties. To resolve differences, the group discussed that now that the law has been enacted, efforts can be made at laying down clear-cut definitions of what constitute hate speech. Members suggested that the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA), which regulates internet, shall secure online spaces to curb provocative statements.
- Members noted that while a law for digital media is passed, its implementing mechanism is missing. “Who will stop hate speech?,” one participant asked, sharing that PTA doesn’t have the capacity.

The group was told that PTA blocks three types of content: anti-religious, anti-social, and anti-state. The system is complaint-based. Content removed online in Pakistan does not get removed from the country. The content stays there, but is not accessible to web surfers in Pakistan. Reposting and sharing of content is entirely different issue. Companies like YouTube and Facebook remove material when presented with legal justifications.



Table: Working table on recommendations and implementation mechanism on “Media engagement programs”:

	Recommendations	Implementation mechanism
Regulation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Religious publications • Entertainment • News and current affairs shows • Licensing/declaration policy review • Convergence of different media platforms • Regulating rating mechanism • Monitoring of FM radio stations • Local newspapers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitoring public sector content in the media, already committed under PEMRA Rules • Release annual credibility report, as committed under PEMRA rules • PEMRA shall ensure implementation of its own rules with regards to checking facts, issuing licenses, among other things. • PEMRA shall provide for timeslots to different age groups esp. children • Diversity in newsroom be upheld
Training and Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pressure groups • Media along with Civil society lead the trainings • Reporters, opinion makers, writers, news anchor, anchors be trained • Academia and media interaction be enhanced • Style book/counter-argument material be developed • Parliamentary committee shall oversee media policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process and content of trainings shall be properly laid down <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Manuals be designed ○ Training of Trainers (ToTs) be carried out • Voice be raised against misuse of religion-based laws • Parliamentary committee on information; law; and human rights be engaged.
Cyber spaces governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploring the implementation status of PECA 2016 • Exploring the priority areas of PTA on curbing content, how can hate speech be fit in the priority areas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear-cut rules of what constitutes hate speech be laid down • Loopholes in the Act be explored and abolished • Prioritize monitoring against “hate speech” • PTA shall secure online spaces to curb online harassment

Professional standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Code of Ethics be laid down • Media studies curriculum in the universities be reviewed • Teachers be trained • Reading culture be promoted • Freedom to think, in universities, be encouraged • Learn from best practices • Watch dogs shall monitor content, media persons • Media shall stop glorifying militants • Editorial policy be clarified • Exploring mechanism to limit advertisements in the news pages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum reform be carried out: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Indigenous literature be incorporated ○ Teachers be trained • Watch dogs shall help dig out facts • Fact-checking mechanism shall be introduced in different media houses • Invest in journalism schools • Monitor the progress of editorial committees
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Recommendations

- PEMRA should ensure its directives are properly implemented.
 - The legal requirements, under which any TV channel gets license from PEMRA, shall be completely implemented.
 - Media watchdogs shall monitor if the laws are properly implemented or not.
- Media watchdogs shall identify loopholes in existing laws of PEMRA that provide space for hate speech to be propagated.
- PEMRA allocate dedicated timeslots to different age groups, especially children and young people.
- To counter online radicalization, engage FIA cyber wing:
 - Online campaign against intolerance and discrimination be launched.
 - Online communities moderating diverse opinions be established.
- Monitoring of entertainment programs, shall be strengthened.
 - Scriptwriters shall be sensitized.
- Efforts can be made at laying down clear-cut definitions of what constitute hate speech.
- Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) shall secure online spaces to curb provocative statements.
- Religious publications shall be regulated too.
- Journalists should maintain professional standards while reporting and making opinion.

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