Brexit to Balakot, what is fuelling the anger in you and who is responsible

Deepanshu Mohan, March 07, 2019

There is something common in Pulwama, Balakot and Brexit vote. Social theorists call it ‘contagious media narrative’. To what extent do public debates shaped by the media affect social, political or economic tensions within a short time period? This is a timely question in the context of events seen during the Brexit campaign and more recently in India after the attack in Pulwama and the Indian Air Force air strikes in response on Balakot in Pakistan.

There has been a ceaseless display of slogan shouting by few war-mongering Indians across social media handles and in television news studios. The 24/7 televised display of ‘arm-chair jingoism’, as reported by Foreign Policy, glorified war for a generation of Indians with little or no lived experience of a war or conflict-zone. Anyone who offered insights that countered the voices giving fuel to such war-drumming sounds was labelled “anti-national”.

If one tuned into Republic TV or Times Now for their 9pm shows The Debate and The Newshour, respectively, they would have found there was hardly any report on the state of the conflict itself; rather, the channels’ commander-in-chiefs spent a couple of minutes informing the audience about the conflict while switching promptly to a panel discussion categorising the panelists in various groups. In Republic TV, one could find panelists in groups titled as “Pak Will Pay” lobby, “Govt. To Blame” lobby, “Just Lip Service” lobby.

“We want revenge... not condemnation... It is time for blood...,” shouted Republic TV’s anchor-host Arnab Goswami, just a day after the Pulwama
attack. Similar choreographed shouting-matches were seen on some of the other televised channels like ABP News, Aaj Tak, India Today and CNN News18. It was almost as if Arnab Goswami set a template for other channels.

As reported by Salil Tripathi, in a recent article in The Caravan, “... Some anchors, such as ZEE News’s Sudhir Chaudhary and Network 18’s Anand Narasimhan took to Twitter to parrot a slogan popularised by the recent Bollywood film *Uri*, which has since been employed by the Bharatiya Janata Party’s politicians — “How’s the josh?”... The official account for the channel Times posted a tweet about “mazboot Bharat” — strong India — taking on “naya Pakistan” — new Pakistan, which the channel’s editor-in-chief Rahul Shivshankar retweeted...”

Hashtags like #AvengePulwama #IndiaStrikes #PakFakeClaims were dominating Twitter handles for days. At the same time, Mita Santra, the wife of a slain CRPF soldier, was trolled online for questioning the Indian government’s failure to prevent the Pulwama attack, and advocating for a peaceful dialogue with Pakistan to resolve the Kashmir issue.

This was in addition to the anti-Kashmiri slogans played on by news channels shortly after the Pulwama attack, which fed into some incidents against Kashmiri students. Even post the surgical strikes in September 2016, The Caravan magazine carried a series of reports on how mainstream Indian media was almost “forcing the government into a war with Pakistan” for political gains.

None of the ranting television-news anchors exhibited any critical display of news or its content, as demanded by their profession. Despite their antics, the conduct of most journalists severely eroded whatsoever credibility they previously held.
Contagious media narratives

Scottish philosopher David Hume (1742) once said that while some may manage to escape contagious ideas, “the multitude will certainly be seized by the common affection, and be governed by it in all their actions.”

In economic history, there is enough evidence to indicate that during times of a downturn in economic activity, projections of economic recessions are enhanced, leading to citizens spending less, or in reducing their aggregate demand, culminating in an actual recession. Stock market crashes witness such effects of herd-behaviour — as part of speculation and rumours — all the time.

Recent years show how narratives floating around the electoral rise of US President Donald Trump (*Making America Great Again*) and Brexit (*Leaving the EU*) are classic demonstrations of how the media’s own visible hand pushed individuals and groups to respond, and subsequently changed their economic and social behaviour in a relatively short span of time.

For Brexit, a narrative-sensitive analysis shows how citizen groups got mobilised because of the contagious media (and social media) debates over immigration and refugee crisis since 2015.

They produced a rhetorical axis along which social behaviour got aligned. These often thrive on an ‘us versus them’ binary of polar identities.

Understanding the extent to which narratives shape citizen-behaviour, discussions on social media regulations have proliferated in the UK and other countries in Europe and the US (after Trump’s election victory).

UK’s Ofcom presented a detailed blueprint for social media regulations (with lessons from Germany and Australia), suggesting the need for an independent information commission that can coordinate and cooperate with social media companies and regulators to ensure that companies are
incentivised for removing any harmful content (hate speech, fake news etc.) within the shortest span of time from the internet, or penalised at the failure to do so.

A similar regulatory proposal is worth a discussion in the Indian scenario as well, where social media platforms (and the electronic media) can be required to exercise involuntary constraints on offensive content online.

With limited self-restraint, one quite often observes how the mainstream Indian media’s quest to account for known causes to events in an extremely competitive news business environment creates a blur between fact and fiction. The callous reporting by news outlets during the Aarushi-Hemraj murder case in 2008, which claimed how “Aarushi sought comfort in an affair with Hemraj, and how her father (Rajesh Talwar) was having an extra-marital affair..” contributed to the demonisation of the Talwars by the media.

In the case of America, most recent American wars had trigger events – the bombardment of Fort Summer, the sinking of the battleship in Maine, the attack on Pearl Harbor, the invasion of Kuwait. But none of the wars (following these events) occurred in a narrative-vacuum space. As political scientist Melvin Dubnick (2006) argues, wars in America are well paved “materially, politically and psychologically” over an extended period of time, and the media plays a central role in this.

But, why do individuals respond to such contagious narratives the way they do? One possible way to explain such behaviour, as discussed by Ernst Fehr and Simon Gachter (2000), is to see how the human mind seems to have an in-built interest in beliefs and social preferences that are built around perceived plots of others. The American Psychiatric Association says this amplifies incidences of “paranoid personality disorder”, now afflicting 2.3% to 4.4% of the US adult population. Economists George Akerlof and Rachel Kranton (2011) too argue how contagious narratives are deeply related with issues of identity that call for a temporary abandoning of shared identities.
In India, we need more robust studies to analyse the psycho-social effects of the media contagion — particularly of the 24/7 electronic or televised mediums — on citizen-behaviour. The analysis is especially relevant in the times of TV, WhatsApp and fake news. An objective analysis on India’s recent escalated response to Pakistan or vice-versa can be understood only by recognising the fermented forms of war-mongering tactics. Simplistic analysis is offered about how this may impact voting preferences, but something deeper and long-term is at stake here and warrants careful analysis and scrutiny.

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