Summary

The United Nations has recently announced that international donors have pledged $1 billion to provide education to millions of children in Pakistan. Nearly 25 million children are currently out of school in Pakistan, and about seven million of these children have yet to receive primary schooling, according to a recent report prepared by Society for the Protection of the Rights of the Child (SPARC). Education in Pakistan has long been in a state of crisis. After Musharraf’s regime, Pakistan resumed elections in 2008, and media, judiciary and other democratic institutions have strengthened since then. What does the narrative of education look like in current times, and what kind of discourse underlies the education narrative? These are the questions that we explore in this inquiry.

Methodology

In order to understand the narrative of education in Pakistan, we employed unsupervised learning algorithm on the text corpus provided by Alif Ailaan, an education advocacy group in Pakistan. The corpus comprises education stories curated from Pakistani media sources— including Dawn, The Express Tribune, Nation, The News and Pakistan Today— since Feb. 2013. The purpose of using unsupervised learning algorithm was to delineate underlying topical themes that are present in the text corpus.

The topical themes that constitute a discourse do not exist by themselves, rather they are ‘produced’ by a specific set of actors and power structures. Hence, the presence of a discourse is expected to be linked with political and social structures that are producing a certain kind of conversation.

We extracted underlying topics and corresponding keywords using the Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) model on a given text corpus. The intuition behind our algorithm (see Figure 1) is that documents exhibit multiple topics. For instance, in a single document,
‘Malala’, ‘woman’ and ‘education’ are lumped together as one topic, and ‘federal’, ‘funding’ and ‘government’ are grouped into another topic. Using this technique we extracted keywords associated with five topics that our algorithm discovers.

Figure 1 Blei, David M. "Probabilistic topic models." Communications of the ACM 55.4 (2012): 77-84.

Our methodology aimed to extract semantically rich insights that extract data organized in a topical manner. This is particularly relevant for understanding text as a discourse. At the core of discourse analysis lie two questions: 1) how are certain topics represented in these texts and 2) what is the nature of discussion about a certain issue?

Michel Foucault in his book “Archaeology of Knowledge” described discourse as “the general domain of all statements sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements.” We assume that a media corpus is structured along similar lines.

The extraction of topics using unsupervised algorithm shows how the general topic of “education” is represented in the given media corpus. It shows how the conversation on “education” takes place in media and in what context. The advantage of using this approach is that it brings into front the underlying representation of the discourse structure. Our methodology is essentially a meta-analysis of the media corpus for detecting the recurrent topics that are grouped in clusters of themes.
Assumptions and Caveats

First, while it is difficult to establish concrete and specific correlations between the media discourse and the actualities on the state of education in Pakistan due to the heuristic nature of this inquiry, it is nevertheless important to see media discourse as an indicator of these actualities. These findings could be used as starting point for understanding the narrative of education in Pakistan.

Second, this corpus only represents textual data from English news sources. An Urdu corpus could very well have a completely different discourse structure.
Findings

We extracted five topical spaces using our unsupervised learning algorithm. Below (Figure 2) is a bubble graph of the entire topical space. Each bubble represents proportional representation of a keyword in a topical cluster, which is differentiated by color.
The topical space comprises five distinct clusters, which we label according to specific semantic relations. We label these clusters after we have extracted the topical permutations. Our five topic labels are as follows:

1) Federal Government & Education
2) Higher Education
3) Primary Education
4) Malala
5) Provinces & Education

These topics represent the main themes in the education discourse in Pakistan. The conspicuous presence of the term “school” in three clusters suggests that the narrative of education in Pakistan revolves primarily around basic or primary education. In the next section we will analyze each topic space separately.
Topic 1: Federal Government & Education

We have labeled the first topic as “Federal Government & Education” (Figure 3) because it loosely exhibits the discourse surrounding federal policies and issues on education in the form of keywords like ‘federal,’ ‘administration,’ ‘CADD,’ and ‘FDE’. Both Capital Administration and Development Division (CADD) and Federal Directorate of Education (FDE) are constitutional bodies that are responsible for federal functions on education.
The discourse comprises stories on subjects ranging from administrative malpractices to federal initiatives to crises that the federal government is facing. We will briefly discuss some of these stories.

A story, titled “Curriculum authority to stay provincial,” discusses the issue of uniform curricula and highlights the tension between the federal and provincial governments.

Another story, titled “Unjustified austerity: Of tight belts and penniless health, education systems,” discusses the issue of budget cuts for 424 educational primary and postgraduate institutions that FDE is supervising. Another story, titled “25,000 students to be admitted to capital’s schools,” reports that FDE decided to admit 25,000 students in a campaign drive.

The story “Federal Govt To Launch Laptops Scheme” reports on the decision of federal government to launch “free-of-cost distribution of 100,000 laptops among the deserving students of federal educational institutions.”

An opinion piece titled “Heard of any more education policies lately?” questions the assumptions behind federal government’s drive to enroll six million children between the ages of five and nine. The author of the opinion piece argues that the National Plan of Action 2013-2016 “has been announced without any prior ground assessment of the schools.”

The story “Report calls for reallocation of education budget” discusses that findings of the report “Public Financing of Education in Pakistan,” which claims that “although a federal budget of Rs3,985 billion was announced for the financial year 2013-14, only Rs80 billion was allocated for education.” The report further stressed that the government was spending only 1.9 per cent of GDP on education.

This discourse, as the above stories suggest, vacillates between reports concerning state initiatives and articles on state failures. The media corpus indicates a discourse that is produced by a complex network of system of educational needs and federal administrative organizations.
Topic 2: Higher Education

We have labeled the second cluster as “Higher Education” (Figure 4) since it contains terms like ‘university’, ‘international’, ‘technology’, ‘faculty’, ‘HEC’, and ‘science’ which are characteristic of higher education in Pakistan.
The Higher Education Commission of Pakistan (‘HEC’) is a constitutionally established institution that drives higher education efforts in Pakistan.

We will briefly discuss some of the stories in the “Higher Education” topic.

In a story, titled “HEC takes steps to improve education,” HEC’s planned evaluation of 300 affiliations is discussed in the context of minimum quality standards.

In another story, titled “Development linked to quality education,” Dr Attaur Rehman, former HEC chairman, reported that HEC has awarded 11,000 scholarships to deserving students.

In another story, an HEC official claimed that “by 2018, Pakistan will cross Singapore, Hong Kong and Thailand in terms of number of research papers published every year.”

In a story on the tenth anniversary of Sarhad University of Science and Information Technology, a university official noted that half of the total 250 faculty members are PhD scholars.

One story highlighted serious administration problems that some higher education institutions are facing. The story, titled “Key educational institutions working without permanent heads in Pakistan,” reported that the incumbent government “failed to appoint permanent heads in several key educational institutions,” including HEC, Federal Urdu Dictionary Board, Allama Iqbal Open University (AIOU), Quaid-e-Azam University (QAU) and International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI).

The “Higher Education” discourse reflects a national-level drive focusing on post-secondary education. Overall, the presence of this cluster in the mainstream discourse is a healthy sign for Pakistan. It indicates that a conversation is taking place on the issue of higher education in Pakistan. In addition, the role of HEC has been instrumental in producing this discourse.
Topic 3: Primary Education

We have labeled the third cluster “Primary Education” (Figure 5) because of terms like ‘child’, ‘primary’, ‘enrollment’, ‘school’, ‘literacy’, ‘teacher’, and ‘english’. Last year, successful primary enrollment drives took place at provincial level in Pakistan to register out-of-school children in public schools.

Primary education is a huge concern for Pakistan. The presence of primary education concerns indicates an almost-desperate need in this sector in Pakistan. We will discuss some of the stores that highlight these concerns.
An education consultant reporting on the state of education in Pakistan reported that “25 million children are still out of school and the literacy rate continues to be static.”

A story titled “Untrue to the word: Of policies that say so much yet do little,” emphasized the gap between government promises and policies. In the story, state minister is reported to have “accepted on several occasions that Pakistan will not be able to meet the goal of achieving Universal Primary Education of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).”

Another story underscored the fact that the non-achievement of primary education goals is because of “low enrollment rate coupled with very low retention rate.”

One story reporting on the “Annual Status of Education Report 2013” stated that “8.3 per cent children in the 6 to 10 age bracket have never been enrolled in schools.” At the same time, the story reported that School Education Department (SED), a provincial level government organization, claimed that it will achieve 100 percent admission of students in the 5 to 9 age bracket by 2015.

In a story reporting on a conference on education, Professor Dr. Saeeda Asadullah, President Council of Social Sciences, said that secondary and primary education in Pakistan are ignored at the expense of higher education.

One story cited a global report that said that Pakistan’s illiteracy rate was 79 percent in 2012-2013, placing it at number 180 in the list of 221 countries.

In another story, titled “Illiteracy in Pakistan,” the author opined that “the state alone cannot be held responsible for low literacy in the country.” The author argued that civil society and the elite class should also take the responsibility of educating one child per family.

The launch of enrolment drives in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa generated many reports on the educational targets.

The discourse on “Primary Education” is replete with stories underscoring the issue of education crisis particularly in the primary education sector. At the same time, the launch of enrolments drives indicates that provincial governments have started to respond to the education emergency in Pakistan.
Topic 4: Malala

The fourth cluster of topics (Figure 6), which we have labeled “Malala,” is the most telling one. Malala became “the spokesperson for a generation of girls” after being shot in the head by Taliban. Almost half of rural young women in Pakistan have never attended school, according to a 2012-2013 UNESCO report. The name “Malala” is the only personal name that appears in the topical space on education in Pakistan. This cluster of words is also marked by tension between heterogeneous discourses in Pakistan including Talibanization, religion, security, peace, rights, and gender, highlighting the disruptive power of the “Malala” narrative on the discourses around education.
Malala becomes one of the main interlocutors through whom the conversation on education takes place from international and national perspectives. Media stories on Malala could be characterized as disruptive because her personal narrative becomes the vehicle for telling a larger story on education in Pakistan. Her narrative created a new global and local audience, which can be linked to the larger question of movement of capital in a global social market economy (donors, funding, and international development organizations like United Nations).

In the media corpus, a news story titled “Unesco launches Malala Funds-in-Trust for girls’ education” highlights several aspects of this rubric. First, the establishment of $7 million Malala funds-in-trust for girls’ education by UNESCO underscores the movement of global social market capital around the Malala narrative. Second, the issue of education as a girl’s ‘right’—articulated in the story as “human rights issue” and “rights accorded to girls in Islam”—becomes part of the national conversation around education. The ‘rights’ tradition is rooted in the Western liberal democratic tradition—not to say that it did not exist in the oriental tradition—and traces its genealogy from the “French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen” to the 1948 “Human Rights Charter.”

Malala’s narrative is a magnet for a range of competing global ideologies. It is, hence, a currency for a spectrum of ideologies including neo-liberalism, neo-colonial hegemonies and the subaltern ideology of the voiceless uneducated woman living in a post-colonial world. In the media corpus, Malala’s narrative plays out in many different channels. When a female teacher is gunned down in Khyber agency, Malala becomes a reference for the plight of girls’ education in the Khyber agency. In another story titled “Many children left behind,” Huma Yusuf, a policy analyst, contextualizes Malala as a protagonist “championing girls’ access to education.” In a story titled “Educating Girls” discussing the education of girls in Pakistan, the unfolding of Malala’s story is seen as a “ray of light” amid the moribund state of female education in Pakistan. In the opinion piece, “The neglect of education”, Talat Masood, a retired lieutenant general, calls Malala a “symbol of the struggle for the right of every child in Pakistan (and in the world) to education.”

Stories, like the ones discussed above, in the media corpus indicate the disruptive power of Malala’s narrative in shaping the agenda on education in Pakistan.
Topic 5: Provinces & Education

Lastly, the fifth cluster of topics (Figure 7) includes provinces-related terms such as ‘sindh’, ‘punjab’, ‘local’, ‘district’, ‘provincial’. We have labeled this topic as “Provinces & Education.”

![Diagram of Topic: Provinces & Education]

We will discuss some of the stories that underscore the problems that provincial governments are facing.

In the news story “Education woes,” Balochistan Education Minister Jan Mohammad Buledi said that about 5000 schools in Balochistan are “shelter-less and single-teacher schools.”
In a story on the state of education in Sindh it was reported that half of Sindh children aged between 5 and 16 remain out of schools.

In a story, titled “Call for immediate attention to set things right in education sector,” it is reported that “40,000 government schools in Punjab were short of basic infrastructure” and “around 6.5 million children did not go to schools.”

In a news report on ghost schools in Pakistan, it was reported that Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) had the most number of ghost schools, with 345 such institutions, followed by Punjab, with 276 ghost schools.

On a positive note, one story reported that primary net enrolment was “estimated to increase by 6 to 7 per cent annually” across all provinces in the National Plan of Action 2013-16.

The topical space “Provinces & Education” indicated that at the provincial level primary education was the main subject of media discourse.
Comparison with India

We used Harvard Berkman Center’s Media Cloud to extract top 100 key terms, weighted equally, related to education in India using 2013 and 2014 media articles from NDTV.com, Hindustan Times, Times of India, and The Hindu. In the Indian corpus (Figure 8) several key terms related to education and economics stand out. These include terms like ‘microsoft’, ‘outsourced’, ‘solutions’, ‘innovative’, ‘digital’, ‘visa’, ‘space’, ‘google’, ‘global’, and ‘economic.’ This shows that one aspect of education discourse in India is centered on global market/economic realities. In addition, it shows that in Pakistan the discourse on education lacks market/economic formalization.

Figure 8 Media Cloud query on India, weighted equally
Conclusions

Key themes:

As mentioned earlier, while it is difficult to establish concrete and specific correlations between the media discourse and the actualities on the state of education in Pakistan, it is nevertheless important to see media discourse as an indicator of these actualities.

In contrast to the media queries from India’s example, there is an absence of a global economic and market element in the discourse on education in Pakistan. In other words, the media corpus representation suggests a social demand— which could very well be rooted in the demand for jobs and livelihood— rather than an economic demand for education at state level. There is of course a push for engineering education around innovation and entrepreneurship in Pakistan but it has not produced a strong media discourse yet.

Our findings also indicate, as mentioned earlier, the disruptive power of Malala’s narrative in shaping the agenda on education in Pakistan.

The presence of state-related organizational structure in the media corpus—ranging from federal bodies to local bodies, and including constitutional bodies like CADD and HEC—suggests a permeation of state interest in education. Indirectly, we can also see the presence of state-related organizational structure in the media corpus as an indicator of state health because it is ‘produced’ by a specific set of actors and power structures.

If we were to frame this discourse in post-colonial terms, we can certainly argue that the discourse structure is represented entirely in terms of a modern state. Although Pakistan has inherited a “ready-made European modern state,” there is a strong desire for a juridical-legal-social Islamic normative state in Pakistan. In the case of education, we don’t see this theme playing out in the discourse on education. There is little in the discourse the highlights education in terms of ‘teleological’ foundations of education in Islam. On the other hand, when Islam is discussed in the discourse, it is discussed either in a subjunctive context (Islamic injunctions in terms of ‘rights’) or in a condemnable reactionary context (Talibans).

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1 The Impossible State: Islam, Politics, and Modernity's Moral Predicament, Wael Hallaq
Trends and Timeline:

In the chart below (Figure 9) we show a timeline representation of the news stories curated in the Alif Ailaan corpus. Malala gave her first speech at the United Nations in July 2013; an increase in the number of stories on education in July could be related to Malala’s speech. Similarly, spikes in Aug. 2013 and Sept. 2013 could be explained by enrolment drives in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunka provinces. These campaigns aimed at enrolling out-of-school children in public schools. Finally, the spike in Feb. 2014 could be related to the launch of Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) report, which highlighted Pakistan’s education crisis and made headlines in national newspapers. An in-depth analysis of these correlations is needed to provide more concrete insights on these trends.

![Figure 9 Timeline](image)

Epilogue:

In summary, our preliminary findings suggest that the current narrative of education in Pakistani media landscape is rich and diverse, and covers the entire gamut of concerns around education crisis. The topics we discovered suggest that the media attention on education is produced by an active state of affairs.