The Conversational Mapping of the Public Sphere of Pakistan

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Abstract

The main purpose of the study was to map the conversation patterns of the citizens from various strata of society. The data of conversations about eight topics at six loci were collected from a sample of 338 citizens from five major cities of Pakistan: Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar, Rawalpindi, and Islamabad through a questionnaire. The data of the study provide basic conversational trends of the citizens of Pakistan and the frequently discussed topics by them. It also reflects on relationship between the topics of discussion with the loci. Findings of the study showed that law and order and inflation are the most discussed topics while the topics related to political issues turned out to be one of the least discussed.

Keywords: Conversational Map; Citizens of Pakistan, Public sphere

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Introduction

In democratic societies people discuss their issues and problems of common concern. Such discussions add to collective wisdom of the people. These conversations will have substantive consequences on the social and political system (Fligstein, 2008).

Theorists agree that the process of opinion formation of the citizens depends upon õconversations and discussionsö among the citizens that õcarefully examine a problem and a range of solutions through an open, inclusive exchangeö (Gastil, 2008, pp. xi-xii).People discuss and deliberate about their problems and issues, and try to reach to some kind of solution and consensus. This form of problem- solving or decision-making is certainly not based upon the aggregate of pre-existing opinions and preferences (Steenbergen, Bächtiger, Spörndli, & Steiner, 2003). Such consensus is reached by dialogue and discussion between the deliberators, considering all dissenting and conflicting arguments, re-evaluating individual opinions and preferences, and ultimately agreeing on a mutual solution acceptable to all.

Public sphere is not an institution or an organization but rather can be understood as õa network for communicating information and point of views i.e. opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudesö (Habermas, 1996, p. 359), where, õthe streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they conjoin into bundles of topical specified public opinionsö (p. 360).

McAfee (2008) while stressing the importance of conversation among the citizens argues that, õfor public sphere to arise, public talk needs to occur throughout the societyö (p. 8). Whenever people communicate through phone or internet or through newspapers in the pages of letters to the editor or free time chit chat; in a street demonstration or through television talk show they form a public sphere. There would be no public sphere without people interacting through talking, writing, expressing, demonstrating; because it is nothing else than these occurrences of conversation and expression.

The public sphere lies between political system i.e. governments, and private sphere and essentially outside the governmental control. People join it as private persons and participate in public deliberations voluntarily, without any obligation, predetermined choices or specific agenda. In this sense, the basic format of public deliberation in public sphere is õnon-purposiveö and õnon-goal-orientedö conversation. Since public sphere refers to a social space rather than a physical space,

any space can be a public sphere if people freely get together and talk about public issues which include cafes, tea houses, shopping malls work places, recreational places, and religious places such mosques etc. Even a mediated space like face book, chat rooms, and blogs on the internet can form public sphere.

As public sphere is constituted by citizens engaged in public debates but cannot be identified as civil society. Public opinion is formed in the course of such debates, capable of influencing government policies. The important point is that the public opinion thus developed is not an aggregation of majority opinions but is actively created by the people (Calhoun, 1992). These collectively evolved opinions delineate public meanings and purposes, which ultimately steer a political community (McAfee, 2008).

Gamson (2001) emphasizes that in the process of participation in public sphere and deliberation the individuals are transformed into public citizens, and their abilities for judging public issues sharpen and their preferences become clear. õThe legitimacy, effectiveness, and efficiency of far reaching policiesí .. depend on public knowledge, opinion, and acceptance, more particularly on the viability of a public sphereö (Koopmans & Statham, 2010, p. 14).

The study aims to map the citizenøs conversation in the public sphere of Pakistan. The study recognizes the everyday interpersonal conversation which reflects public understanding and concerns about the issues. Keeping in view the importance of conversations in public spheres it is imperative to have a conversation map specific to Pakistan. This mapping will help in understanding various concerns of the citizens. The results of the study will provide the insight to the government policy makers to understand the public point of view. It will also help the media managers and planners to device media policies aligned with the public expectations.

Methodology

The study is a survey based. The sample of 338 respondents was drawn from various strata of the society, i.e. unskilled and semi-skilled labor, government employees, professionals, students, and housewives from the four provincial capitals and federal capital of Pakistan. The questionnaire prepared by Kim et al, (1999) consisting of 48 items regarding conversation trends with respect to various topics and loci was administered for data collection. The conversational topics were: Politics, Foreign affairs, Law & Order, Economy& Inflation, Religion, Health& Education, Personal, and Entertainment. The loci identified were: home, work place, shopping places, recreational places, on-line, and religious places, respectively.

Results and Discussions

Mean values were calculated and Paired sample t-test was applied for the mapping of conversational topics and loci. The results of the study are presented in the following table. Cell entries are mean and standard deviation. The topics and loci are arranged in the rank order, from top to down and left to right, according to the means of topics and loci.

Table 1
Conversational Topics at various loci

	Home	Work	Recreation	Shopping	On-Line	Religious	Mean
Economy & Inflation	1.35	1.14	.89	1.00	.76	.47	0.94
	0.736	.774	.800	.839	.826	.719	
Law & Order	1.23	1.15	.87	.87	.72	.53	0.90
	0.773	.783	.800	.828	.790	.759	
Religion	1.16	.98	.78	.59	.65	.77	0.82
	0.746	.739	.779	.731	.753	.838	
Health & Education	1.23	1.08	.80	.70	.63	.40	0.81
	0.743	.791	.812	.787	.776	.665	
Personal	1.09	.87	.67	.58	.74	.33	0.71
	0.793	.777	.748	.728	.810	.607	
Entertainment	0.69	.70	.64	.43	.43	.25	0.52
	0.727	.741	.769	.665	.673	.581	
Politics	0.78	.67	.46	.44	.41	.30	0.51
	0.698	.739	.689	.700	.680	.599	
Foreign affairs.	0.64	.60	.43	.45	.41	.24	0.46
	0.677	.683	.660	.693	.688	.534	
Mean	**0.879**	**0.826**	**0.725**	**0.689**	**0.672**	**0.537**	**0.26**

The mean values in the table reveals that the two most discussed topics are economy &inflation (0.94) and law &order (0.91) followed by Religion (0.82),Health &Education (0.81), and Personal affairs (0.71). Entertainment and politics are less talked about. The least discussed topic by the people turned out to be foreign affairs.

According to the mean values on loci, home and workplace are the places where people do the most conversations and discussions. While the recreational places is the next loci where people talk with each other. However, people comparatively, have less talk in shopping places and on-line. Religious places are the least preferred places to discuss various issues and concerns.

The data indicate that the people discuss economy& inflation and law & order frequently because they have major concern regarding these issues. The loci where these are discussed are home, workplace and places of leisure and recreation. The same issues form more than fifty percent of their talk at the shopping places and on-line conversation.

`   Religion and Health & Education are next frequently discussed topics. These topics are discussed mostly at the loci in the following order; home, workplace, recreational places, shopping places and on-line. Religious places are the least likely locus to discuss such issues. Personal affairs are also discussed at the loci in the same order of preference as other frequently discussed topics.

It is concluded that entertainment, politics and foreign affairs are overall least talked about but still home and workplace seems the best place even for political conversation than any other locus. Probably, the reason for home as the loci where inflation, law & order and other issues of common concern are discussed most lies in the fact people feel most comfortable in their homes and that all information and images related to various topics are provided by media including television, radio, and newspapers which instantly provoke conversations about those subjects. Work place, recreational places, and markets are the loci where people get the chance to meet strangers and acquaintances to discuss and exchange ideas. These are the places from where different viewpoints spread among the people interpersonally.

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