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'Digital Pakistan': dramas, data analytics and the remaking of a culture industry

Abstract: This paper builds on ethnographic research conducted in Karachi, Pakistan to analyse the ongoing digitalisation of Pakistani television drama distribution and production. Moreover, the paper considers the kinds of 'digital' colonisation at work in the collision of global technologies and 'traditional' broadcast functions of TV networks. I turn my attention to the ways that local interests (economic, political, religious) intersect with and exceed liberal technological frameworks being generated in global tech metropoles.

The central aim of the paper is to better understand processes and stakes of the extraction of data (and value) in this major Karachi-based culture industry. Buttressed by tools of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019), global technology firms (e.g., Alphabet, ByteDance (TikTok), Meta, and Netflix) have opened new markets, catalysed, and sustained emergent digital infrastructures that have contributed to the digitalisation of TV in Pakistan. I turn to three sets of practices in the drama industry: the use of YouTube metrics, return-path data (obtained from telecommunications companies Nayatel and PTCL), and audience metering devices (licensed from the data analytics company Kantar), to shed light on the pragmatics of producing religiously salient entertainment content during a period of significant technological shift. These developments have created not only new tools and techniques that must be interrogated, but also call for us to critically engage the new fields of discourse and practice that the Pakistani televisual world has entered and negotiates. This paper highlights these intersections of the globalising ideology of Big Data and the practices of Pakistan's leading culture industry.

Bio: Elliot is a cultural anthropologist focusing on Pakistan with research interests in media, religion, their intersections, and digital technologies/methodologies. He is currently a dual-degree PhD candidate in the Department of Anthropology and the Department of South Asia Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. He is broadly interested in the study of mediatized discourse about Islam, piety, and morality in Pakistani broadcast media productions, specifically television drama serials. His ethnographic work is situated in Karachi, Pakistan as well as in digital spaces. He connects these overlapping virtual and physical worlds by examining the interplay of media production and reception and the impacts of the Internet on shaping pious publics in South Asia. His work has been published in *Bioscope: South Asian Screen Studies*. Elliot is currently teaching in the Anthropology and Asian Studies departments at Kwantlen Polytechnic University in Surrey, Canada.