

Mediatizing Islam: social media, television dramas, and the making of pious publics in Pakistan

Research Focus: My research is concerned with understanding processes that have made piety increasingly central to Pakistani public culture. I focus on the past two decades of Pakistani television dramas' use of religion as a discursive and visual theme and analyze how audiences on social media interact with these drama subjects. Investigating this interplay of media practices – television production and social media reception – sheds light on a key trajectory that has made piety public. My project investigates the advent of the Internet in Pakistan as a significant moment in television history that helped mediatize (Agha 2011) piety. I analyze the ways that the introduction of social media reconfigured how producers of dramas depict religiosity. This nuances narratives of both a liberalizing broadcast mediascape (e.g., Zaidi 2015) and religious groups' role in intensifying piety in public life (e.g., Iqtidar 2011; Khan 2019).

During my preliminary fieldwork, this was best evidenced when Sultana Siddiqui of HumTV stated that dramas depict “things adjacent to religion” as opposed to discussing religion outright (Montpellier 2020). The notion of “religion-adjacent” highlights the industry's attempt to depict (and capitalize on) an integral dimension of social life (i.e. Islam) while avoiding censure from regulatory authorities. It also helps situate audience commentaries that perceive and articulate aspects of dramas as focussed on piety. Consequently, the project explores the tension between discordant, yet dialogic encounters with piety across spaces of production and reception.

The project moves away from a conventional approach to receptive TV audiences to consider their active roles driving new content production as they engage, circulate, and appropriate elements of dramas through digital media. Attention to social media, blogs, streaming platforms, viewer rating systems, and other technologies that mediate production, helps capture the dialogic nature between dramas and the public. Social media practices gained even more salience during the pandemic as virtual spaces are not only an object of analysis but my primary method for ethnographically engaging the processes of audience-producer feedback loops.

Award Tenure: Travel back to Karachi remains essential for completing my dissertation research. My focus during my six-week field visit will be to conduct follow-up interviews and participant observation in the industry. While remote methods have allowed for continued access to spaces where audiences negotiate dramas' pious themes, tracing this “feedback” back into drama-making practices requires ethnographic work in the production spaces where content is produced. Only in these spaces is it possible to examine the script editing, censor processes, staff meetings, set/costume design, and actual filming, as well as staff engagement with social media. As advocated by Francis Cody, methods that span digital and physical sites help “transcend a lingering impasse between studies of production and those of reception” (2011:43) by closely examining social practices that mediate communication.

Contribution: The project's anthropological attention to media and Islam pushes against received logics of progressively evolving media, public spheres, and their secularizing effect. As Brian Larkin (2014) has remarked, religious studies and media theory are too often considered distinct frameworks for analysing broader social configurations. My focus on dramas' representations of Islam and audiences' digital mediations of these themes confronts an emphasis on elite religious authority in the study of Islam in Pakistan, and more broadly. It points to popular participation in the making of publics through the ratifying, negotiating, and subverting of socio-religious constructs. This also pushes media scholarship to account for Global South views of the remediating affordances of new media (Bolter and Grusin 1999) by closely examining media practices in a South Asian Muslim context. Finally, building on debates about “everyday Islam” (e.g., Fadil and Fernando 2015) this project demonstrates how religiosity is articulated in diverse registers of modernity, piety, aspiration, and leisure adding to and complicating existing work on religion in Pakistan (e.g., Khan 2012; Maqsood 2017). My attention to the ways that producers and viewers comprehend discursive and visual elements as religious, “religion-adjacent”, or non-religious speaks to the polysemic nature of tropes in the dramas and the complexity of urban Pakistan's cultural and religious practices.

Works Cited

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