

AIPS Short-Term Research Grant Final Report

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

Author's Name: Elliot Montpellier

Dates for Project: December 2021 - January 2022

Location: Karachi

1. Significance to Pakistan Studies

My dissertation project is concerned with understanding processes that have brought piety to the fore of Pakistani public culture. Anthropologists working on urban Pakistan have sought to disentangle and synthesize disparate complexities of urban religious life, focussing on religious movements (Ahmad 2009; Iqtidar 2011), contestations for sacred space (Hull 2012), consumption practices of pious middle-class families (Maqsood 2017; Kazi 2021), and genealogies of religious identity (Khan 2012). These have traced the contours of increasingly pious identities through ethnographic attention to mosques, televangelism, Islamist parties, Qur'an reading groups, and Islamic schools. My work focuses on Pakistani television dramas, examining how this *entertainment* genre uses religion as a discursive and visual theme. I argue that a focus on everyday spaces - unmarked as "religious" - over the past two decades can help advance our understanding of how piety has emerged as a central facet of public life in Pakistan. My project also suggests that the advent of the Internet and social media in Pakistan is overlooked as a significant moment for the resurgent popularity of dramas because of new affordances for dialogic engagements between audiences and producers.

2. Key Outcomes and Deliverables

Key Outcomes

1. Strong connections made across the executive class of the industry. Given access to audience measurement, marketing, and consumer data. Access via Whatsapp to heads at all major channels.
2. Connection made with the Bedil Library Head Librarian, Muhammad Zubair, who has been instrumental in allowing access to and continuing to send relevant academic and literary journal articles on TV dramas.
3. New concepts that emerged from my ethnographic work include a) "attention," in the context of viewer habits; b) "references," which has been written about in the Indian context as well but was salient across several ethnographic exchanges.
4. Sustained evidence of some other central ideas including a) "feedback," in the relationships between audiences and producers mediated by social media; and b) "religion-adjacent" themes, such as rivayat, adab, tahzeeb, nazm o zabi, and ikhlaq.

Deliverables

- UPenn South Asia Studies Colloquium, April 13, 2022: "Feedback Time": new media and recursive religiosity in Pakistani TV dramas
- Chapter 5 (in progress) and Chapter 6 (to be completed late 2022) of dissertation

- Abstract submitted to Canadian South Asian Studies Association (CSASA) annual conference (May 2022): "Feedback Time": new media and recursive religiosity in Pakistani TV dramas
- Public Lecture, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Department of Asian Studies, Summer 2022: Televising Islam: family life, everyday ethics, and piousness in Pakistani TV dramas