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"SAB DRAMA HAI"/ "IT'S ALL DRAMA": THE POLITICS OF PRODUCING TELEVISION NEWS IN PAKISTAN

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I miss you so much.

INTRODUCTION

In early 2015, I was settling into my daily routine in Karachi—scheduling interviews, meeting potential interlocutors, following up with formal interviews, part-time teaching—and with that movement around the city, there was no avoiding an inevitable part of Karachi life, spending hours stuck in traffic. I can distinctly recall spotting the bright red-and-white logo of an upcoming television station seemingly everywhere. Enormous billboards heralded the arrival of BOL (Urdu for speak) as a proudly patriotic television network, emblazoned with the faces of celebrity journalists who had joined its ranks, and clusters of parked vans covered in BOL logos could be found at key locations throughout Karachi. Alongside my experience with its heavy publicity on the streets for months, the industry chatter about BOL found its way into all of my conversations with news media professionals, many skeptical of the new network's outright stance on providing a "positive image" of Pakistan and equally suspicious of the rumored astronomical salaries that pulled star anchors and talk show hosts from their respective networks. I couldn't believe my timing—I had come to Karachi to study the privatized news media landscape, and here was BOL, a brand-new television network ready to earn its ranking among the existing cacophony of news channels and stealing some of the industry's best-known journalists. I started picturing my days at the new headquarters—I would spend all day shadowing producers, watching them argue over audio soundtracks to lay over video montages in dark editing rooms, rush to brightly-lit studios for last-minute script adjustments before their anchors went on air; I would be in conference rooms where current events of the day were distributed to different talk show programs, production teams fighting for the top stories and claiming key politicians as guests for their particular shows. But, before I could probe my

growing list of contacts to arrange for an introduction to BOL management, my imaginary field site began to crumble.

On May 18, 2015, *The New York Times* published a damning report by Declan Walsh, former Pakistan Bureau Chief, in which he listed sources and documents that exposed BOL's parent company, Axact, in a soon-to-be massive scandal. Widely regarded within Pakistan as a successful-yet-obscure software company, Axact was instead revealed to be a money laundering operation, where employees were trained to exploit thousands of international online students through a global fake degree scam, an educational empire of deception estimated by the FBI to be worth $140 million.[1] Like wildfire, private news channels circulated the story of BOL's fraudulent finances, burning the network's reputation to the ground. In response to the allegations, BOL issued the following statement on its website:

> From the very first day of announcement of BOL, certain elements have started campaigning against Axact and BOL. The GEO/Jang group and Express Media Group being direct competitors of BOL (initiated by Axact) have started a defamation campaign and other criminal pursuits since last 2 years accusing BOL of belonging to multiple groups, sometimes establishment, sometimes a real estate tycoon and sometimes other controversial personalities and were coining all kind of conspiracy theories. Now they have planned this story in collaboration with this reporter as evident from the fact that within less than 60 seconds of the publishing of this article, these media outlets started spreading this maligning campaign via different means. It is also come to our notice that they are planning with other foreign media groups to publish this story with different angles… It should be noted that the announcement of BOL as a positive and pro-Pakistan channel in Pakistan who cares for its employees has shaken these traditional media houses who have promoted hatred, despair, negativity and hopelessness in Pakistan.[2]

The BOL network's acknowledgement and articulation of the accusations against it are telling, particularly in their pointed mention of their alleged connection with the "establishment" and in

[1] Declan Walsh, "Fake Diplomas, Real Cash: Pakistani Companies Axact Reaps Millions," *The New York Times*, May 17, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/18/world/asia/fake-diplomas-real-cash-pakistani-company-axact-reaps-millions-columbiana-barkley.html.

[2] "Text of Axact's Response to The New York Times," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/19/world/asia/text-of-axact-response-to-the-new-york-times.html.

pandering to the public perception of “foreign interference” wherever Pakistan may appear in an embarrassingly negative light on the global news stage. Along with the fact that Walsh, the reporter responsible for the expose, was unceremoniously expelled from Pakistan two years prior in 2013 for “undesirable activities,”[3] many Pakistani journalists’ suspicions of the military’s involvement in backing BOL were seemingly now justified, with *The New York Times* platform explaining why no Pakistani reporters had yet been able to break the Axact fraud story in local newspapers. Within a week, the BOL network’s much advertised bandwagon of celebrity journalists curtly announced their resignations via Twitter:

[3] In his book, *Dispatches from a Precarious State*, Declan Walsh (2020) tries to decipher exactly which of his reporting activities in Pakistan earned him the status of an anti-Pakistan agent, suspecting that out of the several sensitive stories he had reported on, such as American drone strikes, Pakistan’s nuclear weapons program, and the internal workings of the ISI, it was his reporting from Balochistan that finally crossed a red line.

Figure 1. Screenshot of compiled tweets by Pakistani journalists.[4]

The immediate fallout of the expose damaged the credibility of the BOL network and tarnished the Axact image in the short term, but the arduously slow judicial process removed critical media spotlight from the story, no doubt aided by the same influential support that allowed a scam empire (with a global money laundering operation in place) to run undisturbed for several years. Today, both the BOL network and Axact are open as functioning businesses. While I did not gain access to former members of BOL management during the course of my fieldwork, I did

[4] Various Twitter feeds.

encounter former entry-level BOL employees at a journalism training center, who acknowledged each other jokingly on orientation day, with fellow trainees commiserating their misfortune for having been lured out of jobs to work for BOL and then fired before the network was fully operational. For my purposes in this introduction then, the BOL episode offers a brief but compelling encapsulation of the dynamic factors at play in the Pakistani media ecology of news where print, television, and social media form the backdrop against which this dissertation will explore 1) the emergence of private television news channels as increasingly political players, 2) the precarious nature of work for news media professionals, and 3) the limits, both self-imposed and external, of investigative journalism in Pakistan.

"Sab Drama Hai"

"It's all drama"—I encountered this dismissive phrase often when I would observe and (warily) engage in the stereotypically male-dominated "drawing room" discussions held by extended family members on the most recent political controversy highlighted by the media. The inevitable argument that media channels themselves were either involved in the scandal of the day, or were in no small part benefitting from such expositions, would mostly involve accusing favored celebrity talk show hosts as anti-state agitators masquerading as journalists, and such disagreements would end with both parties insisting that the opposing viewpoint was steeped in conspiracy. The ubiquity of such sentiments across households in Pakistan can be found reflected in the portrayal of news channels and journalists in television drama serials, newspaper opinion columns, satirical prose, and an unlimited supply of online memes and parodies.

Figure 2. Image received by author via Whatsapp groups in October 2017.[5]

Consider Figure 2, where the image depicts a comedic interpretation of particular Pakistani news channels and their distinctive dramatic “rendering” of any given news story. The photoshopped images of a man throwing a child in the air ranges from the ordinary (*Dawn*) to the exaggerated (Geo News), becoming increasingly far-fetched (SAMAA TV), to the point of the child disappearing from view altogether (ARY News), only to ridiculously reappear as suspended in mid-air (BOL News). That *Dawn* and BOL News are placed on opposite ends of the range of interpretations is not lost on the average consumer of Pakistani news. *Dawn* belongs to one of the most credible media enterprises in Pakistan, with roots in English print news before the Partition of India, while BOL News on the other hand, (and as described earlier), is viewed as a brash newcomer to the media industry, proudly owning its bias as a staunchly nationalistic media group. The point this user-generated image delivers, is that Pakistani audiences are well attuned to the discourses about news media channels that circulate within the media. Throughout my preliminary fieldwork visits to Pakistan beginning in 2010 and by the time I relocated to Karachi

[5] Personal WhatsApp correspondence.

in 2014, there was a general understanding that, of course, media liberalization had drastically altered the ways in which regular Pakistanis could now consume the vast variety of media content that had become available. It was particularly in regards to the multiple options in television news and the arrival of private television channels that also changed the ways in which a mainstream narrative emerged *about* the news, increasingly conflated with simply “media” itself, and “media waaley”—those pesky journalists, most visibly responsible for delivering daily television news content to our living rooms. To be sure, there is a lot of talk *about* the media *in* the media. But, there is neither much discussion about what these media discourses do nor can any real emphasis be found on the limited structures of media ownership. Asif Agha (2011) has described the institutional practices that reflexively link processes of communication to processes of commoditization, as a special case of mediation that he terms “mediatization.” This term and the set of practices it denotes are particularly helpful in understanding the ways in which the presence of corporate media in Pakistan is glossed over as “independent media”:

> Nowadays, the term *the media* names a well known fragment. The term refers to and groups together certain mediatized institutions and their commercial-communicative practices. When seen as samples of *the media* these entities and practices are imbued with strange powers… With the help of the term *the mass media*, the receiver of messages is understood as a “mass of persons,” and, with the help of point-to-mass dissemination, some bounded installation (TV, radio, etc.) is understood as sender.[6]

Agha further critiques the focus given to “media talk”; he claims such an analysis would conflate mediation and mediatization instead of differentiating them, by extracting focal objects of media talk from the semiotic activities that precede and follow them:

> This enclosure has several walls and grills. It is not merely that attention to social processes is readily replaced by attention to moments that media talk makes salient within them. And it is not merely that salient artifacts such as news stories and TV shows—which are familiar diacritics of “the media”—become characterizable in

[6] Asif Agha, “Meet Mediatization,” *Language & Communication* 31, no. 3 (July 2011): 163, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2011.03.006.

> comparable ways by many people through the dissemination of media talk itself. The enclosure prevents egress: Media talk itself makes it difficult to reason about mediatization and its relation to mediation.[7]

How then, do we get outside this "performative enclosure"? Keeping Agha's advice in mind, it should be pointed out that the whole of public discourse cannot actually be confined within media talk, since there is much more that goes on within what we call "the public." Thus, media talk should be taken as a social process—its encounter with "the media" can neither be taken at face value nor ignored. It is important to keep this preface in mind particularly since we will later come across moments of media talk *as* mediatized, and one of the goals of the dissertation is to illustrate how we could traverse an alternate path to addressing media talk (i.e. instead of presenting media talk as only encountered, we need to further follow the post-encounter process, the ways in which media talk is recycled—received, processed, and worked upon—to become an alternate kind of text).

This dissertation is neither an attempt to confirm that Pakistani television news is sensationalist, nor does it aim to justify the fact that sensationalist media programming is, of course, not unique to Pakistani television. Writing these words in the tumultuous year of 2020 could not be more understated, given the sensationalized television coverage of political polarization and alarming signs of a growing post-truth public sphere in the Euro-American mediascape. In order to contextualize the discourse around television news practices in Pakistan, my project will highlight multiple binaries that rise to the surface when exploring the deep divisions in piety, language, and class that structure much of Pakistani social life—liberal-secular/Islamist, English/Urdu, class/mass—these "splits" in the public sphere appear in everyday forms and can be read, for example, in the criticism of the media industry in English

[7] Ibid., 165.

print newspapers. This critique is levied at Urdu language television channels for sensationalist news reportage, cantankerous talk show hosts, and episodes of unethical broadcast journalism, most of which is quickly attributed to either the "race for ratings" or the rise of religious conservatism, and the increasing concern that commercial and conservative interests not only overlap but reinforce each other. Following Appadurai's (1996) definition of mediascapes as representing both electronic capabilities and the imaginaries of the people who tap into them, it would appear that the linguistic dichotomies in the Pakistani mediascape contribute to what Arvind Rajagopal (2001) has termed a "split public." While he uses this term to describe the dual nature of the Indian public sphere, its use as a heuristic in understanding the contemporary Pakistani mediascape is relevant, given the similarities in the discourses produced by modernizing elites in both postcolonial societies, particularly regarding secular ambitions for incomplete modern polities. According to Rajagopal, the origins of English language news as an elite form of discourse in liberal market society are reflected in the emphasis given by English language newspapers to the truth-value of news, as information provided to a critical-rational public:

> For English language audiences, objectivity and neutrality worked not only to enhance the informational value of news and to guarantee its truth content, but also served as a marker of the relationship of these audiences to power. Objectivity as a news value corresponded to the history of English as the language of colonial and subsequently technocratic nationalistic rule, and rendered this history invisible, thereby avoiding a confrontation of English as the language of a tiny minority.[8]

English language audiences in Pakistan are also largely associated with the country's liberal elite, and the acknowledgement of their minority status within the larger public, while fairly established, received renewed attention after the mainstream media coverage of the Taseer

[8] Arvind Rajagopal. *Politics After Television: Hindu Nationalism and the Reshaping of the Public in India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1.

assassination in 2011. As I will show in Chapter 1, liberal concerns over sensationalist Urdu language programming began to heighten at the signs of an illiberal electronic public space. This anxiety, as we will later see, is stimulated not only through the routinely familiar televisual imagery of religious masses, but more pressingly by the unfamiliarity of new forms of the religious right, visibly endorsed by private media sources. Today, the public figure that best embodies the "splits" of this public sphere is the current prime minister of Pakistan, Imran Khan. In a memorable 2012 interview with Indian journalist Barkha Dutt,[9] Oxford-educated Khan termed liberals as "the scum of the country" and remained firm in his stance on pushing for diplomatic negotiations with the Taliban. Similar to his media-savvy peers of populist political leaders around the world, Khan's rise to power cannot be understood without examining the mediascape that provides both the platform to his messaging and maintains the ideological divisions that underscore his mass appeal. In examining the media circulation of an elite liberal discourse critical of Khan and his political followers, we will encounter that dual relation constitutive of all mediation: a relation of simultaneous self-distancing and self-recognition.[10]

Previous Scholarship

Tracing the cultural transformation of television news practices in Pakistan, my dissertation contributes to a body of literature in media anthropology that has a long and varied history. Scholarly interest in the era of economic liberalization and cultural globalization across the postcolonial world (Abu-Lughod 1993, 1995; Davila 1997; Foster 2002; Guss 1996; Mankekar 1999; Mazzarella 2003; Miller 1997; Morley 1992; Rajagopal 2001; Scanneil 1996)

[9] "Mindset of Rushdie is that of a small man, Imran Khan tells NDTV," *NDTV*, March 21, 2012, https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/mindset-of-rushdie-is-that-of-a-small-man-imran-khan-tells-ndtv-472587.
[10] For more on this subject, see William Mazzarella, *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

took the shape of studies that largely focused on media cultures revolving around film, television drama, and advertising. The phenomenal expansion of television during the 1980s and 1990s sparked debates over how the globalization of media and communication was transforming societies, and in their influential statement on public culture in India, Appadurai and Breckenridge (1995) said, "What is distinctive about any particular society is not the fact or extent of its modernity, but rather its distinctive debates about modernity, the historical and cultural trajectories that shape its appropriation of modernity, and the cultural sociology that determines who gets to play with modernity and what defines the rules of the game."[11] Following in that vein, television scholars Punathambekar and Shanti (2012) argue that what is distinctive about television in South Asia is not so much the fact or the extent to which it is enmeshed in global circuits of production and circulation, but rather its distinctive role in shaping the terrain of public culture," and "it is television's re-mediation of the public/private distinction in the South Asian context that lies at the heart of our understanding of how television stages the modern in the postcolonial context in particular, and television's impact on the modern world in general."[12] The inextricable relationship between television and modernity has primarily driven questions in media and communication studies on the transformation of cultures and societies in the global South. Within the available scholarship on television in South Asia, particularly its early focus on India in the pre-1990s period (Acharya 1987; Singhal & Rogers 1989; Yadava & Reddi 1988) grew with the rise of private television networks (Batabyal et al. 2011; Batabyal 2012; Farmer 2003; Kumar 2000; Mehta 2008a, 2008b, 2012; Rajagopal 2001; Saksena 1996;

[11] Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge, "Public Modernity in India," in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, ed. Carol Breckenridge (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 16.
[12] Punathambekara, Aswin, and Shanti Kumar, "Introduction: Television at Large," Special issue of *South Asian History and Culture,* edited by Aswin Punathambekar and Shanti Kumar, *Television at Large* 3, no. 4 (October 2012): 485. https://doi.org/10.1080/19472498.2012.720058.

Thussu 1998, 2000, 2007, 2009), the concerns have remained focused on the study of homogenized media content that is "directed solely to the middle class representing it to itself, and concerned only with its own economic survival regardless of the effects of spectacular or even near ridiculous news making."[13] Academic literature on Pakistani media, sparse as it is, still offers readers glimpses into cinema and television drama serials (Cheema 2018; Kothari 2006; Siddiqi 2019; Yaqin 2016; Zamindar 2020), and it is mainly through the autobiographical writing of retired journalists that literature on the history of the Pakistani press can be found (Amer 1986; Aziz 2004; Niazi 1986, 1992, 1994). This dissertation can then be considered as both a symptom of and a corrective to the absent scholarship on Pakistani television news.

One of the primary aims of this project is to contextualize the emergence of a liberalized media industry in order to better understand how two binaries, serious/sensational journalism and secular/religious media discourse, get conflated in the Pakistani liberal critique. The emergence of the mass media in Western history has been customarily placed in the context of the shift from theological to worldly authority, and is viewed as an institutional underpinning of modern society (Gellner 1983; Habermas 1991). The rise of literacy in the wake of print media, followed by electronic media and the expansion of communications is seen to secure a secular, democratic society. With the influx of scholarly interest in looking at Muslim modernizing societies, there seems to be a tacit acknowledgement that Western liberal expectations, long attached to the power of enhanced flows of communication and information, may not have the same results when situated elsewhere (Bowen & Early 2002; Eickelman & Anderson 2003). The case of media liberalization in Pakistan also brings up similar issues that question assumptions of secularity in a modernized public sphere. In Chapter 1 of the dissertation, my interest lies not

[13] Amrita Ibrahim, "'Truth on our Lips, India in our Hearts': Television News, Affective Publics, and the Production of Publicity in Delhi," (Ph.D. diss., The Johns Hopkins University, 2013), 53.

only in understanding how anxieties of secularism arise in a privatized media industry, but also in examining how this anxious discourse obscures a curious gap between a principled liberal stand for the commitment to "independent" mass media, and yet as we shall see, a cynical disavowal of its existing forms. In his edited volume *The Phantom Public Sphere*, Bruce Robbins (1993) points out that the significance of mass media in reinventing the notion of the public lies less in its portrayal of an urban space of aesthetic self-presentation and sociability, but more importantly how media manages to tie this notion of the public together with the politically participatory thrust of the "republican virtue" model. The crucial implication is that "participation in the making, exchanging and mobilizing of public opinion (the defining characteristic of 'republican virtue') has to some extent been reinvented or relocated as well—it is now discoverable to an unprecedented extent in the domain of culture."[14]

It comes as no surprise that the domain of culture would be a significant site of political contestation. This admission, well documented by anthropologists, provides an appropriate turning point for us to reconsider the relevance of Jurgen Habermas's model of the public sphere in understanding news publics in postcolonial contexts. In acknowledging the widespread political importance that both media and culture have come to represent today, it is important to continue to reject Habermas's apocalyptic scenario of the rise of mass media as the decadence of the public, as many scholars have done.[15] The fact that Habermas's model completely neglects to account for the role of religion in the development of a public sphere is another indicator of its diminished usefulness in understanding postcolonial publics. Implicitly following Adorno and Horkheimer in imagining that religion must decline as enlightenment progresses, Habermas does

[14] Bruce Robbins. *The Phantom Public Sphere* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), xix.
[15] Ibid.

not question if secularization seems to be part and parcel of modernity and leaves out its role in the rise to critical rational debate.[16] Indeed, postcolonial elites will be the first to subscribe to this model, reinvigorating colonial conceits of mapping the divide between critical debate and affective energy onto the supposedly constitutive difference between secular Western and non-secular non-Western publics.[17] How do we move away from such elitist discourses, and what are the terms with which a new debate can be framed for questioning this "underdevelopment" of critical reasoning?

Let us return to the central figure of Habermas's model, that of the rational-critical man. Habermas's public sphere required a strict separation from instrumental and market relationships, with the resulting bourgeois domesticity laying the foundation for the possibility of the public man, who engaged in rational-critical dialogue. In the standard rendition of this story, the growth of literacy and of reading publics in the wake of print media, succeeded by electronic media and the enormous expansion of communication, secure the establishment of a secular, democratic society.[18] According to Arjun Rajagopal (2001), Habermas employs this model by elaborating on aspects of the communicative logic of print capitalism, identifying it with a particular phase of European history. The question for our postcolonial context thus becomes: to what extent does this logic unfold with electronic capitalism in a non-secular society?[19]

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[16] Susan Gal and Kathryn Woolard. *Language and Publics: The Making of Authority* (Manchester, U.K.: St. Jerome Publishing, 2001).

[17] Raminder Kaur and William Mazzarella. *Censorship in South Asia: Cultural Regulation from Sedition to Seduction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 10–11.

[18] Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*, 8.

[19] In his work, Rajagopal (2001) analyzes the rapid rise of fundamentalist Hindu politics in an era of televised publicity. He says with electronic media, the institutionalized production and circulation of images and symbols displaces and transforms the boundaries of the political sphere, thus reshaping the flows of information society depends on. This is partly a result of the particular technical characteristics of electronic media, but principally, it appears as a feature confirming principles of modern democratic society. Postcolonial news publics thus become an important site for analyzing the supposed derailment of these principles.

Despite its ubiquitous reference in studies of publics, it is clear that Habermas's model serves the purpose of its critics well (i.e. in providing a platform upon which to build a more inclusive and experience-oriented theory of publics in an era of mass publicity). As anthropologists shift away from notions of social stability and borderedness implied by "culture," the figure of "publics" is now being utilized to replace invocations of identity. As Negt and Kluge (1993) note, a preferable reading of a public sphere places emphasis on actions and their consequences than on the nature or characteristics of the actors insomuch that certain actions may not typically be recognized as public "speech," but are nevertheless mobilized and amplified by mass media.[20]

Though Habermas's model of the public sphere does not retain particular usefulness in explaining news publics in postcolonial contexts, this does not mean however that we do away with the concept of the public sphere as a whole. Following Dipesh Chakrabatry's line of thought in *Provincializing Europe* (2000), postcolonial thinkers must recognize that while concepts such as citizenship, the state, civil society, the public sphere, and so on all bear the burden of a Eurocentric genealogy, they remain indispensable to discussing both political modernity and a universal vision of the human. Indeed, the historical exceptions of the colonial context provide a rich site of reimagining such seemingly universal concepts. As is well known, the European colonizers of the 19th century preached Enlightenment humanism to the colonized and at the same time, denied it in practice. Given this legacy, how do we then conceptualize the political, as Chakrabarty asks, in "the moments when the peasant or the subaltern emerges in the modern sphere of politics, in his or her own right… without having had to do any 'preparatory' work in

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[20] For example, when Negt & Kluge (1993) speak of a working class public sphere, rather than a working class culture, the stress is on a site of interaction and continuing self-formation, rather than a given body of ideas and practices distinguishing one group from others.

order to qualify as the 'bourgeois citizen'?"[21] This question tugs at the very premise of liberalism, and we will find the question reworking itself in various forms in the following pages. If we recognize liberalism to be a set of ideas committed to political rights and self-determination, then we must also understand how liberal thought, particularly under the rule of imperialists, was deployed in justifying the colonial subjugation of the Indian subcontinent. In his historical research, Uday Singh Mehta (1999) tracks how imperialism stemmed from British liberal assumptions about "progress" and "civilization" and shows how such ideas rarely transcended the tendency to view other cultures, particularly Indian, as "backwards" and "infantile." In the following chapters, I will explore how this continuing liberal legacy emerges in particular articulations, and as particular anxieties, always as a "problem," of postcolonial news publics in an age of mass mediation.

One of the aims of this dissertation is to consider how anthropological approaches to mass mediation can help rethink the conceptual categories that are generally held to constitute modern publics. By tracing the conventional critiques of mass media to the genre of reception studies, we can ask how an anthropology of media effectively establishes itself amidst a negative terrain. In what ways can an analysis of the repositioning of mass media in newly democratic societies inform our understanding of the cultural politics of mass publicity? Given the ubiquity of "media-saturated" environments that once-traditional anthropological subjects now increasingly inhabit, it may seem impossible to ignore the relevance of incorporating media categories in our analyses of the social and political processes that punctuate the everyday lives of our interlocutors. Against a backdrop of the early stages of mass media critiques, this

[21] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 11.

dissertation has benefited from the dominant approaches taken by media anthropologists whose collective work can be read as pushing back against negative interpretations of mass media consumers.

Emerging in the early 1970s, British cultural studies reoriented the focus on media texts, taking up the issue of media reception and questioning the assumption of direct and uninterrupted transmission of coded messages from producers to consumers. A prominent member of this group, Stuart Hall criticized mass media research of his time for ignoring multiple interpretations of media texts, despite recognizing that such texts were not simple behavioral inputs. His influential "encoding/decoding" (1980) formulation allowed a reconsideration of audience members as active subjects, while at the same time identifying representational strategies employed by media producers to assist in "preferred readings."[22] This approach of regarding once-passive audiences as now-active producers of meaning opened up a new space for anthropologists to engage with questions on the varieties of media text interpretations in the context of their research sites. Well-placed and trained for ethnographic study in non-Western cultures, anthropologists interested in the cultural experience of media texts were able to offer resisting accounts to "cultural imperialism" theories that prevented readings of audience agency. An example of how studies were once dominated by this approach can be seen in the reception of Benedict Anderson's work. Inspired by his analysis of the role of print media in the construction of "imagined communities" (1983), anthropologists sought to address the complicity of particular media with nationalism, most notably television (Abu-Lughod 2005; Ginsburg et al. 2002; Mankekar 1999; Rajagopal 2001). One of the fallouts of this approach has been the perception of media institutions as static entities that function entirely as

[22] Of note of course is the success of such strategies, even as they are overtly recognizable as guided reading of media texts (e.g. stereotyping, essentializing, binary oppositions, etc.).

ideological apparatuses of governments. Such an understanding is problematic in two related aspects; first, it refuses to extend the same focus on other "people and their social relations" (i.e. people who happen to perform the role of producers working within media institutions. Second, the notion of government-controlled television as an ideological state apparatus fails to account for the productive factor of censorship; for instance, the ways in which it generates its own resistance.[23] It must be noted that while both production and reception studies have formed the bulk of media anthropology from the 1990s and 2000s, (but also from as early as the 1950s (Mead 1952; Powdermaker 1950) with scholarship spanning over a range of fields such as advertising (Dávila 2001; Mazzarella 2003; Moeran 1996), television and cinema (Abu-Lughod 1993; Armbrust 2000; Dornfeld 1998; Larkin 2008; Mankekar 1999; Miller 1992; Salamandra 2008; Wilk 1993, 1994) and journalism (Bird 1992; Bishara 2006; Boyer 2000; Hannerz 2004; Hasty 2005; Pedelty 1995; Peterson 2001; Ståhlberg 2002). Anthropologists have increasingly sought to not only bring "production" and "reception" together, but to also decenter that very way of framing the problem (Lukacs 2010; Nakassis 2016). Moving away from the production/reception lens and towards studies of networked circulation, a renewed focus on cultural reproduction, publicity, and political and social imagination and subjectivity now also includes studying the participation of media users in reshaping their experiences with technologies and institutions of digital culture (Boellstorff 2008; Coleman & Golub 2008; Coombe & Herman 2004; Kelty 2005; Miller & Slater 2000; Postill 2008; Reed 2005).

In my original envisioning of my dissertation project, I was determined to conduct an ethnography of television news production, aiming to shadow interlocutors in a quintessential

[23] Examples of such instances are often come across when script writers and drama producers in private television stations routinely wax eloquent over the "1980s golden years" of Pakistani television dramas, which took place amidst strict state censorship during the reign of a repressive military regime.

bustling newsroom. Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2010) has noted that "newsroom-centricity" has had both advantages and disadvantages for the study of journalism in sociology, media studies and now anthropology as well as it turns to news as an object of study.[24] While it would be convenient for me to list the disadvantages of such a fieldsite, the fact remains that my requests for daily ethnographic access to television news channels in Karachi were resoundingly ignored by the ultimate decision makers at these channels, and it was a deftly avoided topic when I did receive access to interview upper management professionals. While I correctly presumed my access to elite news media professionals would be fast-tracked by my credentials as a graduate researcher from an American university, I also found that my employment as a part-time instructor at elite universities in Karachi formed critical local connections. My ability to cross reference a particular social-professional network in Karachi is indicative of how Western-educated Pakistanis are privileged with cultural and social capital on their return. I was invited into media organizations to observe news production at work, I sat in during professional training seminars, and I would interact with my interlocutors at social events as well. While this elite class of journalists did not consider me a professional peer, their responses during interviews clearly mark an assumption of our shared cultural capital through our fluency in English and higher education.

Newsrooms are undeniably the material space where news is created and events are turned into stories (Bird 2010), and while I wistfully lingered in these spaces during my scheduled visits to news channel offices, upper-level interviewees would begrudgingly allow for guided tours and also ensured that I was politely escorted outside the building. Classic studies of

[24] Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, "News Production, Ethnography, and Power: On the Challenges of Newsroom-Centricity," in *The Anthropology of News and Journalism: Global Perspectives*, edited by S. Elizabeth Bird (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 21–35.

the newsroom have largely focused on the organizational and bureaucratic means by which work in the newsroom as a particular kind of industry of production takes place (Schlesinger 1987; Tuchman 1978), but as anthropologists are aware, news has never been a product that is created only in the newsroom—a point increasingly made by the rise of freelance journalists that now have the possibility to film, edit, and broadcast from the site of breaking news itself. My dissertation can then be posited as a contribution towards ethnographic studies on the changing transformation of news journalism practices (Boyer 2010; Cody 2015; Graan 2016; Gursel 2016). I found the articulation of these practices in an unexpected fieldsite—the physical classrooms of broadcast journalism training seminars. Through my interactions and interviews with Pakistani news media professionals, both those that were providing the required training, and those that were receiving it, my interlocutors outlined a broad-strokes picture of a nascent television news industry in flux: the media boom of the mid-2000s brought an unprecedented number of private television channels on air, with the pressing demand to produce and fill twenty-four hours of news content. With only a limited industry talent pool existing within print media, television channels urgently needed to staff their newsrooms, allowing for an influx of untrained entry-level jobseekers who were then forced to quickly learn the ropes on the job. Hired *as* journalists, the trainees I encountered at journalism training seminars were sponsored by their respective employer networks, seemingly as a corrective to a prior lack of formal training. The figure of the "untrained journalist" then becomes deployed in the critique of a sensationalist genre of news, where unscrupulous reporting practices are blamed on the lack of critical rational skills. The public debate on news channels predictably swings between what comprises "reasonable" forms of public discourse, and on the inefficacy of the state regulatory authority. Through the following chapters, this dissertation attempts to show how these

normative debates arise out of a lived professional context of media production where ethical questions rub up against the tremendous daily pressures of deadlines and competitive positioning. I begin with a brief historical arc to contextualize how privatized television news channels have effectively transformed the nature of the national news culture in Pakistan. As corporate television channels compete for higher ratings and employ increasingly hostile strategies of doing so, the examples I have selected in Chapter 1 suggest a closer look at the points at which liberal concerns surface in media commentary in order to understand the role of such anxieties in triggering discourses of the religious Other. In Chapter 2, I expand on navigating my attempts to conduct an ethnography of Pakistani television news and my encounter with the figure of the untrained journalist. In addition to critically reflecting on my positionality in this particular field, I briefly examine the history of language and class in Pakistan to provide context to my observations on the training practices provided at the Center for Excellence in Journalism, a joint-venture in Karachi sponsored by the U.S. State Department. Chapter 3 explores how Pakistani news media professionals negotiate the tension between a principled commitment to protecting the "independence" of mass media and a cynical disavowal of its existing sensationalist forms. In this chapter, I show how the prevailing discourse on the ethics of journalism in Pakistan becomes a productive site through which the differences between privileged and vulnerable media labor emerge as most apparent. Lastly, in Chapter 4, I discuss how media liberalization in Pakistan must be understood in the context of its constrained relationship with the state, and I analyze the ways in which the shadow of the deep state featured in my dissertation fieldwork among news media professionals in Karachi and Islamabad.

CHAPTER 1

CONTEXTUALIZING LIBERALIZED MEDIA IN PAKISTAN

Monday, November 14, 2016, Islamabad

A large concrete sign with bold lettering confirms that I have reached the headquarters of the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA). An imposing structure of steel and glass, the building casts an intimidating shadow and, as my shoes tap out echoes on the empty floor of the main entrance, I'm struck by the absence of familiar ambient sounds of my fieldwork. It is a quiet and somber building, devoid of the bustling din and steady stream of foot traffic I was accustomed to observing in television channel offices. I am promptly directed to an office on the top floor, which opens up to an impressive panoramic view of the city. My interviewee today is Absar Alam, then chairman of PEMRA, who is quick to identify as a journalist first, and only a reluctant regulator in practice. His desk is covered in newspapers, and he shuffles them around as he launches into a critical tirade on current news channel practices, pausing briefly to ask his secretary for an in-house lawyer to join our conversation.

> You see, Pakistani electronic media is…. It's strong. And compared to that strength, Pakistan's media regulator is not that strong. Pakistan is generally a country where people don't like to abide by law—especially so for media persons, they think that they are above the law. Any law. So, when it comes to implementing the media laws, they oppose it tooth and nail and they take pride in it![1]

At this point, Alam has rolled up a newspaper and is now brandishing it in the air for emphasis, angrily jabbing it this way and that:

> [T]hey have actually become a certificate-issuing authority on who is patriotic, who is not. Who is a traitor, who is Muslim, who is Deobandi, who is Shia, who is Sunni, who is whatever! Every night on the TV channel, *they* decide it. And this is

[1] Personal interview, 2014–2016.

> dangerous, very dangerous! It has taken lives. I won't say it's simply risky, it *has* taken lives. And yet, they are so dheet. [2]

The lawyer coughs loudly, and Alam receives the signal to restrain himself on record. Our conversation proceeds in this way, with Alam extending long diatribes on the recalcitrance of the media, and the lawyer employing non-verbal gestures, urging the chairman to cool off when he appears too agitated. Any regular viewer of Pakistani news channels would not be surprised by Alam's angry reactions, and they might even share such emotions, for indeed his accusations of unprofessional, endangering behavior by the electronic media are not without precedent. By the time of my 2016 visit to Islamabad, I had already conducted interviews with a range of television news media professionals: reporters, associate producers, executive producers, along with news channel senior management, and the collective dismay over the media's role in the lead-up to the political figure Salman Taseer assassination in 2011 hung heavily in our conversations, six years after its occurrence.

In late October 2010, reports of a blasphemy case were making the rounds on Pakistani news channels. A Christian woman, Aasia Bibi, had recently been imprisoned for allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad, an act that under the blasphemy laws is punishable by death. This was not the first time such a case had made headlines in Pakistan, but it was the first case in which a provincial governor made a determined public effort to pursue a mercy petition on behalf of an alleged blasphemer. As the governor of Punjab, Salman Taseer's appeals were widely covered in the media, and he appeared on numerous political talk shows, defending his stand on the need for debate on reforming the religiously sanctioned laws. On air, Taseer was

[2] Alam was speaking in fluent English and, as this interview quote shows, I have conserved the choice use of Urdu, as the term carries a distinctive weight that would not have come across in the English translation. Here, for example, the Urdu term dheet can be translated as stubborn or obstinate, but given the context of intending to insult, it is better understood as pigheaded. Personal interview, 2014–2016.

constantly antagonized by his interviewers and reminded of the dangers of criticizing the blasphemy laws. In a live interview with Taseer, talk show host Meher Bukhari antagonized the governor – asking him to justify his stance on calling for amends to the blasphemy laws and insisted that his life was in danger: “Do you feel like your steps are fanning the flames of religious hatred?” She concluded the show with reading aloud an Islamic legal ruling (*fatwa*) that declared Taseer a non-Muslim as a result of his pursuing a mercy petition on behalf of a Christian woman convicted of charges of blasphemy. On January 4, 2011, Taseer was shot to death by one of his own security guards, Mumtaz Qadri. Within hours, Pakistani news channels broadcast statements by major religious parties who praised Qadri’s actions, and television screens showed jubilant supporters taking to the streets to celebrate him as the defender of the Prophet Muhammad. In the following weeks, tens of thousands of people marched through Karachi to oppose any change to the blasphemy laws, chanting “Courage and bravery, Qadri, Qadri.”[3] When Qadri was eventually brought to appear at the Lahore High Court, throngs of lawyers showered him with rose petals, pledging to defend him pro-bono.

[3] “Sermons Motivated Killer of Governor Taseer,” *Dawn*, January 10, 2011, https://www.dawn.com/news/597628/sermons-motivated-killer-of-governor-taseer.

Figure 3. A pro-Qadri Rally held in Karachi, 2011.[4]

Taseer's stance continued to be misconstrued after his death (i.e. his intent to protect victims accused of blasphemy was itself taken to be blasphemous), and channel ratings soared as viewers watched prime time talk show hosts' attempts to justify Qadri's actions, suggesting that Taseer had brought ill unto himself. The day of Taseer's funeral, Bukhari opened her show by comparing Qadri to a Muslim "hero" from the 1920s, who killed a Hindu man for publishing a blasphemous book. Taseer's family members were quoted widely in both the national and international press following the assassination, and when asked to comment on Bukhari's talk show, daughter Shehrbano Taseer, referred to the first interview as "plain incitement to murder"—and the second show, a "senseless condonation" of it.[5] In the years that followed, both Aasia Bibi and Mumtaz Qadri remained in prison on death row until 2016.

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[4] Express News, AFP.
[5] Omar Waraich, "Why Did a Trusted Bodyguard Turn Fanatical Assassin?" *Independent*, January 28, 2011, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/why-did-trusted-bodyguard-turn-fanatical-assassin-2196706.html.

At this time, I was living in Karachi, conducting fieldwork alongside teaching at a local university, when on the morning of Monday, February 29, 2016, I received the following text message and paused to consider canceling my class that day:

> Karachi Protest Update: Dear Colleagues, due to protests Shahra-e-Faisal, Numaish Chowrangi, MA Jinnah Road, Old Numaish chowrangi and Nagan chowrangi are blocked. Please avoid mentioned areas and take alternate routes. Stay safe.[6]

I quickly consulted my preferred news platforms—first, I checked the *Dawn* website, then Twitter, Facebook, and finally, I turned to flip through television news channels. Social media updates were abuzz with reactions to online news headlines: "Taseer's killer Mumtaz Qadri hanged." With jubilant declarations of justice being served, many users on my news feeds were sharing real-time information on how to avoid certain main routes as religious groups announced their protests. Pakistani liberals found themselves both denouncing the state's power to end a life and celebrating the state's refusal to bend to the pressure from religious groups to release Qadri. Television news channels kept a running news ticker on the announcement of Qadri's hanging, but actual visible headlines were oddly focused on the possible cancellation of an upcoming India-Pakistan cricket match. It seemed strange that talk show hosts who had been clamoring over the Taseer case in 2011 would suddenly avoid expressing any opinion on the momentous news of Qadri's execution in 2016. When I asked Absar Alam to discuss the PEMRA ban on reporting on Qadri's funeral, he started by correcting me:

> We did not ban anything. That's very important, it was only a warning. We were able to intervene before time, and we issued a warning to all TV channels, we said 'don't exaggerate, don't comment or show things which inflame people, or provoke, or inflame the people.' So, it was a strict warning from us, and we handled it very well, or else it would have become a big, big trouble for the entire country. But then, as you know there are different power centers in this country, so on that day—all power centers were united to handle it wisely.[7]

[6] Personal correspondence, 2014–2016.
[7] Ibid.

During the time of my fieldwork (2014–2016), it was difficult to imagine a scenario where a wildly competitive, ratings-hungry television industry would succumb to "only a warning," particularly from a state regulator whose warnings they had been routinely flouting for almost two decades. One need only be a regular reader of Pakistani newspapers to find numerous articles devoted to the delayed court proceedings between PEMRA and the suspended television channel of the week. Indeed, by Alam's own admission in his initial quote, the news media industry was not only "stronger" than the state regulator, but took "pride" in opposing media laws. The same "weak" regulator's pride in shutting down live television coverage of protests related to Qadri's execution is, then, slightly suspect—until I received this acknowledgement: "*as you know* there are different power centers in this country, so on that day—*all power centers* were united to handle it wisely."[8]

As a researcher, I was collecting the terms that my interlocutors used as precautionary euphemisms: "the deep state," "the powers that be," "the establishment," "the boots," "the boys," "they," "them," "the not to be named," "the please-cut-this-part-out." As a Pakistani researcher, I was acutely aware of when and why my interlocutors would not name the military in our conversations. While I will address these forms of self-censorship in Chapter 4, my purpose in these initial pages was to present an introductory snapshot of the ways in which the television news industry in Pakistan is seen as both seemingly unbridled in its power to provoke a politics of outrage, as in the case of Taseer's assassination, and yet excessively bounded by the contours of (certain parts of) the state.

Since 2002, privatized Urdu-language news channels have effectively transformed the nature of the national news culture in Pakistan. In addition to sensational news packaging,

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[8] Emphasis is mine.

leading current affairs talk show hosts routinely capitalize on aggressive interrogative tactics to antagonize politicians and analysts on-air, producing a dramatized performance that has cultivated an industry genre for news channels. Within this context, the emancipation of television from state control that was once celebrated through media deregulation in the early 2000s has since been replaced with a disdainful liberal discourse on the lack of critical-rational debate. Drawing local and international attention for their alarming acquiescence in stoking religious and sectarian conflicts, Urdu news channels and their primetime anchors have been regularly accused of pandering to populist religious sentiments in a range of infamous episodes: from condoning assassinations in blasphemy cases, providing airtime to anti-state militant organizations, to popularizing anti-government protests. The implicit, and sometimes explicit, acknowledgement within the broadcasting fraternity of the government's inability to rein in sensationalist news television has routinely triggered industry-wide calls for internal self-regulation. In this chapter, I highlight the significance of the transformation of the electronic public sphere in Pakistan, resulting from the state deregulation of electronic media in 2002. With specific emphasis on the privatized television industry, I attempt to sharpen the distinction between two binaries that, in this particular setting, tend to get collapsed: "serious"/"sensationalist" reporting and secular/religious reporting. In doing so, I trace the emergence of the "independent media" from its introduction as a secular, modernizing agent, to its current position as a powerful media platform that, according to the liberal elite, has capitulated to the religious right.

A Brief History of State-Controlled Media

Drawing from Pakistan's history of heavy press censorship and its state monopoly on

broadcast television for close to 40 years, it is important to outline the political events that prefigured the emergence of a privatized media sector, which will, in turn, provide context for the changing nature of public discourse almost two decades since deregulation. Certain Pakistani newspapers have been in print since before the 1947 Partition of India,[9] and they were operated as privately-owned businesses, while both radio[10] and television have functioned as state-run apparatuses. From the first broadcast transmission in 1964 to 1989, there remained only one government-controlled television channel, Pakistan Television (PTV). A semi-government television channel called Shalimar Television Network was launched in the early 1990s, but for entertainment purposes only as the broadcast of news and current affairs bulletins was restricted to the state-run PTV. Interestingly, the history of media in Pakistan has seen its most profound changes during the tenure of "caretaker" governments rather than during the short-lived terms of elected governments.[11] Military ruler Ayub Khan promulgated the Press and Publication Ordinance (PPO) in 1962, the origins of which can be found in the colonial Press Act laws that were introduced to control and suppress anti-government publications in 1910.[12] Like its colonial

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[9] In 1947, when the British partitioned British India into India and Pakistan, only four major Muslim-owned newspapers existed in the area now called Pakistan: *Pakistan Times*, *Zamindar*, *Nawa-i-Waqt*, and *Civil and Military Gazette*, all located in Lahore. A number of Muslim papers moved to Pakistan, including *Dawn*, which began publishing daily in Karachi in 1947. Other publications moving to Pakistan included the *Morning News* and the Urdu-language dailies *Jang* and *Anjam*.

[10] Radio Pakistan became formally institutionalized as the Pakistan Broadcasting Service in 1947. It was a direct descendant of the Indian Broadcasting Company, which later became All India Radio. Today, the government continues to control Pakistan Television and Radio Pakistan, the only free-to-air broadcast outlets with national reach, and their coverage supports official viewpoints.

[11] On pp. 61–62, Javed Jabbar and Isa Qazi (1997) lists three events as the most profound changes to media laws in the country: 1) The "black" Press Law of 1963 was replaced by the more "reasonable" Press Law of 1988 during the tenure of President Ghulam Ishaq Khan; 2) The Freedom of Information Ordinance was announced in January 1997 during the tenure of the caretaker government appointed by President Farooq Leghari, and it was under this government that the third radical change came to media laws; 3) the Electronic Media Regulatory Authority Ordinance in February 1997.

[12] On p. 22, Thursby (1975) notes that the Newspapers Act was passed in 1908 in response to a growing anti-government attitude among Indian publicists. This act empowered district magistrates to confiscate printing presses that had been used in the publication of seditious material. The further consolidation of stronger press laws resulted in the omnibus Press Act of 1910.

precedent, the PPO empowered government authorities to confiscate newspapers, close down news providers, and arrest journalists. Using these laws, Ayub Khan nationalized large parts of the press and took over one of the two largest news agencies. Pakistan Radio and TV, established in the mid-1960s, were also brought under the strict control of the government.

The Zia Years (1978–1988)

After a brief period of democratic leadership from 1972–1977, General Zia-ul-Haq seized power in 1978, overthrowing his predecessor Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in a military coup. Lacking domestic legitimacy, the Pakistani military establishment quickly became one of the United States' most strategic Cold War allies when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in late 1979. As a counter to international communism, the U.S. pursued a proxy war in Afghanistan in which violence in the name of Islam became legitimized, and the networks through which it was to be operationalized were created (Toor 2011). While there was nothing new in the invocation of Islam for political purposes in Pakistan, its strategic use by the military under Zia marked a profound shift: "Islam, as deployed by this regime, served to consolidate the centralization of power in the army, now the protector of Pakistan's territorial *and* ideological frontiers."[13] The moral and political support that Islamist parties received during the Zia regime was in direct relation to his need for religious legitimacy (Nasr 2001) and he placed these groups in charge of prominent state-sponsored organs.

Zia's newly appointed information secretary, General Mujeebur Rahman, installed a system of double censorship for television programming, where scripts for proposed programs were scrutinized by the resident *alim* (Islamic scholar) in the television station and then sent to

[13] Sadia Toor. *The State of Islam: Culture and Cold War Politics in Pakistan.* (London: Pluto Press, 2011), 157.

the Ministry of Information for approval.[14] Further amendments made to the PPO were used to promote Zia's Islamist leanings[15] and demonstrated the alliance between the military and religious leaders.[16] Zia promulgated the notorious Hudood Ordinance to lead toward an Islamic legal system; these laws were used to control dissent and resistance to his regime. State censorship during the Zia years was direct, concrete, and dictatorial; and the trope of his Islamization of the country would continue to resonate deeply in the national narrative. Indeed, the case of Taseer's assassination in 2011, as described in the beginning of this chapter, is but one example of the dire consequences of attempting to publicly criticize the blasphemy laws,[17] which are notorious for their frequent abuse in settling personal scores or targeting minorities. Rooted in the Indian Penal Code of 1860, the set of laws that became known as the blasphemy laws were substantially revised in the Pakistan Penal Code during Zia's regime in 1986.[18] Five new sections were introduced over a six-year period, and unlike the colonial laws that were meant to protect all religions, Zia's amendments only protect Islam. Asad Ahmed (2009) has argued that the antagonism of religious and secular-liberal groups over Pakistan's blasphemy laws occludes the complex history and genealogy of these laws. He traces the particularly South

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[14] While Zia's regime enforced strict forms of censorship, it is not surprising that producers and artists of this period found creative ways of pushing back as is evident by the hugely popular and poignant television dramas and plays that were produced in this era.

[15] The imposition of regulations based on Islamic jurisprudence (*sharia*) was visibly reflected in the media. For example, the government required all women to wear scarves (*dupattas*) to cover their hair on newscasts and other PTV programs.

[16] See Husain Haqqani. *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005).

[17] For further reading on blasphemy laws in Pakistan, see Amin 1989, Mangi 2000, and Weiss 1986.

[18] In addition to the promulgation of the much criticized and controversial Hudood Ordinances, a number of sections were added to Chapter XV of the Pakistan Penal Code. These included Section 298-A (use of derogatory remarks in respect of holy personages), Section 295-B (defiling a copy of the Holy Quran), and Section 298-B (misuse of epithets, descriptions and title, etc. reserved for certain holy personages or places). The newly-introduced sections aimed to protect holy personages of only one religion (i.e. Islam, the state religion). Section 295-C was added by an act of the parliament in 1986 and made it a criminal offence to use derogatory remarks in respect of the Prophet Mohammad. The offense is punishable with life imprisonment or death.

Asian history of blasphemy to its instigation as a punishable crime by the British and reveals how these laws enabled the colonial state to "assume the role of the rational and neutral arbiter of supposedly endemic and inevitable religious conflicts between what it presumed were its religiously and emotionally excitable subjects."[19]

Ahmed's analysis shows that the erasure of the colonial roots of these laws allows the global discourse of blasphemy to retain its contemporary valence of "essentializing difference," and the same erasure within post-partition Pakistan conceals "the similarities between colonial legacies and logics and their postcolonial elaborations and entanglements."[20] By forgetting the colonial state's involvement in adjudicating public religious sentiment, Zia's regime can be remembered as the story of the attack on secularism by the religious right. While Ahmed briefly alludes to the role of the burgeoning vernacular press in turning public attention towards certain court cases of blasphemy[21] in pre-partition India, my aim in this chapter is to exemplify how the public discourse on the Pakistani privatized media sphere as "independent" or "free" deflects attention away from the forms of dependency which privately-owned media sources must now rely on, (i.e. commercial advertising and political interest groups).[22]

[19] Asad Ali Ahmed, "Specters of Macaulay: Blasphemy, the Indian Penal Code, and Pakistan's Postcolonial Predicament," in *Censorship in South Asia*, edited by Raminder Kaur and William Mazzarella (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 173.
[20] Ibid., 177.
[21] See also David Gilmartin, "Democracy, Nationalism and the Public: A Speculation on Colonial Muslim Politics," *South Asia* 14, no. 1 (1991): 123–40, https://doi.org/10.1080/00856409108723150.
[22] It is important to clarify that public usage of the phrase "independent and free media" refers predominantly to private television broadcasting despite implicit understandings of self-censorship, which I will discuss further in Chapter 4. The dangers of investigative journalism in Pakistan are routinely documented by human rights organizations, with several journalists' deaths being linked directly to their reports on conflict zones and state intelligence agencies. While current affairs programming on television occasionally highlights the dismal state of press freedom in Pakistan, the consequences of unbiased reporting in conflict zones ensure that journalists routinely practice self-censorship.

The Musharraf Years (1999–2008)

In late 1999, the army once again ousted the civilian government, and General Musharraf staged a nine-year balancing act as both political leader and army chief. He liberalized Pakistan's economy and ushered in an information revolution by implementing new media laws, which finally broke the state's monopoly on electronic media. While liberals welcomed the issuance of TV broadcasting and FM radio licenses to private media outlets as a positive development, there was no framework in place for regulating cross-media ownership, thus paving the way for powerful private investors to gain political influence. Additionally, because cable operators do not share subscription profits with content producers (i.e. TV channels), the latter have to rely almost solely on commercial advertisements as their main source of revenue.[23]

Given Pakistan's history of state monopoly over television, what were the Musharraf regime's motivations for liberalizing media licensing? In 1990–1991, the first Gulf War had marked the beginning of foreign satellite broadcasting and the entry of commercial cable networks in India. This development allowed Indian news channels to cover the first live televised South Asian war, the 1999 Kargil War between India and Pakistan, with almost complete monopoly.[24] On the Pakistani side of the border, the same war was shrouded in mystery, with only the state channel Pakistan Television (PTV) issuing terse and vague updates. To this date, there are no official reports confirming that a decision was made to censor the ongoing failure of the war. According to defense analyst Shireen Mazari, "[Pakistan] lost the information war from the start because of the decision not to inform the public at home and an

[23] According to government figures released in September 2011, cable TV operators contribute Rs. 617 million in license fees to the Pakistan treasury. At that time, 2,800 cable operators were registered with the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority. Unofficial figures place the number of cable operators in the country at about 5,000 with their revenues exceeding Rs. 40 billion.
[24] Veena Naregal, "Media Reform and Regulation Since Liberalisation," *Economic and Political Weekly* 35, no. 21/22 (May 27, 2000), 1817–21.

equally half-hearted approach regarding what to give out to the international community."[25] This is not to say that a Pakistani counter to the deluge of Indian war reporting would have affected the outcome of the Kargil War—but rather to contextualize the need felt at the time for alternatives to state-owned sources of mass media. The Kargil War ended in defeat for Pakistan, and this result also affected then Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who was overthrown by Musharraf's military coup later that same year.

In a fashion typical of the military's perceived superiority over incompetent civilian rulers, the Musharraf regime justified its intervention on the grounds that it would revitalize the economy and swiftly announced privatizations of major public sector enterprises. This move was welcomed by the liberal elite as a means of ridding those sectors of Islamist labor unions.[26] The Musharraf regime's resolve to root out Islamist influence tied in with setting the groundwork for introducing a version of secularism (i.e. "enlightened moderation" oriented towards Western political allies, particularly in the immediate aftermath of 9/11).

Media deregulation took place in 2002, and the ensuing decade saw the cropping up of 92 private television channels (26 of which focused exclusively on news and current events) and over 130 FM radio stations. In her essay "Beyond the Crisis State," Maleeha Lodhi details the figures upon which the television industry targeted and, in effect, produced its viewing demographics. Lodhi employs the yardstick of consumption to measure the growth of the middle class between 2002 and 2007, listing the surges in car and television sales to substantiate the phenomenon. The growing buying power of the middle class resulted in huge profits for foreign investment that was pouring into the telecommunications sector. Mobile phone subscribers rose

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[25] See Subash Kapila, "Pakistan's Lessons from its Kargil War (1999): An Analysis," *South Asia Analysis Group*, Paper no. 1231, January 25, 2005.
[26] Humeira Iqtidar. *Secularizing Islamists?: Jama'at-e-Islami and Jama'at-ud-Da'wa in Urban Pakistan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 88.

from one million in 1999 to 120 million by 2010. In the same period, Internet subscribers multiplied fourfold so that by 2007, 10 percent of the population used the Internet, and figures for 2012 showing a rise to 16.8 percent. With well over half of all households owning a television set by 2005, there was a 118 percent annual growth in privately-owned cable TV networks in 2008–2009. These statistics and numbers signifying economic growth coincide unsurprisingly with the same years of the influx of American cash, some $6 billion, into Pakistani military coffers—propelling the military to new heights as the largest landlord, largest employer and largest business enterprise in the country.[27]

While middle class consumerism is seen as a significant feature of upward mobility, the analytical allure of quoting statistics for the rising figure of the middle class in developing economies often blurs aspirations of middle class ideals as unitary and homogenous. All this is to say that even when consumption patterns are haphazardly used in media commentary to broadly paint the elusive figure of the middle class, it is the ways in which these statistical figures are invoked in public debate that point to the insistence on a felt sense of social transformation. Acknowledged by the new forms of advertising and television programming, this electronic public sphere perpetuates a language of consumerism (Mazzarella 2003) which may target certain classes, but through its audio-visual medium, is understood by all. Hence, for our discussion here at least, the above statistics are useful in generalizing a picture of a more connected polity as an imagined, and widely circulated, image of the Pakistani public sphere.

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[27] Manan Ahmed, *Where the Wild Frontiers Are: Pakistan and the American Imagination* (Charlottesville: Just World Books, 2011), 247.

A Dictator Sets the Media Free

If you were to ask any Pakistani media professional to recount where it all began, then the story of privatized television in Pakistan would emerge from a now well-repeated premise: after authorizing a military coup in 1999, General Pervez Musharraf's government imposed a version of secularism under the banner of "Enlightened Moderation"[28] as a crucial policy that helped legitimize his regime. Aware of his role in the international media in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Musharraf positioned his liberal image towards Western political allies—promoting his ideals of modernity, tolerance, and democracy in *The Washington Post* and in numerous interviews, including an appearance on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*.[29] Within Pakistan, Musharraf's secular agenda to reform the country was welcomed by a beleaguered liberal elite, wary of what was seen as the increasing "Talibanization" of society since the 1990s—a wide-ranging term, which can be read to include state-led Islamization efforts, a rise in social conservatism and an increase in public displays of piety. Musharraf established his secular credentials with Pakistan's liberal elite and NGO-based civil society activists by inviting many of them into his government; a sharp contrast to the campaign of harassment directed against them by the Nawaz Sharif government, which had been working on passing a *sharia* bill in the National Parliament.[30] Thus, instead of

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[28] Pervez Musharraf, "A Plea for Enlightened Moderation," *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2004, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A5081-2004May31.html.

[29] On September 26, 2006, Musharraf was on the show to promote his memoirs *In the Line of Fire* (2006), a book in which he revealed that after 9/11, Richard Armitage (Deputy Secretary of State) told him that Pakistan would be "bombed back to the Stone Age if it failed to help Washington."

[30] Toor, *The State of Islam* (2011) p. 195: "so many NGO representatives joined the [Musharraf] government in one capacity or another as Ministers, advisers and consultants, that it became popularly referred to as the 'NGO government'." According to Toor, liberals were not the only ones to succumb to the charms of the General. Even the National Workers Party, a leftist group of trade unionists joined the military alliance.

condemning the overthrow of a democratically-elected government by a military dictator, most NGO activists openly celebrated it and welcomed the General as a savior. In a joint Q&A session with President George W. Bush in Islamabad in 2006, Musharraf listed several reasons that evidently expressed his commitment to democracy—introducing a local government system, empowering women and minorities in the political field, and deregulating the media:

> It may sound odd that I, being a military man, am talking about democracy. But let me assure you… We have liberated the media and the press. If you see this press today sitting around here, and the media, previously there was only one Pakistan television. Today, there are dozens of channels. All these people sitting around are the result of my democratization of Pakistan, opening the Pakistan society of the media—the print media and the electronic media, both. And they're totally liberated.[31]

Economic liberalization was thus understood as a political project of liberal democracy, not as a continuation of it, but as a break from the encroaching threat of illiberal forms of governance. If liberating the media was an economic strategy, it was also perceived as a move away from Islamization. Musharraf's envisioned liberal-ization of Pakistan eventually unraveled into a series of political blunders, highlighted and criticized by the many news channels he had so proudly encouraged. While his liberal reforms were hailed by many civil society activists as progressive (Zaidi 2008), such approval exemplifies the liberal elite tendency in postcolonial contexts to favor thinly-veiled forms of authoritarianism as long as it is secular in nature.[32] Indeed, in such scenarios it is important to note as Sahar Shafqat (2017) has done, that political liberalization is in fact, distinct from democratization and involves an easing of civil liberties

[31] Ahmed, 2011, 120.
[32] Think, for example, of the military control of Egypt after the revolutionary "Arab Spring" serving as a prominent regional example (Aziz 2016).

restrictions *within* the framework of authoritarianism (O'Donnell & Schmitter 1986; Stepan 1988).

It was during the critical series of events in 2007 that the media gathered much of its image as one of the political "game-changers." In early March, Musharraf had unsuccessfully tried to dismiss the Chief Justice of Pakistan, Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudry, after he refused to assist Musharraf in his plans to get another five-year mandate. Chaudry challenged his unconstitutional dismissal in the Supreme Court and, through an organized Lawyers Movement, received massive public support for his reinstatement. The extensive media coverage provided to the Lawyers Movement played a significant role in mobilizing civil society actors and brought large numbers of protestors to the streets, demanding an independent judiciary and democratic rule. A thirteen-member bench of the Supreme Court reinstated Chaudry as Chief Justice in July, a decision that was celebrated on primetime slots on every news channel. In November 2007, the army moved onto the streets of Islamabad, and the country's sixty-plus private channels were blocked. All thirteen judges including Chaudry were placed under house arrest and hundreds of protesting activist lawyers and members of human rights organizations were arrested. Pakistanis were once again left with state-run PTV, which ran Musharraf's announcement imposing Emergency Rule without commentary as their only option for news:

> We've been effectively blacked out in Pakistan, and news has become a contraband item…. this media explosion that you see now was one of the achievements that Musharraf used to talk about and very proudly point to as one of his great steps that he took. But it seems like, you know, he created in his mind a Frankenstein monster [sic].[33]

While most channels were allowed to resume broadcasting after agreeing to government guidelines, Musharraf's strategies to regain his stronghold could not gain traction and under

[33] "Pakistan's Media Struggles to Cope with Emergency Rule," *PBS NewsHour*, November 21, 2007, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/pakistans-media-struggles-to-cope-with-emergency-rule.

immense public pressure, he announced his resignation in August 2008. The lilting return to democracy in Pakistan appeared in the reshuffling of the usual suspects: poised to win the 2008 elections and return for a third tenure, Pakistan's first female prime minister Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in late 2007. The party she inherited from her father, the People's Party of Pakistan (PPP) came into power, and Asif Ali Zardari, her husband, was elected as President in 2008. Notorious as "Mr. Ten Percent" for skimming off of his wife's government contract deals in the 1990s, Zardari's government could not retain its hold on voters after five years of political scandals and corruption charges highlighted by a hyperbolic media. The PPP bowed out in the 2013 elections to make way for the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), with Nawaz Sharif returning as prime minister, a position he had held twice before in the early and late nineties. The 2013 elections were unique in their significance as the first transition of power between elected civilian governments in Pakistan's history—but these elections will also be noted for the remarkable rise of a serious contender to traditional political parties, the Pakistan *Tehreek-e-Insaf* (PTI) "Movement for Justice," a party spearheaded by a celebrated national icon, Imran Khan. Eventually emerging victorious in the 2018 elections, Imran Khan's political journey to the position of prime minister is in no small part owed to the unprecedented publicity provided by a privatized news media landscape, particularly of the series of protests orchestrated by Khan's party in Islamabad in 2014. In the following section, I will contextualize this media coverage, with a focus on the English-language news media commentary of Imran Khan, in order to show how the Pakistani liberal narrative of the transformation of the political mediascape turns most anxiously on the specter of populist politics, particularly on the illiberal nature of such figurations.

Naya Pakistan: The Rise of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI)

While the PTI had been attempting to make political inroads since 1997 without much success, it was never before afforded the kind of massive public attention granted to it in the elections of 2013. I am interested primarily in the ways in which English language news commentary positioned Imran Khan and his political party in two identifiable phases. Cautiously optimistic, the first wave of commentary commended the *Kaptaan* ("Captain," Imran Khan's moniker) for managing to tap into a diverse range of previously apolitical voters, including middle-class women and young professionals. The second stage involved a blistering vilification of his political strategies, now labeled as a form of "bourgeois populism" after his party launched massive protests in 2014. Before I unpack both of these phases to draw out my argument, it is important to understand the complicated appeal Imran Khan holds as a public personality in Pakistan for both his supporters and detractors.

An ex-cricketer who captained the national team in their cricket World Cup glory of 1992, Khan was enshrined as a beloved figure for much of the 80s and 90s, particularly in a public imagination charged with religious-like fervor of the colonial sport. Khan's Oxford education, his playboy persona, and his marriage to a British socialite cemented his sociability ranks in the upper-class circles of liberal Pakistani privilege. These latter "credentials" limited his ability to push his political career forward in the late 90s, and he spent many years reaffirming his born-again Muslim-ness before he was able to capitalize on the tried-and-tested platform of combining nationalism and religion. Pakistan's history is replete with politicians and military dictators using this powerful combination to further their careers, and Khan's eventual arrival on this popular platform coincided with the aftermath of 9/11 and the enraged sentiments of a nation who saw the ceding of their sovereign airspace to American drones.

The fortuitous effect of the timing of Khan's party building momentum to coincide with the changing media landscape in Pakistan cannot be overstated as it allowed the PTI to establish itself as both a media-savvy party and one attuned to the concerns of a disaffected urban middle class. Campaigning for an end to official corruption and promising to reject American aid, Khan declared that he would stop CIA drone strikes in Pakistan's tribal frontier regions and bring peace talks with militants. As the outsider-savior, his lofty ambitions electrified primetime television and managed to appeal to a rapidly urbanizing class of Pakistanis who could envision his techno-bureaucratic solutions as a cure to the country's problems. Indeed, the public platform provided to Khan resembled the nearly unanimous media support and coverage afforded to the 2011 anti-corruption movement in India. Led by Anna Hazare and Arvind Kejriwal, the largely urban movement employed the classically populist language of the "aam admi" (common man) combating the predatory "political classes," demanding legal accountability in governance and a new culture of "clean and transparent" politics (Roy 2014; Sitapati 2011). The anti-corruption movement's enabling relationship with the Indian media resembled many contemporaneous social movements in other parts of the world, whether the Arab Spring uprisings or the various Euro-American Occupy movements, as noted by Chakravartty & Roy (2015), despite the "substantial divergence of its sociological constitution and of the normative import of its actual political claims as an essentially status quo-ist sociopolitical formation."[34] That being said, my intention here in focusing on Imran Khan's mediatized rise to prominence is not to pursue a chain of causality, nor is it meant to outline a middle-class politics peculiar to South Asia. Rather, against the backdrop of what Francis Cody has called a "postcolonial publicity," I am

[34] Paula Chakravartty and Srirupa Roy, "Mr. Modi Goes to Delhi: Mediated Populism and the 2014 Indian Elections," *Television & New Media* 16, no. 4 (2015): 315. https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476415573957.

interested in contextualizing both the appeal and the distrust that Khan attracts in contemporary Pakistan to better situate how certain elements that are seen as "deviation, failed replication, or crisis from a liberal normative perspective… can be brought closer to our understanding of democracy in the age of deep mediatization."[35]

Muslim Others in Post-Liberalized Pakistan

For his detractors, Imran Khan's own turn to religion (particularly after a very public, glamorous lifestyle in his prime cricketing days) was seen to be opportunistic and insincere, lacking the overt physical transformation of what is expected from public religious figures. Instead, Khan's routine avoidance of outright condemnation of the Taliban, his insistence on brokering peace talks with militants, and his consistent anti-American rhetoric have led his Westernized elite critics to mockingly label him "Taliban Khan." The circulation of such criticism is abundant within English print newspapers, and while the audiences of these news outlets consist of a privileged minority in Pakistan, it is nevertheless noteworthy that these narratives are re-circulated by international news commentary on Pakistani politics, as is illustrated by the case of Khan's treatment in a television interview with Mehdi Hasan, host of the Al Jazeera English news program *Up Front* on July 29, 2016. Maintaining his well-known, fast-paced debating style, Hasan pulled no punches:

> Mehdi Hasan: You've been accused of being soft on the Taliban, of being linked to the Taliban, and some of your critics have even dubbed you 'Taliban Khan'—because in the words of the Pakistani journalist Cyril Almeida, you have "mainstreamed extremism." It's an allegation even in the West, in the outside world, we hear more and more that Imran Khan is soft on the Taliban, that he distinguishes between good and bad Taliban. What's your response to such

[35] Francis Cody, "Populist Publics: Print Capitalism and Crowd Violence Beyond Liberal Frameworks. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 35, no. 1 (2015): 52. https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-2876092.

criticisms?[36]

> Imran Khan: The phenomenon of Taliban has to be understood, there were no militant Taliban in Pakistan when 9/11 took place. There were no militant Taliban in Pakistan right up till 2004. The militancy started in Pakistan when Pakistan Army went into our tribal areas…and there was collateral damage. We didn't have ideological Taliban as a movement. This was a reaction to the Pakistan Army seen as going into these areas at the behest of the Americans to root out al-Qaida.
>
> Mehdi Hasan: People would say you're very good at analyzing the subject, you're very good at understanding the problem, but you don't condemn it as much as other people.
>
> Imran Khan: [exasperated sigh while shaking head] This is absolute nonsense. It's just not true. All you have to do is look at my statements for the past 10 years. Any bomb attack, every human being would condemn where innocents are being killed…
>
> Mehdi Hasan: Do you consider the Taliban to be a terrorist group?
>
> Imran Khan: [raises both hands to frame his face, taking a physically emphatic stance] Yes. There are—yes, yes, yes. Yes, they are [short exasperated laugh]. Anyone who kills innocent people are terrorists!

The exchange continues in this tone, with Mehdi Hasan asking pointed questions and Imran Khan defending himself from the "liberal" accusations of his "illiberal" sympathies. The evident exasperation on display signifies both Imran Khan's strategy to emphatically deny claims of sympathizing with the Taliban during an interview for an English-language news program with an international audience, as well as an irritation with having to state a seemingly obvious stance on the notorious militant group.

However, for viewers familiar with Khan's political maneuvering, and his party's recent considerable electoral gains in a rapidly urbanizing Pakistan, such "obvious" statements were to be taken with a grain of salt. Indeed, Mehdi Hasan's line of questioning draws directly from

[36] "Pakistan's Imran Khan on the Talbian and Nawaz Sharif," Up Front, Al Jazeera, July 29, 2016, https://www.aljazeera.com/program/upfront/2016/7/29/pakistans-imran-khan-on-the-taliban-and-nawaz-sharif.

liberal news sources within Pakistan that have contributed to developing a narrative of suspicion when confronting religiously conservative political candidates. While this concern may often be warranted, the failure to contextualize liberal anxieties in Muslim-majority publics results in both a limited understanding of the mass mediation of populist rhetoric in such environments, as well as a regurgitation of a colonial-esque lexicon in addressing the masses.

“Container” Politics: Unfolding of a Media Spectacle in the Red Zone

In 2014, Imran Khan’s PTI and their supporters culminated their Azadi March (Freedom March) by occupying the “Red Zone” in Islamabad—a generally secure and sensitive site surrounding the Parliament House in the capital city—demanding an independent inquiry into the rigging allegations of the 2013 elections and ultimately calling for Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif’s immediate resignation. Joined by another political party, Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT), headed by its own charismatic leader and with distinct grievances against the government, PAT supporters eventually left the protest site after 67 days, but the PTI was adamant in its demands, maintaining street presence for 126 days—the longest record of continuous protest in Pakistan and attracting larger media scrutiny to what appeared to be an ineffective bargaining tool.

Known as dharna—a non-violent mode of protest popularized in colonial and postcolonial India—this kind of political action takes the form of an aggrieved party sitting at the offender’s door until justice is received. Between the months of August and December 2014, tens of thousands of supporters would gather daily to listen to fiery speeches, addressed to the crowd from the top of shipping containers, hastily made into stages. While the presence of large metal shipping containers outside the premises of shipping ports and industrial sites is almost always associated with security blockades in urban centers of Pakistan, the use of such containers in the

dharnas symbolized the ability of a popular political party to breach those same security measures. Often referred to as the "container dharna," the English news commentary on these protests was usually a mixture of disdain and grudging acknowledgement. *Dawn* frequently published opinion pieces by analysts charting the progress of the protests. Consider the following words by the Secretary General of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, I.A. Rehman:

> The container dharna reinforced the model of elite-dictated discourse. The dharna leaders posed as messiahs, spoke down to the people from raised pulpits and presented oversimplified answers to the country's endemic crisis… However, the dharna also made some positive contribution to Pakistan's politics—electoral fraud, corruption, indifference to the rights and interests of women, labour, peasantry, the jobless youth, policies of a client state, rulers' extravagant lifestyle, etc., were brought into public discourse as basic issues that merited immediate action.[37]

The skepticism against "container politics" was premised on the inevitable failure to sustain popular movements of resistance and, notably, the "populist quality" of the supporters involved. As the journalist Zahid Hussain noted in his column:

> Without Tahirul Qadri's dedicated followers, the staying power of the largely young and middle-class supporters of the PTI remains doubtful. Surely, populism and the politics of agitation have their own limitations. It is one thing to draw large crowds at rallies and quite another to sustain the momentum and bring down an elected government, however inept it may be.[38]

It was, indeed, the marking of the PAT and their religious cleric leader Tahirul Qadri as a purer form of "faithful" following that differentiated them from PTI's supporters who were seen to be upper- to middle-class novices, entering the political arena for the first time, trickling into the protest site after spending the day at the office, and enjoying the musical entertainment provided at evening rallies. That the presence of devoted, religious masses on the streets indexes "incredible" populist action speaks to the ways in which the physical public sphere continues to be imagined in the Pakistani mediascape.

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[37] I.A. Rehman, "Year of the Dharna, *Dawn*, January 1, 2015. https://www.dawn.com/news/1154293.
[38] Zahid Hussain, "The Limits of Populism," *Dawn,* November 26, 2014, https://www.dawn.com/news/1146863.

Figure 4. Tahirul Qadri (L) and Imran Khan (R) at the 2014 dharna.[39]

GEO News: A Marked Media Channel

While Imran Khan's presumably main motive for marching on the capital was in protest of an allegedly rigged election in 2013, his party laid a large amount of blame on GEO News for showing early non-official and partial results in favor of the majority party PMLN, which went on to win the election. Claiming that the media giant was complicit in the rigging, Imran Khan thundered against GEO in rousing speeches to his supporters, labeling them traitors of the nation. Anti-GEO sentiment was demonstrably high during the dharna, and the backlash fell largely on

[39] EconomicTimes.com.

the low-level reporters and cameramen who bore the easily identifiable GEO logos and were sent out to cover the protests. Laila, a senior producer at GEO, was wistful when she remembered her junior staff asking for a different assignment:

> They'd say, 'Please don't send us! You don't know how bad the situation is!' And well, the rest of the production team sitting in Karachi would say, 'how bad could it be? It's great footage!'… We really dismissed any real threat of reporting from a dharna—I mean it's not like your life is in danger—but I only actually understood when I decided to go along to cover the Lahore jalsa (protest).[40]

She recounted a scene for me that has become a well-known story amongst journalists and news media professionals, when GEO's female reporter Sana Mirza was standing on top of a DSNG van (Digital Satellite News Gathering), surrounded by a sea of PTI supporters, largely young men, who were heckling and throwing bottles at her, waiting for her to fall during a live broadcast. Senior male journalists, sitting in the GEO news studio spoke directly to Mirza on-air for moral support, urging her to stay calm and composed as she wiped back tears (a clip that was replayed multiple times throughout the news cycle for that day). Trapped inside the DSNG van, Mirza's producer, Laila, recalled feeling helpless in that moment:

> We couldn't get out. We were completely surrounded by men—the van was moving, shifting by the weight of the crowd, and if anyone cracked open a door, we were terrified we would be carried out somehow. *The PTI organizers could never really control their supporters*. I can't imagine what Fox News would do if the Democrats had done this to them at a rally. I mean, they would have probably launched their own dharna on the side.[41]

The distinction drawn in this quote between "the PTI organizers" and their "supporters" is critical to understanding the figuration of what kinds of PTI supporters elicit fear of a threateningly uncontrollable mob. Indeed, the fact that the PTI has managed to both build and maintain middle-class appeal rests not only with a charismatic Imran Khan, but on the very

[40] Personal interview, 2014–2016.
[41] Ibid.

public personae that represent the core of the party's organizational members—non-feudal, urban, educated professionals, some of which gave up lucrative careers in multinational corporations to build a "Naya Pakistan." And yet, a movement is not understood as fully legitimate before it is seen to have "mass" support. While political parties are quick to label opposing street demonstrations as comprised of "rent-a-crowds" or "paid supporters," they are less prone to acknowledge or condemn unsavory actions of their own teeming enthusiasts.[42] This excerpt is telling in the moving target of elite denigration towards groups suspected of illiberal tendencies, with Imran Khan followers as highly suspect. If the individual typical PTI supporter is a "decent" middle-class person, then his participation in a mob-like scenario is simultaneously read as a potential threat, now as a zealous political supporter, revealing his inner "irrational" self. That Laila equates her employer network GEO with Fox News is indicative of her understanding of the cross-cultural industry comparisons between American and Pakistani news networks. In this comparison, GEO is indeed the Fox News of Pakistan, the "sensationalist" news brand, but as the visible target of the ire of the PTI mob, she views her channel as an underdog, fighting a "mainstream" onslaught of negative criticism. The phenomenon of zealous political supporters is certainly not new, and neither is the liberal elite denigration of such groups. However, the emergence of alternate mass media platforms through which these groups are both imagined and visualized on television screens and online does call for further reflection on the politics of the visibility of crowds and their subsequent containment.

[42] As noted by Lisa Björkman (2015), the mechanism of "cash for crowd" should not be seen as a simple purchase of presence, but rather it can demonstrate crowd participants' potential willingness to support a bid for office. In the case of the PTI dharna, the crowd in turn became its own audience, watching and waiting to see how their kaptaan would fare.

The Specter of the Masses

In the 1970s, Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto's rise to power through the formation of the People's Party of Pakistan (PPP) and his successful election as prime minister marked the culmination of Pakistan's populist phase (Toor 2011). Bhutto drew his ethnic support base largely from the Sindh province and his party supporters had earned the term "jiyaley," denoting strength, the term refers to those people who would sacrifice themselves for Bhutto, and whose passion and zealous support for the party leader would translate into gathering mass numbers in the streets as well as at the ballot box. Indeed, personalized yet hierarchical relations of political support are one of the ways in which systems of ethnic and tribal patronage ensure political participation of the bulk of the largely illiterate voting electorate in Pakistan.

Against this backdrop, it is significant to note that the 2013 elections were contested with an additional platform of political campaigning—that of social media—and the most prominent party to do so was the Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI). Notable for their rapid and abusive Twitter responses to any criticism of their kaptaan ("captain") Imran Khan, online supporters of the PTI assumed a term of their own—"insafians." This moniker (with the English affix "–ians" added to the party's key term "insaf"/justice) aptly reflects the imagined demographic of online PTI supporters as urban, educated, and upwardly middle class. Positioning themselves as rational actors, insafians' online campaigning for Imran Khan relied on tropes that depicted traditional support for dynastic political parties (such as the PPP jiyaley) as uncritical and uneducated—symptomatic of the "problem of the masses" where ethnic and tribal loyalties kept returning the same corrupt political parties into power. If PTI organizers had built a social media campaign on the basis of appealing to urban apolitical voters, their media savvy strategies also enabled the

mushrooming of loyal Twitter trolls. At the cost of being particularly abusive in their rhetoric, insafians were identifiable online by their impassioned defense of the PTI and Imran Khan wherever hashtags using these key terms could be found. Female political figures, journalists, and television talk show hosts in particular who would find themselves the targets of such Twitter troll attacks would often tweet demands to PTI organizers to "control" their insafians—articulating the distinction between the two (i.e. that only the former could be reasoned with). In Chapter 3, I discuss the gendered hierarchies that female journalists find themselves caught in, but for now, it is significant to note that the upper middle-class rendering of PTI online supporters as reminiscent of "the mob" or the "masses" is precisely because of the ideological threat the PTI poses—with a leader (Imran Khan) who popularly endorses the term "liberal fascists" for his detractors and is quick to facilitate the demands of religious groups—PTI supporters are thus easily imagined as slipping across the binary of the educated modern into the irrational Islamist. In contrast to the seeming deceptive figure of the PTI male supporter, let us now consider the unprecedented televisual coverage of female PTI supporters during the 2014 dharna.

Figure 5. Female PTI supporters taking a selfie at the dharna, 2014.[43]

While news channels were seen to be providing almost unlimited airtime to the protests, the occasional focus on female PTI supporters served a specific purpose. Visually urban elements of the party's female following were highlighted by news cameras zooming in on well-dressed, middle-aged women sporting sunglasses and handbags and attractive young women adorned in PTI flag colors. When approached by reporters and cameramen, female supporters would eagerly address Imran Khan directly through the camera to express their admiration for him, commenting on their favorable experience of the protests, and of feeling safe in this public setting. The framing of the PTI dharna (by its own supporters, at least) was that of "family friendly" protests that encouraged women to physically participate in the public demand for accountability from the government. Indeed, PTI spokespeople played such optics to their advantage when they appeared on news talk show programs, pointing to these visuals as validating both the urban middle-class appeal their party held and their distinctness from "mob politics." Predictably, news

[43] Nation.com.pk.

media channels were not as interested in the optics of the many burqa-clad female protestors in the crowd, camped out in the streets with their families to support their party's leader, the religious cleric Tahirul Qadri. This contrast follows the lack of media attention paid to the visibility of overtly religious figures prominent in the Pakistani mediascape—religious political party members, preachers and Islamic televangelists, recognizable through their long beards and religious attire, are easily dismissed both by a liberal elite and an aspiring middle class. The former has long held figures of such orthodoxy to be irrelevant for the maintenance of the status quo, and the latter cannot rely on such groups to offer upward socioeconomic mobility. Instead, critical media commentary accompanying the politics of mediatized populism are reserved for troublingly conservative, yet charismatic public figures like Imran Khan; the classic "insider-outsider," whose privileged social position allows him to gain political credibility as a feasible savior to corrupt politics-as-usual, particularly at a time when his anti-American rhetoric was attractive to an urbanizing youth coming of age post 9/11—eager for Western technological imports while rejecting the accompanying cultural imperialism. Commenting on this form of liberal secular "Islamo-discomfort" via the deluge of media criticism on Imran Khan's ascendency to power, SherAli Tareen (2019) notes how the exported caricature of "Taliban Khan" filtered media narratives that barely concealed the "pressing liberal desire to tame and moderate Islam and Muslims so as to render them amenable to the protocols of secular modernity."[44] In order to understand why the religious right appears so threatening in the news mediascape, we can turn to Naveeda Khan's (2012) analysis of the public perception of everyday religious figures in urban Pakistan. In her book *Muslim Becoming* (2012), Khan devotes a chapter to the public skepticism surrounding the religious authority-figure of the

[44] SherAli Tareen, "The Aspirations and Ambiguities of De-Colonial Politics," September 10, 2019, *Public Seminar*, https://publicseminar.org/essays/the-aspirations-and-ambiguities-of-de-colonial-politics/.

"mullah/maulwi"—a belittling title that refers to an overtly religious man, whose religiosity is most often perceived at the superficial level of his styled appearances. When prompted to describe how they identified a mullah, one of Khan's respondents explains: "[If he] wears his cap a certain way, keeps his beard a particular length, wears his pants this high… this person doesn't actually have to be an educated religious scholar. If he looks a certain way, then people fear he is going to act a certain way… most likely a bad-tempered religious person."[45]

It is common to come across the derogatory use of "mullah" and "maulwi" in everyday interactions in Pakistan and indeed, my own surname has proved to be the subject of much bemusement to new acquaintances. "Maulwi," used interchangeably with "mullah," technically means "learned master." Once used as a title of respect, it increasingly refers to those educated in the religious sciences. In its attenuated form, the term refers more specifically to *ulema* (religious scholars) of low-to middle-class origins who have not completed the course of study to make them experts of the highest ranks.[46] My intent in picking up on Khan's usage of "maulwi" is to build upon her observation of this figure as the Muslim Other. While the characterization of the Muslim *as* Other has a deep history in Western literature, the less-than-subtle remains of this discourse within the liberal mainstream points to a "palpable dis-ease with Islam," a result of the long exposure to "Orientalist and Islamophobic discourses that ideologues such as Bernard Lewis have continuously fed for several decades, and that is being supplemented and affirmed by a new generation of intellectuals,[47] many of them trading on their 'authenticity' as Muslims."[48]

[45] Naveeda Khan. *Muslim Becoming: Aspiration and Skepticism in Pakistan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 147.

[46] See Khan, *Muslim Becoming*, Chapter 5 for a detailed analysis of these semantics.
[47] Notable examples are Ayaan Hirsi Ali's *Infidel* (2007) and Irshad Manji's *The Trouble with Islam* (2004).
[48] Sadia Toor, "Imperialist Feminism Redux." *Dialectical Anthropology*, (2012), 3.

Embroiled in the Global War on Terror after 9/11, and battling its own sectarian outfits, the widespread conspiracy rhetoric of foreign agents can no longer hold when Pakistan's own religious militant groups claim responsibility for violent domestic attacks. Thus the character of the maulwi as the Muslim Other finds its extreme rendition in the form of the militant fundamentalist. Liberal fears of the increasing hegemony of the religious right in the public sphere (despite their constant failure at the polls) can be located in the critique levied at both figures like Imran Khan—"He is the beardless internal 'other' who is not quite as easily dismissible as the body of the bearded religious brown man"[49]—as well as political talk show hosts for pandering to religious sentiment, with the Taseer assassination becoming a cited example. As one blogger put it: "[This is] just one of the many examples which can be cited where media's leading anchors, or *media mujahideen*, in their drive for ratings and an urge to appear holier-than-thou, [have] transgressed every professional and ethical limit."[50]

The term "media mujahideen" is referenced from a popularly quoted talk given by Pervez Hoodbhoy in 2010. An eminent Pakistani nuclear physicist, Hoodbhoy is the public face of rationalist opinion, often invited on political talk shows and cited in the international press; known for his liberal views and his stance on calling for increased military action in confronting the Taliban. Hoodbhoy describes his coinage of the media mujahideen to refer to young television anchors who came of age during and since the Zia years, and thus, according to him, subsequently brought an Islamicist ethos into the "independent media," becoming the "purveyors

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[49] SherAli Tareen, "Liberal Fundamentalists and Imranophobia," *Global Village Space*, December 3, 2017, https://www.globalvillagespace.com/liberal-fundamentalists-and-imranophobia/.
[50] Shafaat Shafi, "Meher Bokhari's Bid for 'Muslim' Credibility Cost Taseer His Life." *Viewpoint*, no. 137, February 17, 2011. http://www.viewpointonline.net/meher-bokharis-bid-for-muslim-credibility-cost-taseer-his-life.html.

of conspiracy theories, hysterical in their denunciation of the United States and vocal in support of the Taliban."[51]

This description fittingly demonstrates the liberal figuration of populist Urdu language media as the breeding site for irrational and hyperbolical anchors. Indeed, the association of these figures with an extreme Muslim Other, in this case the mujahideen,[52] becomes necessary in order to distance such persons from the 'media' itself. Not surprisingly, the rhetorical use of the mujahideen in this way aims to conjure imagery of an anti-Western (thus un-modern and un-civil) Islamist force—effectively obscuring the history of the explicit support the Afghan mujahideen had received from the United States in the 1980s, hailed by Western allies as "freedom fighters" for pushing back the ideological and territorial boundaries of Soviet-led communism. This incoherent critique of the liberated mass media shifts the focus on the threat of an encroaching Islamization of society and avoids a deeper scrutiny of the commercial interests of private media businesses to profit from populist programming.

Returning to the Taseer case described at the beginning of this chapter, we see the same liberal conundrum emerging with media commentary on the (in)visibility of conservative figures on television screens: the rewarding salaries offered to attract media personalities like Meher Bukhari affirms why provocative anchors are often seen channel-hopping, removed from one controversy to another, but always to reappear during primetime slots. Bukhari was not the only anchor to project an anti-Taseer stance in the Bibi case, and yet she symbolizes the secularist's nightmare precisely because her media representation showed a person whose superficial

[51] Fawzia Afzal Khan, "Role of Media in Salman Taseer's Killing," January 30, 2011. http://fawziaafzalkhan.webs.com/apps/blog/entries/show/5986221-role-of-media-in-salmaan-taseer-s-killing.

[52] When translated, "mujahideen" refers to those who struggle in the way of God. In its modern day context, the term is attributed to Afghan opposition groups that rebelled against the Soviet invasion in 1980. See Burki (1991) for a history of how the mujahideen were strategically supported by the U.S. in order to stem the influence of communist ideology.

appearance, styled in modern fashion, could be mistaken for a secularist: "But Bokhari is no fundamentalist. She doesn't cover her hair, dresses in western clothing and has vociferously denounced the Taliban."[53] Indeed, the critique of Bukhari can be read to include both contempt and confusion: "What does this mean when a journalist who is clearly not a fundamentalist plays one on TV?"[54] Such impersonation of extremist characteristics becomes cause for liberal anxiety particularly as these figures inhabit spaces and appearances that are deceptively non-extreme. An example of the concern over such deception is evident in a comment made by Abbas Nasir (former head of Dawn News television): "My real worry is that Pakistan is moving rightwards [again], and this time the face won't have a beard."[55]

Figure 6. Screen grab of Meher Bukhari on her show News Beat in 2011.[56]

[53] Waraich, "Why Did a Trusted Bodyguard."
[54] "Media Hostility – Entertainment or Incitement?" January 29, 2011, *Pakistan Media Watch*, http://pakistanmediawatch.com/2011/01/29/media-hostility-%e2%80%93-entertainment-or-incitement/. This website is no longer available, and it has been archived: https://web.archive.org/web/20210309182103/http://pakistanmediawatch.com/.
[55] Declan Walsh, "For Many in Pakistan, a Television Show Goes Too Far." January 27, 2012, *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/27/world/asia/for-many-in-pakistan-a-television-show-goes-too-far.html?pagewanted=1.
[56] CafePyala.com.

Within the general stream of media talk, there has been a larger focus on scrutinizing women in the news media. Indeed, whether during the reign of General Zia or of General Musharraf, women and their public image[57] have served as the ideological identity markers of the regressive or liberal potential of a regime. That an "independent" media could produce such Western-stylized, modern personalities was a welcoming factor for the liberal minority, but the regression of these figures into illiberal representatives was perceived as all the more unsettling given their tailored television presence—a particularly duplicitous deception as the following complaints show:

> We need to stand up to these so-called 'educated' but otherwise unethical anchors who show up in western dresses, speak confident English but in fact have a very conservative and bigoted agenda.[58]
>
> …[I]t was not the bearded clerics but the clean shaved TV show host Mubasher Lucman who drew national attention to the alleged blasphemy and devoted two episodes of his talk show to protesting this 'assault on the sentiments of the nation.'[59]

The assumption therefore is that *actual* "educated, western-clothed, English speaking personalities" (associated with the figure of the secular liberal) would not resort to inflammatory tactics that are stereotypically associated with "bearded clerics" delivering thundering religious sermons to faithful masses. It is thus the discomfort of religious excess from decidedly non-

[57] There is much to be said about the transformation of female representation on Pakistani television. In the thirty-year phase of state TV, female news anchors were generally elderly women, conservatively dressed with heads covered and recited news coverage in subdued tones. Today, the dramatic refashioning of political talk show hosts has produced both male and female personalities that have developed into news channel brand names. While male figures are advertised on their experience as seasoned news journalists (many of them having made the transition from Urdu newspaper columnists to lucrative careers in news television), female talk show hosts are packaged in a manner that prioritizes their youth, attractiveness and particularly confidence, which often translates on screen into an aggressive interrogation style.

[58] Ammara Ahmed, *ViewPoint* Online, 141, February 7, 2013, http://criticalppp.com/archives/242403.

[59] Fatima Tassadiq, "Those in Pakistan Who Accused Amjad Sabri of Blasphemy Are Now Mourning His Death," *The Wire*, June 26, 2016, https://thewire.in/culture/those-in-pakistan-who-accused-amjad-sabri-of-blasphemy-are-now-mourning-his-death.

religious imagery on Pakistani news channels that troubles liberal elite sensibilities, funneling their media criticism when corporate television channels generously reward on-screen "unprofessional" behavior by anchors who appear "secular" but convey "intolerant" attitudes. The immense popularity of religious television programming (Kazi 2018), with shows hosted by *ulema* (religious male scholars, in the fitting attire of traditional clothing and long beards), does not garner the same attention in the Pakistani news mediascape in comparison to the interest given to religious rhetoric used in non-religious programs (political talk shows in particular). Indeed, it is the blurring and threat of collapse of the binary that distinguishes the secular from the religious that sounds the alarm in the liberal anxious discourse—an alarm that questions the supposed stability of this binary, particularly in the context of mass publicity.

Naveeda Khan (2012) has contextualized the roots of this anxiety by tracing the growing resentment by the upper classes of Zia's Islamization process in the 1980s. It was during this time that domestic religiosity was spurred by Zia's agreement with the United States to engage Pakistan in the Afghan-Soviet war. By siding with the Afghan *mujahideen*, both the Pakistani military and intelligence agencies received financial support from the U.S. and Saudi Arabia (Haqqani 2005; Rashid 2008). In this phase of Zia's regime, the perception of Pakistan's failing political condition was brought to bear not on Islam per se, but on the state endorsement of the *ulema*—the community of religious scholars who serve as guardians and interpreters of *sharia* (Islamic jurisprudence) among other religious domains.[60] The mockery of the figure of the maulwi is then discernable from what appeared to be the seeping of religious authority into everyday life, achieved in particular through modes of mass media. The religious regulation of the public sphere was to continue far beyond the confines of Zia's program of Islamization, and

[60] See Khan, *Muslim Becoming* (2012).

indeed continues to trouble Pakistani liberals in the post-liberalization era. This perception is most vividly encapsulated by Zia himself in a televised speech to the nation in 1982:

> People think that they have cracked a big joke by branding Radio Pakistan or Pakistan Television as a religious school which will be greeted by peals of laughter by others. But alas, these people are a joke themselves. They say what kind of people are they who have a grouse against the ban imposed in Pakistan on the performance of vulgar dances, on nightclubs and dancing houses? Lashes are administered for drinking. Films are properly pruned and edited before they are shown on television. The call for prayer reverberates from radio all the time. *The Maulwi has got stuck on the TV screen; and let me tell you he will remain stuck there*.[61]

Does the specter of Zia's prescient threat haunt Pakistani television screens today? And is the threat greater if one cannot actually recognize the Maulwi because he is clean shaven or a woman? An answer from either end of a polarized ideological spectrum would provide little insight without examining the socio-historical significance of how such discourses affect our understandings of what modern and democratic public spheres are imagined to constitute. My intent in pulling examples from English print commentary on illiberal figures such as Imran Khan was to highlight the ways in which a dismissal of the perceived populism at the PTI *dharna*—similar to what Ernesto Laclau (2005) has termed "the denigration of the masses"—carried with it the general complaints: accusations of marginality, transitoriness, pure rhetoric, vagueness, manipulation, and so forth.[62] Imran Khan's rightward religious shift and the widespread appeal such a position had brought him appeared to threaten the assumed stability of the ideological class binaries in postcolonial Pakistan. That having been said, it is precisely in the mediatized illiberal figuration of Imran Khan and his mass of supporters that we are confronted with what Chantal Mouffe (2000) has shown to be the *contingent* articulation between liberalism and democracy. The anxiety over the implications of such contingencies takes the form of a

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[61] Inaugural address by President General Mohammad Zia-ul-Haq, Government of Pakistan (1982: 25). Emphasis is mine.
[62] Ernesto Laclau. *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005), 63.

discourse of disdain in the English language press, where liberals hoped an information revolution would aid a progressive public sphere via the modernizing technology of television. Within my network of news media professionals, the worrying acknowledgement of the media's complicity in stoking sectarian violence would appear to signal the seemingly effortless progression of rightist Islamic ideologies in contemporary Pakistan, and yet, in the face of this very rightward shift, how do we account for the sudden unity of institutional forces, particularly "all power centers," as Absar Alam put it, to effectively muzzle the mass publicity that would have otherwise been afforded to the protests against the state execution of Mumtaz Qadri? This form of implicit censorship is but one example of the ways in which Pakistani journalists are highly attentive to the ways in which their work remains bounded in general by the state and, in particular, the deep state which stands between a liberal imagination of civil society under conditions of democracy and an illiberal non-secular populism as secular but illiberal. Indeed, it is the symbolic positioning of such debates within the post-liberalized context of a commercial mediascape that allows for a re-assessment of our prevalent understanding of mass publicity in general. The remaining chapters will aim to demonstrate how a grounded study of the everyday practices and challenges facing news media professionals can allow for a nuanced understanding of the politics of media production in Pakistan.

CHAPTER 2

THE PROBLEM WITH TRAINING JOURNALISTS

Prologue

It was the summer of 2008 in Karachi. I had my first job lined up after graduating with a Social Sciences undergraduate degree and I was terribly excited about my very important title of "Associate Producer" in the Current Affairs department at GEO News. My interview had been conducted entirely in English and I had been expecting to join the GEO English team—it was to be the first English language news channel in Pakistan. I discovered on my first day of work however, that I was actually assigned to the "regular", i.e., "Urdu" side of the news channel, and my job was to actually translate Current Affairs programming from Urdu to English, so as to develop English language formats for the GEO English department to use. I can still recall my sinking feeling at being led to the office of the "Urdu" Current Affairs department in a decrepit building on I.I. Chundrigrar Road. The peeling paint and decades of neglect on the exterior of the building belied the spruced-up interiors of a modernized, bustling newsroom, but it was still significantly older and more worn out than the sparkling new office accommodations provided to the GEO English team down the road. On my first day on the job, I marched up to my boss's office to ask if there had been some paperwork error—surely, I should be working in the GEO English department, shouldn't I? He sized me up in a beat and his smirking reply quickly put the matter to rest: "Listen up *beta*, there won't be an English department soon, so you're lucky you're even here. Now get out of my office."[1]

[1] Personal communication, 2008.

Figure 7. Building exterior of the GEO News office in Karachi.[2]

In the following months, I settled into the routine of creating programming skeletons, translating existing Urdu programming content, hung around recording sessions of different talk show programs and practiced keyboard shortcuts in the editing room. The GEO office was littered with screens—computer screens on every desk space available and television screens covering wall space, each showing a competing local news channel. Some screens would have foreign news channels running, CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera, etc., and prominent memories of

[2] Photo by author, 2016.

occasional references to Fox News stand out, particularly as Fox was taken as the model on which to develop vibrant news programming.[3] One such example was a conversation amongst a few male senior colleagues while they were watching an episode of the morning show "Fox & Friends" on Fox News—the format of the show is a couple of hosts sitting on a sofa, discussing the news in a relaxed, informal manner. My supervisor shook his head at the screen and said out loud in Urdu "*Yeh yahan nahin chaleyga*"/"This won't work here," and proceeded to tell us why.

> Look at the way they're sitting next to each other—(a male host and female host), so casual! The conversation is so natural! If we tried this (to seat male and female news presenters) on the same sofa, the mullahs would burn the office!
>
> Forget the mullahs, yaar, our people wouldn't even know how to talk to each other like this—we're stuck with our *Khabarnama* anchors.

The assumption that the "mullahs" (a term that refers to the religious right and used here disparagingly) would take violent offense to such on-screen mingling in Pakistan might today be acknowledged as overt exaggeration—indeed, the plethora of religiously-objectionable content available to the average viewer in the year 2020 suggests that television producers can safely disregard the potential of such a threat. But, back in 2008, Pakistan's televisual landscape (while populated at the time with a handful of private news channels) had yet to be coherently defined by any particular style of news delivery. Thus, we can read the dismissive reference to "Khabarnama anchors" as effectively recalling the era of state-run television in the 1970s and its stilted style of news delivery.[4] For the duration of a twenty-five-minute slot, both male and female newscasters would be seated at the same table, but placed apart, with stiff, formal body

[3] On submitting one of my first programming skeleton assignments to my boss, he shook his head and asked me, "Fox kabhi dekha hai?" ("Have you ever watched Fox?") That GEO actively modeled its programming on Fox News is no industry secret and along with its first mover advantage on the market, its attempts to replicate Fox's style was seen as vital to its early success.

[4] Translated as "newsletter"—the formal Urdu term khabarnama was the official program name of daily news reports provided by state television.

language, taking turns to read out news in a measured, monotonous tone that today would be mocked as the appropriate tenor for state propaganda.

purana_pakistan

MORNING NEWS, WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 19, 1979.

TV Today

4.30 p.m. Opening.
4.32 Baseerat.
4.45 News in Urdu.
4.50 News in Sindhi.
5.00 Iqra.
5.07 Lok Rang.
5.32 Congress—Tareekh-o-Falsafa-e-Science: (Khosoosi Report).
6.00 News in English.
6.10 Cartoon Magazine.
6.40 Wadi Wadi Roop.
7.00 Mera Naam Mangu (Episode No. 7).
7.30 Rockford Files.
8.30 Khabarnama.
8.55 Husn-e-Qirat.
8.57 Tijarati Khabrain.
9.05 Neelam Ghar.
10.00 Kal Kay Programme.
10.02 Farman-i-Ilahi and Close Down.

Figure 8. A newspaper clipping of the daily Pakistan Television (PTV) schedule on December 19, 1979.[5]

[5] Instagram post, May 9, 2020, @purana_pakistan.

Figure 9. Khabarnama on PTV (early 1970s).[6]

If the tone and style of news delivered on state television of yore could be characterized by its solemn banality, then it appeared that those now responsible for producing private television news were striving for something markedly different—something louder, higher-pitched, and attention-grabbing. The sounds of this new, "free," and "independent"[7] media would surround me all day, their volumes lowered to a constant buzz in the office background, their screen visuals loud, through colors and graphics. Several years later, when I returned to these sensorial spaces for fieldwork, I would often have recurring senses of déjà vu as I waited in newsroom offices for interviews to commence. The convenient presence of the sounds and visuals of

[6] *The Friday Times*, May 30th, 2014.
[7] Throughout my project, I aim to keep the terms "free" and "independent" in quotes when referring to the media in Pakistan. Pakistani media professionals have a long history of engaging with self-censorship, particularly during the eras of military rule, when entire pages of newspapers would purposely be left blank to protest the denial of free speech, but self-censorship in the age of private television news cannot be as symbolically circulated. I discuss the restrictions and boundaries of investigative reporting and the pressures on journalists to self-censor in Chapter 4.

television news on nearby screens would serve as direct examples for my interlocutors to lean on, as the following conversation excerpt shows. On November 4th, 2016, I had wrapped up an interview with the director of news at SAMAA, a private news channel headquartered in Karachi, and was now being given a tour of the newsroom by a female news reporter. Faryal (pseudonym) was 27 years old, had earned her master's degree in Mass Communications from a local public university, and was detailing her reporting experience to me with deep pride. Talking rapidly, Faryal multitasks while responding to multiple WhatsApp messages on her cell phone, the loud pings of each new message interrupting us constantly. I've asked her about the pressure to produce "entertaining" news and she cuts herself off:

> But then again…can you hear that? (Faryal cups a hand to her ear and beckons to the cafeteria behind us where a mounted TV screen showing a female SAMAA news anchor is on full volume). You can hear her right? That is our most senior anchor, Kiran Aftab Ahmed Khan. She's been in the studio since before you arrived today—she's been continuously providing commentary on the protest today for hours, but listen! Her volume, her tone, it's remained constant! It never wavers! *Uss key jhumley kitney mazay key hain*! (Her sentences are so entertaining) She's been live for 3 hours, you think someone is feeding her these lines? Nope. Every single word, she's speaking on her own, except for of course the new events that are being relayed to her, she repeats that information from the prompter, but otherwise she's really on her own. This is the kind of skill that you either have or you don't. It comes from yourself. It's the same kind of skill to be able to figure out whether or not something is both newsworthy and entertaining.[8]

Indeed, I could hear Kiran Aftab Ahmed Khan loud and clear. Her volume, tone, turn of phrases, they were indicative of the sounds of contemporary Pakistani television news—the very elements that Faryal praised would reappear in my interviews at a later point and would elicit a far less appreciative reaction.

In this chapter, I aim to situate my ethnographic research with news media professionals, locating parameters of professional hierarchy and social class within the television news industry

[8] Personal interview, 2014–2016.

as reflective functions of postcolonial subjectivity in contemporary Pakistan. The prevalent stylistic transformation of the televisual delivery and packaging of news will serve as my backdrop in mapping how journalistic expertise in the news media industry is shot through the prism of class dynamics and is refracted by factors such as education, work experience, and cultural authenticity. This chapter will examine how the contradictory problem of untrained journalists produces a self-distancing discourse for news media elites who must acknowledge the lowered entrance barriers to their profession as well as the increased ratings created by the inclusion of sensationalist news crafting practices. What modes of knowledge and expertise are brought to bear on the process of crafting television news by those involved throughout production phases as different actors make and contest claims to expert authority?

2014–2016: Navigating Fieldwork in Karachi

Sure enough, as my former boss had predicted in 2008, there was simply not a feasible market to run English-only news channels in Pakistan, and channels that attempted English-only transmissions shut down within a few years of operating. Many of my English-fluent interlocutors started their careers with one of these three specific media groups—GEO, *Dawn*, and Express—all of which had launched English news channels in the mid-2000s that were short lived (GEO English shut down in 2008, Dawn English had to switch language formats in 2010, and Express 24/7 ended in 2011). One primary advantage of conducting research in an urban field-site in the age of social media, particularly among working professionals, is the ability to virtually "follow" your interlocutors, both while living in the same city, and once you've left the field-site. Following my interlocutors on Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn allowed for multiple communication platforms and updates regarding changes in their employing news channel and

professional title positions. It certainly helped to be able to see rapid Facebook status updates and Tweets with date and time stamps to confirm that my interlocutors were actively online (and that my unanswered text messages were indeed being ignored). The preferred use of "WhatsApp" among journalists in Pakistan was evident in the early stages of my research.

Establishing initial contact with a new acquaintance would begin with a formal email, indicating how I received their name and contact information and would include a blurb about my research project, with my phone number included. If I had already obtained their phone number, I would follow with a short text message mentioning that I had just sent them an email with further details. Nine out of ten times, I would receive a prompt text message reply: "Ok, Whatsapp me." The initial thrill of receiving positive replies would soon wear out as I realized my optimism for WhatsApp and its feature of confirming the recipient had "read" my messages was not necessarily a positive indication of establishing an in-person meeting, or at least not right away. While WhatsApp allows users to turn off the "read receipt" feature, I found that almost none of my interlocutors had turned it off—my hunch as to why this was the case was later confirmed as simply, news office protocol. Due to the time-sensitive nature of breaking news, journalists in professional WhatsApp groups were constantly "online" on their phones, forwarding news alerts, editing story headlines. and sending images and audio video clips to their production teams. My access to news media offices was mostly facilitated through networks of management-level news media professionals that were recommended to me through social acquaintances, where my own class and elite status as a graduate student in an American university played a significant role.

When encountering news media professionals that were fluent English speakers, my reception as a researcher would depend on the way in which I had been able to contact them—if

a social acquaintance had made a prior introduction, there would be warmth and conviviality. If I had cold-called or approached them at a training seminar, I would be met with a wary cautiousness with an immediate request for a follow-up email with a description of my project. My interactions with lower-class journalists were largely initialized by one of two settings: I had either been observing them during a training seminar, or I had been introduced to them by their colleague during a tour of their news media workspace. In both situations, I was largely received with polite interest. Throughout this dissertation, I have provided pseudonyms for my interlocutors, many of whom have since moved on from the channel they were working for during the time of my fieldwork. For the purposes of recognizing dominant players in the news media landscape in Pakistan, I have chosen largely to preserve the original names of the news channels themselves, but there are instances where I have chosen to not specify the name of the channel in particular examples as doing so would easily lend to the identification of certain interlocutors. Wherever my interlocutors would mention prominent news media professionals by name, or when I am citing news articles that reference such individuals, I have chosen to keep those names intact, as their fame precedes my analysis and their identification does not pose any subsequent risks.

When Ethnographic Supplements Turn into Sites

On visiting old college friends, now instructors in the social science departments of a few different universities in Karachi, I was encouraged to "make myself useful" during my two years of intended stay and commit to part-time teaching in my spare time. I was able to teach introductory classes on Media Anthropology to medical students at Aga Khan University (AKU), to social science students at the Institute of Business Administration (IBA), to journalism

students at SZABIST (Shaheed Zulfikar Ali Bhutto Institute of Science & Technology), and to art students at the Indus Valley School of Art & Architecture (IVS). Far from being a distraction to fieldwork, teaching at these elite private colleges provided both a regimented structure to my daily routine and additional access to "ethnographic supplements"[9] that I otherwise may not have been privy to, such as college-held events where notable journalists would be invited as speakers, faculty-organized journalism panels at literature festivals, and so forth. Several of my faculty colleagues directly introduced me to executive news media professionals as a social acquaintance; without their reference, my previously unread emails would have indeed remained unanswered. But it was my teaching stint at one particular university that provided a critical key to turn open the "gates" to access news media professionals in Karachi.

The Institute of Business Administration (IBA) was the recipient of a USAID project to build a news journalism training center in Karachi, the inaugural opening of which, in early 2015, coincided with my arrival for fieldwork. I suddenly found myself to be a card-carrying member of a Pakistani university that had developed the Center for Excellence in Journalism (CEJ), a training institute aiming to bring together a range of journalists to explicitly discuss the daily work practices of an industry that I wanted to observe. Granted permission to sit in during sessions, my networking possibilities multiplied ten-fold as each training seminar provided a fresh classroom full of potential interlocutors, all hailing from a variety of news channels. When the CEJ seminars were in session, I would usually position myself at the back of the classroom, scoping out the seminar participants' group dynamics as well as their reactions to the instructor and course content. In between sessions, I joined trainees on their way to refill teacups, aided in their attempts to furtively take smoking breaks and fielded mostly jovial questions on why I was

[9] Sherry Ortner (2010) discusses gathering data at "ethnographic supplements," while trying to get access to her object of study: Hollywood. This includes, for her, attending screening Q&As, festivals, social events, etc.

spying on them. My rushed explanations of my research project were often met with enthusiasm, a proud acknowledgment of the importance of their profession, and a demand to be emailed a conclusive report of my "findings."

Figure 10. Screenshot of CEJ social media upload on November 4, 2015.[10]

According to their website, the Center for Excellence in Journalism is "an initiative for the professional development, training and networking of Pakistani journalists and media professionals."[11] Made possible through a $4 million grant by US AID, the Center was a collaboration between IBA, the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), and the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University. As a researcher, I was elated at the very literal

[10] *Facebook.*
[11] https://cej.iba.edu.pk/.

confluence of local media practices meeting international "standards" of journalism—and as I will show in this chapter, it is through observing spaces in which discourses of journalistic ideals are articulated, debated, and wedged in between the uneven practices that Pakistani news media professionals encounter in their daily work that we can begin to map out how categories of "expertise" are both held up and unfolded. Arguing for the importance of studying journalism ethnographically, Dominic Boyer and Ulf Hannerz (2006) state:

> …the final forms that news messages take, are largely dependent on the micro-labors of research, information selection, collegial coordination, and editorial conversation that constitute their crafting. On the other hand, they are likewise co-constituted by the professional training that a journalist has completed; by the conceptions of journalism as a vocation s/he has absorbed; by the on-the-job apprenticeship in the craft offered by colleagues; by institutional expectations for productivity, efficiency, loyalty, and comportment; by the necessary interaction with 'real-time' technical systems of information transmission and management; and so on.[12]

What happens when the conception of journalism as a vocation conflicts with on-the-job apprenticeship? While we could safely say that an idealistic vision never fully aligns with the ground realities of almost any career, for my purposes here, however, it is that very incongruence that centers the CEJ as a productive site. In the introductory video posted on the CEJ website, we hear from prominent Pakistani journalists that the arrival of this kind of training institute in Pakistan is a "dream come true," with gleaming state-of-the-art facilities being showcased as journalist trainees practice their craft in the background. While the participants of these training seminars are largely employed as reporters by television news channels, it is their self-identification as journalists that prompts my use of the term "journalist trainee," in specific reference to my interaction with them at the CEJ. If the majority of their professional workload consists of reporting, why would I not simply address them as "reporters," as they identify

[12] Dominic Boyer and Ulf Hannerz, "Introduction: Worlds of Journalism," *Ethnography,* 7(1), 2013: 8, https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138106064587.

themselves during the signature reporting sign off on camera? (e.g. "Reporter so-and-so, with Cameraman so-and-so, XYZ News"). Following Raymond Williams' *Keywords* (1976) project, Barbie Zelizer & Stuart Allan's extensive compilation of *Keywords in News and Journalism Studies* (2010) define a journalist as a broad label for:

> the range of people who engage in activities associated with newsmaking… Traced at least as far back as the *French Journal des Sauvants* in the seventeenth century, today the term refers to individuals who engage in a slew of related activities – reporting, criticism, editorializing and the conferral of judgment on the shape of things.[13]

If the term journalist by definition is an individual engaged in the field of journalism—the collection and editing of news for presentation through the media—then, it became increasingly apparent in my fieldwork interviews that this extremely broad category can be wielded as an aspirational occupation in Pakistan to harness a labor force needed in the privatized television news industry, and yet the "title" can be simultaneously denied to those who are currently employed in its capacity.[14] That does not mean of course, that anyone employed in a newsroom will self-identify as a journalist—my interaction with interlocutors in their work offices included introductions to newsroom staffers such as cameramen, non-linear-editors, rundown schedulers, and copy editors, all essential jobs without which a newsroom cannot function, but not roles that would claim the term "journalist." My point, thus, is to clarify why I have chosen the term "journalist trainee" for interlocutors that were enrolled in CEJ training courses—firstly, the addition of "trainee" is to distinguish them from "senior" journalists that were present in the seminar as co-instructors and, secondly, the insistence on "journalist" is to underscore the basic category of their employment in that capacity, but also their self-identification as such—no

[13] Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan. *Keywords in News and Journalism Studies* (London: Open University Press, 2010), 64.
[14] "Journalist," https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/journalism.

doubt, the potential for such professional aura to carry journalist trainees through the ranks of social mobility is excessively higher in television news than in print.

At the time of my fieldwork, CEJ seminar participants were largely funded by their news network employers as the relatively high cost of attending (around Rs. 30,000 per course, or roughly $300) would be out of reach for lower-middle class journalists. The CEJ was essentially operating on the business model that news channels would "invest" in training promising employees at the CEJ, particularly since it was widely acknowledged that news channels were unable to provide "formal" training at their own workplaces. Which brings us back to how my engagement with ethnographic supplements led to the emergence of the CEJ as an unexpected field site in which to study journalism practices in Pakistan. In this chapter, I am interested in examining the ways in which participants of these journalism training seminars were simultaneously engaged with and stuck between the theory and practice of a professional field; it is thus through ethnographic observation that we can assess the weight of these interactions in specific social spaces. If we follow the conceptualization of publics as what Susan Gal (2018) has phrased a particular "social organization of interdiscursivity," then we recognize publics as not only constituted by the circulation and recontextualization of discourse, but also by a set of participation norms, metadiscourses and language ideologies that mediate how one participates in public spheres (Warner 2002).[15] In this chapter, I will pay attention to the parameters that mark the public field of professional journalism in Pakistan and will show how boundary-making attempts by elite journalists fail in the face of the neoliberal commercialization of the news industry.

[15] Michael Warner. *Publics and Counterpublics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

The Problem with Training Journalists

"Advanced News Reporting," "Writing For Broadcast," and "Basics of Reporting" were just a few of the names of seminar short-courses that were offered at CEJ during my fieldwork in 2015–2016. The subject content for these two-week seminars reflected the demand for a focus on training for broadcast news in particular and while their overall programming included courses designed for online print news and even creative writing—it was clear that the CEJ was positioned to fill the "instructional" gap that many journalist trainees encountered when learning on-the-job as news media professionals. Each seminar course would accommodate up to twenty participants, with the majority being sponsored by their employer news channel along with a small minority of self-financed participants who might be looking to add a CEJ seminar certificate to freshen up their resumes. There were certain factors that lent an existing prestige and status to the CEJ—first, its location within the private campus grounds of IBA (Karachi's premier elite business school) required participants to secure access-granting credentials either through their existing press ID badges or temporary trainee IDs provided by CEJ. Second, the center was housed in a brand new, shimmering five-story building, with all the trappings of modernity reflected in expensive digital equipment and state-of-the-art recording facilities. And most importantly, the early establishing CEJ seminars (during 2015–2016) were taught by largely white, American journalists. Embodied in the foreign instructor was the visual sign of "international" expertise, an encounter with which was no doubt considered a unique privilege for all of the trainees and was documented with many photo-taking sessions both as commemorative for the participants and for the center's own advertising purposes.

My initial curiosity on the potentials for communication lags between foreign instructors and the trainees was tempered by the presence of local CEJ employees during seminars who

served as occasional translators when needed for particular terms or phrases for either party. But this workaround did not remove the lingering presence of a particular gap between the foreign expert and the local trainees. For all intents and purposes of a training institute, some kind of gap was, of course, to be expected. A qualitative gap of professional experience, of international work experience, of varying degrees of formal education, and so forth. We can of course explain certain gaps of communication between instructors and trainees in terms of privilege, class, and language. As mentioned before, the trainees that I encountered at CEJ were all either current employees of various private news channels or were in between media jobs. That the bulk of the workforce that populates the news industry in Pakistan is comprised of individuals with lower-to-middle class socioeconomic backgrounds is a) a sociological fact and b) feeds into the cultural stereotypes associated with the "problems" circulating within the contours of my dissertation project that broadly examines the production of sensationalist news in a postcolonial public. Again, it is significant to repeat that while I label "trainee" interlocutors and "elite" news media professionals as such in order to highlight their class differences, it is the unarticulated presuppositions about these exact class differences that I am interested in unraveling as and when my conversations on news journalism in Pakistan turned on undesirable practices. What happens when the boundaries of a skilled profession, in this case, journalism, are blurred by the technology through which it is mediated (live broadcast television) and simultaneously flooded with "untrained" labor?

Figure 11. CEJ training seminar in progress.[16]

Assessing the State of Pakistani Media Ethics or, Ethics

For almost every seminar offered at the CEJ, one session was reserved for a discussion on "media ethics." The need to invoke a conversation on ethics in a Pakistani training institute for journalists was expected, given the larger national narrative surrounding a sensational, irresponsible media industry. These sessions were predictably boring, with mundane slideshows listing the dos and don'ts of broadcast news; participants would yawn and nod along, distractedly scrolling on their cell phone screens. During one such stuffy session in February 2016, I was relieved to hear one of the seminar participants ask a question on verifying quotes for a news story, and more pointedly, a follow-up question on who held the responsibility to carry out the verification. The American instructor asked Akbar (pseudonym) if he could provide an example of this situation to better clarify the context, and with some assistance in translating Urdu to English for the instructor, the class received the following anecdote: Akbar was sent on an

[16] CEJ Facebook upload on February 23, 2016.

assignment to the Karachi Zoo to record on location and provide a quick report on an escaped monkey. Prior to going on air, Akbar asked the zoo official for a statement on how the monkey escaped, but the official declined to comment. Left hanging with no "official" story, Akbar determined that providing some kind of story to his supervisor was better than not having one at all, and so he was promptly patched through to the news anchor, where he concocted a plausible short story of the monkey's escape live on air. Hours later, the zoo official called Akbar on his cell phone to complain after having watched a repeat of his news story and said he was now ready to provide a proper quote on how it really happened!

On hearing this retelling, the seminar participants sprang into a lively debate: on one hand were admonishments from fellow participants—the American instructor agreed with this camp, chiding Akbar on effectively lying on camera, while clicking back on the slideshow to emphatically read aloud the text provided under "Factual Reporting." On the other hand, indignant arguments arose from trainees siding with Akbar's predicament—how was it his fault that the zoo official was uncooperative? Why weren't the rest of us seeing the positive side of this story, that Akbar managed to save face by providing a ready-to-air story when demanded? And, finally, what difference did it make how the monkey actually escaped, as long as Akbar was able to deliver a story of an escaped monkey? While our session time ran out that day, and seminar participants scattered to avoid rush hour traffic, these unresolved questions stayed with me. I was reminded of the corrections I would attempt to make in dinner conversations in Karachi when friends and acquaintances would inquire about my research:

> Oh, so you're studying fake news! Great timing, it's really such a global problem.
>
> Well, actually I'm more interested in how Pakistani journalists negotiate between reporting news and sensationalist production and…

> Yes, yes, but you must have figured out by now that news is just another big drama to these media people, they wouldn't know how to report the truth if they were staring at it![17]

Repressing my quiet exasperation at elite condescending attitudes was a frequent habit throughout fieldwork, and yet with every negative iteration, I found it all the more difficult to pinpoint my struggles to categorize the many examples similar to Akbar's "half-lying" news report. Fudging facts, speculating in the absence of evidence, and failing to verify received information, were all charges that several of my trainee interlocutors sheepishly admitted to at one point or another. Under time pressure to produce any news story, an all-too-slippery path leads to a predictable outcome: unchecked information, presented as fact in low-profile stories, escapes both scrutiny and consequences—particularly given the "liveness" of television—inevitably results in journalists taking similar liberties with higher stakes when reporting news in grave situations.

On December 7, 2016, a Pakistani passenger plane carrying 48 people crashed in a remote, mountainous area near Islamabad, killing everyone on board including celebrity singer-turned-religious preacher, Junaid Jamshed. Due to the inaccessible site of the crash and lack of eyewitnesses, news channel reporters quickly began filling the information vacuum with patently unverified news and questionable analyses. The shock of a beloved national celebrity's death added to the social media frenzy of users circulating conspiracy theories on the causes of the plane crash. Fake audio recordings of the passengers last cries, and suspicious cell phone video footage of the plane crashing originally shared in WhatsApp groups found their way to TV

[17] Far from not being able to recognize the truth, Pakistani journalists are only too familiar with the conundrum of what to do with the truth in the face of managerial pressure to avoid sensitive news stories that can attract the wrath of a number of interest groups ranging from corporate advertisers to religious groups and the powerful military. I discuss these limitations in Chapter 4. Personal interview, 2014–2016.

screens, with journalists claiming “they received it from ‘high-level’ sources and ‘insiders’ who were all naturally anonymous.”[18] In a rarely published admission of the failures of managerial responsibility in airing developing news stories, the following quote provided to an English print news outlet resembles the usual excuses I would hear during interviews with higher management:

> ‘There is no doubt that a lack of training and understanding as well as disregard for journalism ethics is seen on TV,’ Azhar Abbas, managing director of Geo News, told Al Jazeera. ‘This is maybe because our media is not mature enough or there is this urge to compete not only among ourselves but also with the monster that is social media. However, at times there is so much pressure on the newsroom that you have to air unverified material. In operational situations, you have to take a call in order to compete and remain relevant. I'm not saying you shouldn't try to verify news items, but these are operational decisions you have to make.’[19]

The chime of constantly delayed maturity that elite news media professionals insist underscores the industry’s current predicament is only too reminiscent of postcolonial elite discourses on the liberal tendency to favor authoritarianism while gradually introducing democracy to the masses (Rajagopal 2001; Roy 2007) or ambivalent postcolonial discourses on censorship (Mazzarella 2013). One of my aims in this project is to show how this discourse does not dissipate in the long-awaited arrival of democratic forms of governance in contemporary Pakistan, but instead an ever-present teleological ideology of “catching up” with the West is then recalibrated to position an immature and unstable television news industry as symptomatic of an incomplete subject formation that is manifested by news media professionals.

In October 2016, a viral video clip of a physical altercation between a male Frontier Constabulary (FC) security guard and a female reporter made its way from YouTube onto

[18] Zarrar Khuhro, “As Received,” *Dawn*, December 12, 2016, http://www.dawn.com/news/1301942/as-received.
[19] Faras Ghani, “Pakistan’s Electronic Media Faces Ethics Questions,” *Al Jazeera*, December 20, 2016, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/12/20/pakistans-electronic-media-faces-ethics-questions.

mainstream news channels and newspaper editorials.[20] Saima Kanwal, recording a news story for KTN News, was reporting on difficulties faced by Karachi citizens at their neighborhood NADRA office (National Database and Registration Authority), when her cameraman was denied access by the FC security guard, Hasan Abbas. Visibly agitated in the video recording, Kanwal directs her cameraman to focus the camera on Abbas and attempts to name and shame him for blocking media access in a public space. In response, Abbas angrily slaps her face and the video is cut short. Pakistani social media was awash with viewers sharing the video clip, with the viral qualia of the video instantly identifiable in the quintessential "thappar" ("slap"). Aside from the obvious gendered dynamics at play in this video, I am interested here in the embodied professional identities of the individuals involved that reveals how conflicting layers of class and power unraveled in this particular public spectacle. The Frontier Constabulary (FC) is a federal paramilitary force in Pakistan originating during British rule under the Frontier Constabulary Act in 1915.[21] As an armed police force, the prestige of colonial legacy once afforded to the FC has since depleted, with FC units largely being deployed to guard national installations and foreign embassies and providing security services to politicians and VIPs.[22] It is thus telling that while the affronted dignity of both individuals involved in this particular incident can be reduced to the gendered public performance of a man violently putting a woman in her proverbial place, we can additionally read this interaction as the result of an assault on the other's dignity, precisely because of the perceived prestige of the institutions that each professional self was supposedly

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[20] "On Cam: Pak FC Trooper Slaps Female Journalist in Karachi," October 21, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuXSnRj4jJg.
[21] Writing on the colonial encounter with the north-west frontier of undivided India, Akbar S. Ahmed (1979) notes: "When the British finally left in 1947, the legacy they left behind did not consist of schools or colleges or such other symbols of development, but of repressive institutions like the Frontier Constabulary…The mystification and romanticization of the colonial encounter on the Frontier helped to popularize a universal image of the Pathan embodying the finest qualities of loyalty, courage and honor that transcended race, color and creed" (2097).
[22] "Deployment of Federal Constabulary Outside KP Displeases Court," *Dawn*, June 8, 2012, https://www.dawn.com/news/724795.

representing. The ensuing commentary surrounding the video on various media platforms included firm denunciations of the violent slap, with media pundits noticeably rushing to disassociate the reporter's actions from "journalism":

> 'Whatever we watched over the video is extremely painful and the security guard's action is condemnable,' said Fazil Jameeli, president of the Karachi Press Club. 'But I am sorry to say that what the reporter was doing was not journalism at all. Here we need to understand that our broadcast or electronic media is passing through its early years and cannot be termed mature.'[23]

The explicit blame conferred on the reporter in this case, while couched in the broad labels of "unprofessionalism" and "immature," reveals the implicit bias that media elites will constantly confer on lower-middle class journalists: they are either unaware of how to practice "good" journalism, or they are masterful at bringing in ratings by virtue of their "unprofessional" conduct. Writing on the same incident, the editor of the *Express Tribune*, (a Pakistani English newspaper affiliated with *The International New York Times*) said:

> Clearly our journalists need training on how to conduct themselves in public. The manner in which some have behaved in the past make them unpopular amongst many Pakistanis. All the good work many of them do by exposing corruption and fighting for the right causes is set aside because of the unprofessionalism of a few. And yet it is this very unprofessional behavior that brings in the ratings. In this incident, an unknown reporter from a relatively lesser known channel has made both herself and her news organization famous. In the past too, we have seen media personalities indulging in all sorts of questionable behavior only to get ratings. In comparison to most developing countries, our media is relatively free. But with this freedom should come responsibility.[24]

While Saima Kanwal's perceived low status as an "unknown reporter" for a low-ranking regional language news channel is taken here as the assumed explanation for her "unprofessional" behavior, the charge against presumably well-known (but unnamed) "media personalities" is that their questionable behavior is *intentional* and therefore reprehensible. This

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[23] "FC Guard Who Slapped Female Reporter Gets Pre-Arrest Bail, *Dawn*, October 22, 2016, https://www.dawn.com/news/1291652.

[24] Kamal Siddiqi, "Bell the Cat," *Dawn*, October 23, 2016, https://tribune.com.pk/story/1207654/bell-the-cat.

understanding, where lower middle-class journalists were denied intentionality in their unprofessionalism, was never fully articulated as such in my interviews with elite media professionals, but was rather expressed as an unfortunate lack of "common sense." Indeed, when viral videos of Pakistani reporters in baffling scenarios populate social media feeds, elite commentary notably revolves around both the stupidity of the actions involved and the cynical "genius" of such journalism that pulls in ratings: it is the simultaneity of this discourse which suggests that while elite disdain towards the news-grabbing tactics of lower middle-class journalists is directed towards the lack of judgment displayed, it reveals the anxiety of sharing an occupation whose professional capacity, one presumably demarcated by entry barriers, is now brimming over.

On the Lack of Intellect, or an Insufficient Education

On April 3rd, 2016, the International Consortium for Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), released the Panama Papers, a trove of leaked documents from the Panamanian law firm Mossack Fonseca that implicated dozens of politicians and powerful international figures in shady offshore business dealings.[25] Among those figures, the children of Nawaz Sharif, then Prime Minister of Pakistan, were listed as owners of offshore companies: "Controversy has long engulfed Sharif's family, including three of his four children—Mariam, Hasan and Hussain—over their riches from a network of businesses that include steel, sugar and paper mills and extensive international property holdings. At various times, depending on the political party in power, the Sharifs—one of Pakistan's richest families—have been accused of corruption,

[25] https://www.icij.org/investigations/panama-papers/.

ownership of illegal assets, tax avoidance and money laundering."[26] Regurgitated on Pakistani news channels for months, the Panama Leaks served as the long awaited confirmation of the public perception that Pakistan's elected leaders were plundering the nation's wealth and hoarding the spoils for themselves overseas. Demanding Sharif's resignation, opposition political parties threatened to lay siege to the capital but were placated after the Supreme Court accepted a commission to start an official inquiry into the Panama Leaks.[27]

A corruption scandal of this magnitude was difficult for consumers of Pakistani news to ignore in 2016–17, and yet along with the plethora of online memes and Twitter puns[28] directed at the accused, I found that the very term "Panama Leaks" or "Panama Papers" became a humorous litmus test within the news circles of my interlocutors, used to assess one's general knowledge of Panama, its geographical location and the actual accusations detailed in the Supreme Court case—a "good journalist" would, of course, pass such a test. I was not surprised that elite media professionals leaned on this test as an example in our conversations, and as the below interview excerpt will show, it was only when pushed to specifically articulate the problem with training journalists that I would receive a blunt answer. In November 2016, I was able to speak with Shujaat (pseudonym), a news director of a prominent news channel in Karachi, and I relayed the CEJ anecdotes of reporters 'creating' news to gauge his response:

> Shujaat: Okay, there's this big problem of accessibility for staff, that they're not able to access the news director. They don't get that rapport. But most of the news directors that I know, *jaahil log nahin hain. Samajhdar log hain* (They're not illiterate, they have decent sense). What happens is, I give you a story and ask you to go cover it. You went, and you didn't find that story—now don't make up that story! Find another one! *Mujhey toh pait bharna hai bulletin ka* (I have to feed the bulletin) so simply find me another story! And present it in a way that's even better, so then why would I have a problem with a story that I

[26] "The Power Players," ICIJ, January 31, 2017, https://www.icij.org/investigations/panama-papers/the-power-players/.
[27] Khawar Ghumman, "Imran Plans Siege of Islamabad on Oct 30," *Dawn*, October 7, 2016, https://www.dawn.com/news/1288516.
[28] https://twitter.com/search?q=%22sans%20sharif%22&src=typd.

> didn't request? The problem is, they like to be told what to do.
>
> Ayesha: How does a news director deal with that problem?
>
> Shujaat: [loud sigh] It's about intellect. It's about your ability. And there simply isn't a pool of qualified candidates we can choose from. You walk into any news channel and what's the hottest story of the day? It's Panama Leaks. Ask some of my own employees outside this office, what is Panama Leaks? Where is Panama? They have no idea… Look, in our country from cricket to politics to newsrooms, we are suffering from one issue - that is lack of intellect. There is lack of understanding of issues. There's lack of having the basic intellect of doing the right thing – this includes your educational institutes, it includes upbringing, it includes work environments, it's a mixture of a lot of things that have created this mess, and journalists are a part of it.[29]

This well-entrenched elite discourse can, of course, be traced to the proverbial postcolonial hangover. While scholars of contemporary South Asia have documented how the colonial creation of the narrative of the infantile masses, in need of the benevolence of their British rulers, continues to perversely dominate perceptions of the public at large (Ganti 2000; Mazzarella 2013; Roy 2007), the framing of this narrative relies on the illiteracy of the masses in question. In the case of elite Pakistani news producers, the disdain for the lack of "basic intellect" displayed by lower-middle class journalists can no longer be premised on the absence of a formal education, and as I will show in the remaining of this chapter, this anxiety is now redirected to highlight an "insufficient" education. Writing on the impact of colonialism on social structures in South Asia, sociologist Hamza Alavi (1989) describes the salariat to be a section of the Pakistani urban middle class as those with educational qualifications and aspirations for salaried jobs in the state apparatus, the civil bureaucracy and the military: "Associated with the salariat are urban professionals, lawyers and doctors, as well as the intelligentsia, writers, poets, teachers and journalists, who share the life experiences and many of the aspirations of the salariat."[30] A

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[29] Personal interview, 2014–2016.

[30] Hamza Alavi, "Nationhood and the Nationalities in Pakistan," *Economic and Political Weekly* 24, 27 (July 8, 1989), 1527, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-11401-6_8.

product of the colonial transformation of Indian society in the nineteenth century, the salariat was distinguished by their Anglo-vernacular education rather than a classical education in Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit and were contemptuously referred to by British civil servants in India as "westernized oriental gentlemen."[31] Indeed, if elite news media professionals in contemporary Pakistan are identifiable by their Anglo-vernacular education, their work experience, and their Western cultural capital, then the bulk of the labor force employed in the category of news media professionals will paradoxically remain an always-aspiring class by virtue of their perceived insufficient Anglo-vernacular education and their "authentic" local cultural capital. That this insufficiency is not directly articulated as such rests on the very demand and necessity of "authentic," fluent Urdu speakers to work in a television industry that must cater to the masses. Consider how this problem of an insufficient education was described to me by Shakeel Masud, the CEO of Dawn News TV, in an interview in 2016:

> Take the example of a qualified mechanical engineer, and somebody who learns on the side of the road, fixing a car. So, the approach of a qualified engineer fixing a car would be different. The *ustaad* (teacher) or whoever that teaches this young boy who's come in at the age of 10 or 12, he will always be what the *ustaad* has taught him, you know "do it this way." So he doesn't have the luxury of being exposed to multiple *ustaads*, to say you can do this or that, and to be engaged in a debate on right or wrong—he only knows what is right. And what is right, is what has been given to him by this one person. So, this is the case in our news media. You've joined a media organization, you learn from the boss or the *sait* (business owner) at that time, so you were only trained and educated in a certain way. You simply did not have the exposure, for instance, somebody who is working for us today has been working as a reporter for many years—he's been on the beat, he understands people, he is educated, he is well read, and he needs to have an opinion of his own as well—right or wrong. But then he also needs to know how to curb his own personal opinion—when you're communicating to so many people, you can't have your personal biases coming in. Right? That sadly isn't found today in the industry and that's why we are where we are.[32]

[31] Ibid.
[32] Personal interview, 2014–2016.

It is significant to note that when elite news media professionals complain of a shortage of qualified candidates, they are not gesturing as much to the specific lack of college graduates with a degree in journalism, but rather as Shujaat mentioned earlier, a “lack of intellect,” and as Masud mentions in the quote above, the wrong kind of “exposure”—both of which are associated with the absence of critical thinking skills in poorly-funded Urdu medium public education. It is not surprising then, that in Masud’s analogical attempt to contrast a “qualified mechanical engineer” with its presumed opposite, he rested on the example of the visibly public “road-side mechanic.” This binary of the supposed exposure afforded by formal “quality” education versus the skills acquired from a self-taught “Ustaad” can be read as the elite bias for the private over the public when we consider what quality education in Pakistan is understood to be.

In an attempt to shield themselves from General Zia-ul-Haq’s Islamization drive during the 1980s, the elite liberal class rushed to privatize English-medium educational institutions, effectively producing an ever-increasing chasm between upper and lower classes that exorbitantly priced out educational opportunities for social mobility. Indeed, the option of studying “Easy Urdu” today in private English medium schools is indicative of the low expectations associated with the use value of the Urdu language for students belonging to upper-middle class segments. This detachment cannot divorce middle-to-upper class students from the everyday social usage of Urdu, but does deter their professional participation in certain public fields for which fluency in formal Urdu is a prerequisite, most notably national politics and higher religious studies. All this is to say, that while the structural exclusivity of the elite has maintained much of the private/public divide in Pakistani society, it is within the production of sensationalist television news that an anxiety over the blurring of this binary appears to be

premised on the increasing influx of an "insufficiently" trained labor force entering the newsroom—one that has a tendency to operate in an imitative rut rather than taking responsibility for pragmatic decisions—and it is of course, the reliance on this particular form of labor that allows private news channels to stay operational.

The Choonti as the Punctum

Many of my interlocutors, both elite and trainee journalists, were able to identify and provide arresting examples in television news by pointing to aspects such as heightened audio effects, musical soundtracks, graphic imagery, camera zooming, etc., but what appeared to be both practiced observation in the course of daily work (and described as simple intuition) continued to crash up against the difficulty of articulating what precisely was problematic in finding such aspects embedded in television news. Oftentimes, my constant prodding would result in an exasperated "It just feels wrong! Surely, you can see it as well!" Turning to academic literature that analyzes the ways in which we see and make meaning of images, it is helpful to reflect on what Roland Barthes (1981) has said about the punctum, particularly its effect both at once, and in registering as memory:

> Nothing surprising, then, if sometimes, despite its clarity, the punctum should be revealed only after the fact, when the photograph is no longer in front of me and I think back on it. I may know better a photograph I remember than a photograph I am looking at, as if direct vision oriented its language wrongly, engaging it in an effort of description which will always miss the point of its effect, the punctum.[33]

In thinking through the punctum as an "emergent, almost unbearably poignant experience of being 'pricked' by an irreducible element in a particular image-object," William Mazzarella (2013) has noted that for Barthes, there was a definite distinction between the private experience

[33] Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 53.

of the punctum and the banal, overdetermined studium (the conventional symbolic legibility of images) he attributed to advertising and other mass-mediated publicity.[34] In questioning if this "pricking" can occur at a public, collective level, Mazzarella makes a compelling argument for understanding the obscene tendency of mass-mediated images as a public punctum. Using this concept and stretching it to include the audio as well as the visuals of television news, helps us locate the offensive impact of certain practices that news media professionals encounter in their daily work. Recall the example provided at the beginning of this chapter, where a young reporter was enthusiastically praising her colleague's vocal capabilities in delivering the news—and contrast it with the following example enacted in front of me when I was interviewing a senior executive of a news channel:

> Obaid: If you hear a regular sentence from a random news anchor they will deliver in an even-tone." As if on cue, Obaid rests his cigarette on an ashtray, clasps his hands together at his desk and straightens his shoulders to maintain the posture of a 'serious' news anchor and clears his throat: "*Pervez Musharaf ko ijazat milgayi hai aur woh ilaaj key liye jaa rehain hain*" (Pervez Musharraf has received permission and will be receiving medical treatment abroad). Normal, no? Now listen to this.
>
> Obaid continues to repeat the same sentence, but now his eyebrows dance exaggeratedly, and he begins to speak in a sing-song way, hitting high notes and extending his last words in a crescendo to mimic a particularly (in)famous female news anchor:
> *Pervez Musharaf ko ijazat milgayi hai aur woh ilaaj key liye jaa rehain haiiiiiiiiin*.
>
> He takes a quick drag of his cigarette to say (in his regular voice), SAMAA hired that anchor at double the salary. Then GEO hired her back at quadruple the salary! Today she's on GEO's screen and she delivers the news as if someone is dying—that shows the sensationalism, there's no objectivity! I don't even know her name, but I really hate her!
>
> I pause to ask why.
>
> Obaid: I don't like it because it's not a music channel, it's not an entertainment channel—it's a news channel, *news* should be serious! News is not supposed to

[34] Mazzarella, *Censorium,* 211.

> give a choonti (pinch) to your audience. This thing should not happen—This happens here and in India. This will not happen in the States, in UK, in Europe. Have you ever seen a newscaster delivering the news in a sing-song way?
>
> I comment on our earlier conversation and ask: But didn't you just say that GEO is one of the few 'true' media houses with journalists as owners of the channel…?
>
> Obaid: That is the sad part—I would never expect this from Azhar Abbas, from Imran Aslam? I mean, Imran Aslam is a very respected journalist. For God's sake!
>
> He stubs out his cigarette and sighs, But the audience also likes to see this kind of thing—perhaps it is in our blood, or in our nature that we like to watch dramas, instead of serious discussions.[35]

The point of selecting this particular scene from my interview is not to highlight names of otherwise-respected Pakistani journalists who are accused of kowtowing to the demands of "drama-loving" news audiences, but rather to question what is at stake when journalists draw on their expertise to contest certain broadcast news practices. How do we make sense of professional claims ("news should be serious!") that may follow textbook understandings of journalism, but fail to perform on the scales of value translated into television ratings?

In Pakistan, dominant private television news channels, while relatively recent in terms of their business development over the past eighteen years, have managed to amass both public recognition of their particular style of news delivery, as well as an industry-internal understanding of how they expect their employees to file news stories. Let us consider an example provided to me by a twenty-five-year-old female reporter, Nosheen (pseudonym). She had earned her bachelor's degree in Mass Communications from Karachi University and had been working as an on-camera reporter for two years at Dawn News, before she received the coveted phone call: "When I got the call for GEO, I went straight to my Dawn Bureau Chief and

[35] Personal interview, 2014–2016.

he knew the look on my face when he saw me enter his office, he said "you got the call from GEO right? Go ahead."[36] As explained in Chapter 1, while the sudden expansion of the number of private news channels in Pakistan in the mid-2000s pitted news organizations against each other in the battle for ratings, it was the urgent demand to fill news media staff positions that allowed for an influx of untrained entry-level job seekers who were then forced to quickly learn the ropes on the job. Young and determined reporters like Nosheen found that within a few years of working experience in the news industry, the potential to be promoted to senior reporter and editor roles was high, and would position them as the primary breadwinners in their lower-to-middle class families, bringing in highly desirable salary ranges (anywhere between Rs.30,000 – Rs.50,000). The higher the prestige of the news channel, the greater the room for career growth, opportunity and money. When I asked Nosheen about the switch from Dawn News to GEO, she began with a smile and a shrug, "GEO is GEO!" but on further prodding, she explained why the news channel was known for its particular style of broadcast:

> Nosheen: There's not much difference in reporting. They both do basic reporting, but there is a big difference in the framing of the stories, the angling. When I was at Dawn, I would do my reporting, file my stories, and see them get aired. When I came to GEO, I noticed my stories weren't getting aired, they might get mentioned in the tickers, but not in the news segments. I had to actually learn how to read the temperament of GEO.[37]

I asked for a particular example.

> Nosheen: Look, one time I had filed a story about an actress, it was a sad, somber story of the classic poor girl looking for fame in the big city. GEO didn't run that story, but I noticed that another reporter's story got picked up, it was full of *dhol dhamaka*, it focused on her dancing abilities, she was glamorously dressed, there was lots of music, the full works! So, from that day I knew, that I have to push entertaining stories. I know that if I gave my original report to Dawn, they would have run it, but sad, quiet stuff doesn't run on GEO. They will always show color,

[36] Personal interview, 2014–2016.
[37] Ibid.

> brightness – so now whatever I submit, I know it should be full of life, *chehl-pehl*, basically what we call a *neela-peela*, *rangeela* package.[38]

If Pakistani news producers in the early 2000s were looking for ways to differentiate their liberalized news channels from the composed banality of state television, then by 2014, senior news industry professionals were routinely lamenting the crass production of television news. While my elite interlocutors were quick to provide examples of such practices, ranging from training high-pitched news anchors to orchestrating mayhem by pitting politicians against each other during live talk shows, to the exaggerated dramatized re-enactments of crime stories, it was however, the rangeelay (colorful) packaged news reports that were often nitpicked as particularly exasperating instances of news. As described by Nosheen above, these are lively, entertaining versions of an otherwise banal news story; rangeelay news reports often depict the reporter physically immersed in the story itself—dancing in monsoon rain with a crowd of exuberant youth, interviewing goats and cows as they are herded across overhead bridges to avoid road traffic and donning creative costumes for relevant story settings. Derided by elite executives that greenlight such productions and routinely mocked via social media circulation, the industry-internal narrative on the ostensibly harmless rangeela news report serves to not only emblematize the divisions of social class within Pakistani television journalism, but it also heightens the tension between claims of journalistic expertise and expert knowledge in reaching and attracting mass audiences.

In his ethnographic study on the digital transformation of news journalism in Germany, Dominic Boyer (2013) begins his first chapter with the romanticized image of "the hard-nosed reporter, the relentless investigative journalist, the cantankerous desk editor, the fearless foreign correspondent, all fighters for the objectivity of truth against forces of deception and

[38] Ibid.

dissimulation."[39] Acknowledging the powerful resonance of such imagery, Boyer shows how behind such glamorous ideals, it is far more common to find the "average" journalistic type to be a sedentary office-based screen worker. Indeed, while this unglamorous reality holds true for the average Pakistani journalist, it is significant that the former ideal type nevertheless continues to be maintained through discourses in and about the role of journalism in a democracy and was certainly reinforced in CEJ training seminars.

On one of my visits to a private news channel in Islamabad, I was on my way to interview a senior executive, when I was excitedly waved down by one of my interlocutors from a past CEJ seminar. A rising reporter, Qasim (pseudonym) was twenty-six years old, and possessed an enthusiastic air about him—his male colleagues whistled their appreciation of his leather bomber jacket that morning, and I recalled that he was nick-named the "hero" of his CEJ seminar, with his youthful good looks and carefully styled hair. It had been a few months since I had last seen Qasim at CEJ, and I asked him if he was able to implement any of his training in his daily work. His voice was noticeably deflated when he reflected on his current workload: "That training, those lessons, it was for Western standards, Western ideas. The format here, it's totally different here, it's a different atmosphere. Of course, yes, it was helpful, and I use some techniques that I learnt but there's still a big difference." When I asked for a specific example, Qasim mentions the following:

> There is no time to pitch stories here! There is no concept of pitching because your editor is looking at the competing channel and asking, why have you not reported on what that guy is reporting? Why don't we have their news? *Bahar ki journalism* (journalism outside/in the West) is all about digging in to give a story its full due, over there you would pitch a story, maybe even work on it for four full days, you can ask tough questions, you have time to polish it—but over here, in 4 days, you have to produce 25

[39] Dominic Boyer. *The Life Informatic: Newsmaking in the Digital Era (Ithaca:* Cornell University Press, 2013), 1.

> stories! I don't have the luxury to sit with one story and develop it. I have to file multiple stories and hope that they're good enough to run.[40]

The urgency of the 24-hour news media cycle and the demands on news media professionals to fill consecutive news slots are certainly not unique to the Pakistani news mediascape, and scholarship in communication and media studies has well-documented these trends in the 21st-century digital news industry, with a growing focus on media transformations in transitioning democracies (Alhassan 2007; Hughes 2006; McCarg 2003). It was not surprising to me that Qasim offered confident assumptions about what Western journalists surely must have at their disposal to carry out "true" journalism: the luxury of time and resources to really dig into a news story. This aspirational narrative of journalism according to "Western standards, Western ideas" was a readily available theme present in my conversations with trainee interlocutors, often invoked to indicate that they were indeed familiar with "correct" journalistic practices, but were simply unable to carry them out in local constraints. While Western-based journalists are certainly not immune to the pressures of time constraints (Boyer 2013, Gursel 2016), the fact remains that this is a common theme in media studies of democracies in the non-Western world and indeed, while comparative studies are available on media effects in "unstable" democracies (Nyamnjoh 2005; Waisbord 2000; Wasserman 2011; Zhao 2012), it is the disciplinary push of anthropology that urges us to search for a different analytical lens. In what ways can we look beyond the binary mapping of sensationalist news audiences onto an infantile citizenry?

I want to briefly return to Obaid's dismissal of the choonti (pinch), and the unwelcome intrusion elicited by the imagery of pinching an audience in the serious domain of news. As with almost all of my interviews with elite media executives, our conversations would take place in fluent English, with a sprinkling of Urdu terminology injected where English failed to capture

[40] Personal interview, 2014–2016.

certain sentiments.[41] The term choonti, while denoting a physical pinch, carries with it cultural connotations of cheap excitement,[42] resorting to lower-class proclivities. The accusation, then, ["News is not supposed to give a *choonti* to the audience."] can be read at once as reflective of the kind of boundary-making around what news is or is not, but also indicative of what kinds of audiences would succumb to the attempt to "pinch" them, as it were. Throughout my fieldwork, I encountered numerous elite news producers who would constantly attempt to distance themselves from non-serious news practices and the disavowal, while wholly legible, routinely failed to articulate the particularities of what was actually offensive. In his work on censorship in Indian cinema, Mazzarella (2013) argues that we need to go beyond reading the censor's discourse as (only) one of hypocrisy ("The censor can tolerate the offending image but the common man cannot.") and in taking those steps, uses the term "extimate," a double relation of the external and intimate, as the "something in the way." This obstacle, according to Mazzarella, is both fascinating and contemptible:

> …the extimate squirm is a symptom that runs down the middle of the whole project of asserting performative dispensations. It is, to be sure, subjectively registered as discomfort, irritation, or aversion by individuals who find themselves either formally or informally exercising judgement over the pleasure of others. But its source is structural: the impossibility of establishing stable closure at the open edge of mass publicity.[43]

In *Censorium* (2013), Mazzarella breaks down the censor's positionality vis-à-vis those for whom they must censor images. When the censor speaks of common men ("pissing men"), he does so not only because there exist unruly crowds that must be controlled, but also by identifying them as unruly, the censor can disavow the same unruly affective potential that he,

[41] The inverse pattern ensued in my interviews with lower to middle class journalists where Urdu would be primarily used in conversation, but a larger amount of English words would come to replace more formal Urdu, particularly television industry terms.
[42] It is telling that the use of the term choonti also successfully invokes the image of the scoundrel "eve-teaser," subjecting unsuspecting women to fleshy pinches, the trivialized "hit-and-run" version of sexual assault in a crowded marketplace.
[43] Mazzarella, *Censorium*, 157.

too, can feel:

> but which his function as censor constantly implies (since he must be able to recognize obscenity when he sees/feels it) and denies (since the censor must stand above all that). The pissing man is not so much the censor's empirical 'other' as his phantom alter ego. Like a phantom limb, he has been amputated, but he nevertheless causes constant twinges in the central nervous system of the censor's discourse.[44]

Given their shared postcolonial experience, it is not surprising that the hypocritical discourse of elite journalists in Pakistan follows the logic of the Indian censor's discourse. In the case of the former, their ability to recognize the choonti (pinch) when watching news does not so much suggest that their hardened journalistic expertise differentiates them from the common viewer as much as it implies that they, too, can be just as affected by television news that is produced to convey particular qualia. While it may seem that their professional hierarchy protects elite journalists from having to physically participate in the embarrassing production of *rangeelay* news packages, (such reporting and ingenuity being relegated to "untrained" journalists instead), I will argue that the ideological purity of the profession and the subsequent discourse around it lends itself to the self-distancing articulated by postcolonial elites in order to maintain class hierarchy in a professional industry where thresholds of entrance are increasingly flexible.

The Sait and the Scribe

It is another hot, scorching September day in Karachi, and I am out of breath as I rush up the stairs to the CEJ conference room, mentally kicking myself for being late. The icy air conditioning blasting through the room is a welcome shock and by the time I have settled into my corner, I am surprised by the large number of participants seated—I count up to thirty heads facing away from me (ten women and twenty men) and note to myself that it is the largest class I

[44] Ibid.

have sat in so far. Then I remember the seminar title for this month—Talk Show Production—and it begins to make sense. A member of the CEJ introduces the American instructor for this training seminar, and the class breaks into enthusiastic applause when they hear of his experience in co-reporting for a Pulitzer prize winning story for *The New York Times*. After introductions are made all around, the American wants to start off the session with a screening of a talk show episode he had recently produced. We proceed to watch three participants discuss immigration policies in the context of the upcoming 2016 U.S. presidential election.

The talk show host (the American instructor himself), an NYU law professor, and an immigration attorney are all seated at a table and exchange views for thirty minutes. Throughout the duration of the episode, there are no televisual graphics on screen; the host does not pose any particular accusatory questioning; the experts are generally agreeing with each other; the overall conversation volume has remained at a steady level of calm collectedness.[45] Once the clip ends, the American asks for general responses, and there is a measured pause before the seminar participants start talking over one another. One male trainee, Hassan (pseudonym) loudly complains of, what appears to him as, obvious bias on screen—the American is bewildered and asks what he means. Hassan explains, “All three people on this show are Black; there’s no diversity!” and quickly adds, “I’m sorry if I’m offending you, but I can’t see any balance to this

[45] Significantly, the American instructor did not elaborate on the media outlet for which this episode was produced and, as the example unfolds, we will see how this omission shapes the class discussion. It was only after I was typing up my field notes that I later discovered the American instructor’s show does not air on a mainstream American news channel, but is instead a program on CUNY TV—a non-commercial educational television station in New York City, part of City University of New York's university system. In conversation with a CEJ local manager the next day, I casually mentioned the contrast between the instructor’s work experience and those of his seminar trainees who are employed at private commercial news channels, but my observation was brushed aside with a quick reminder of the “excellence” in journalism that the Center intends to provide – effectively claiming that regardless of the discrepancy in media platforms, “journalistic principles” should be implemented across any kind of news platform, and the American instructor’s status as an international award winning journalist was emblematic enough of the expertise that Pakistani journalist trainees would surely benefit from.

show." The American lets out a deep laugh—he is indeed Black and assures Hassan that he is not offended. There are low moans of embarrassment from some of the trainee journalists, eye-rolling each other as they shake their head at Hassan, while another trainee loudly admonishes him, "You duffer! It has nothing to do with what they look like; they are experts in the topic!" This insult instigates a fresh round of clamoring from Hassan's defenders who accuse the rest of the class of not being honest with the instructor and address him directly, "Sir, it is simple. Your show looks like a show on PTV! It's too boring!"—there is a collective chuckle around the room as the tension over Hassan's earlier remark dissipates, and the class can now focus on their personal objections to the format of the episode with more jokes comparing it to stale state television programming. "A show like this won't get any ratings in Pakistan," another trainee quips, to which the American responds, "It's not about the ratings, guys; it's about gaining the public's trust!"[46]

The class is divided into two camps: those who agree with the journalistic principles that the American is espousing and those who are adamant that they would never replicate the American's boring talk show format in their own work. The unoffended American defends his episode by detailing the amount of time and research he put into crafting the discussion and selecting appropriate experts, when he is interrupted by members of the latter camp: "Sir, please, sir! We can produce an episode from scratch right now and have it ready for air tonight and, believe us, it will be fast-paced and exciting! Research is important, yes, but you actually need the right contacts!" The seminar discussion continued to splinter down common issues the trainees faced in producing current affairs talk shows, a glaring problem being the directive to

[46] Personal observation, 2014–2016.

bring in panel guests on opposing ends of a particular issue (at the cost of valid expertise), so as to facilitate the talk show anchor's ability to instigate heated arguments between panel guests.

Throughout the session, many of the trainees expressed how the success of any television talk show relied on the all-important figure of the talk show anchor—with the class promptly launching into an enthusiastic poll of which celebrity talk show hosts were "real" journalists and which were unworthy of the title. Indeed, out of the many differences between state television and private news channels, the latter's introduction of a vigorous style of interrogation during talk show programs has continued to evolve. Private news channels have sought to capitalize on the aggressive tactics displayed by leading current affairs talk show hosts, who routinely antagonize politicians on-air, demanding answers from an inept government on behalf of viewing citizens. Heated arguments amongst talk show guests over one crisis to another inevitably involves the use of anti-Indian rhetoric, peddled in religious conspiracy theories of "foreign hands" attempting to dismantle the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Deemed by the English language press as "right-wing provocateurs" rather than professional journalists, current affairs talk show hosts are nevertheless hugely profitable name brands for television news channels, with advertisers fueling their increasingly belligerent programming. Regularly accused of sensationalism and unprofessional conduct, it was not surprising that celebrity talk show hosts without a prior background in print news (much like their "untrained" reporter colleagues much lower down the pay scale) were not considered "real journalists." For my elite interlocutors, such critique often began with outlining how one typically "becomes" a journalist in present-day Pakistan, and through Mansoor's interview excerpts below, we can see how particular inferences are highlighted:

> Anybody who spends even five years in a journalistic medium says, "Oh, I'm a journalist," right? So, 2004, 2005, we saw the media boom and now we're almost in

> 2017—so twelve years, whoever went in as a junior employee at a news TV station is now a "journalist"! [gestures with air quotes] But does he have what it takes to *be* a journalist? Now that's a question mark."

Mansoor (pseudonym) is a veteran journalist with over 40 years of experience in print news and now the CEO of a private news channel. He asks to be quoted anonymously for this section of the interview and suggests that I find a 'more diplomatic way' of rephrasing it (which I have not). I mention this specifically because as the executive head of his news channel, Mansoor is a recognizable public figure, and quite frequently quoted in the local and international press. Along with the exorbitant salaries offered to news media celebrities,[47] it is their public claim (and recognition) of the title "journalist" that irks the sensibilities of elite journalists who employ the use of virtual quotation marks when differentiating themselves from the former:

> Basically, a lot of them (talk show anchors) are not journalists. Right? So, when television news started, you could only get journalists from newspapers because there was only one channel that had news, and that was PTV. But then from one TV channel, in a period of 4 years, you went up to 18 news channels, and today you have 32 news channels so… where will people get those resources from? Whoever was a junior producer and had some sense of news was picked up and made a director of news at another channel. People wanted anchors—they thought, Key buss aap bait jaao (Okay, fine, you sit here.) One Plus Three karo (anchor + three guests), gaali nikaalo (let out a few insults), cheekhna chilana hona chahiye, show sharaba, (there should be lots of yelling, drama and antics) you know the works! The few journalists that were there, the real journalists, um… they went in different directions, but they were far and few. And then also, again I don't know how you'll put this, but you'll have to find a diplomatic way of saying it—but when a good journalist went to a bad sait (business owner), then it depends on who's pulling the strings. The ones that were brilliant and would not compromise… sadly there are hardly any left today—who would not compromise on their content, they walked away. And they have very few other platforms to go to. Financially, the benefit that individuals got in television, compared to print, were manifold. If you were getting Rs.100 in print, you were getting Rs.1000 in television, that's 10 times more. So, you know the pull of the financial benefit was such, that people started compromising on the journalistic side. Where you had a good journalist, you probably had a compromised sait. Where you had a good sait, you probably had a compromised journalist.[48]

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[47] Average monthly salaries for talk show hosts in 2016 were quoted to me as ranging from three to five *lakh* rupees (usually morning talk show hosts) to 18 *lakh* and above for primetime evening current affairs shows (the unit of lakh = 100,000) [A rough US Dollar equivalent range for the latter would be $18,000 per month].

[48] Personal interview, 2014–2016.

Within Pakistani news media circles, the use of the Urdu term sait disparagingly refers to business tycoons who have purchased television news channels to acquire and flex political leverage. In writing on corruption practices within journalism in Pakistan, Nobil Ahmed (2011) outlines the business environments most recent news providers operate within, noting that media moguls with business interests in Pakistan today are defined by their political agendas over and above any ideological commitments, taking news channel ARY Digital as a prominent example. Founded by Abdul Razzaq Yaqoob, a leading Pakistani businessman who made his earliest millions as a gold merchant and property tycoon in Dubai during the 1980s, the channel initially started operations in 2000, catering to the U.K.'s Asian community. When licenses for private satellite television channels went on sale, the ARY Group stepped into the Pakistan market, and its network today consists of news, religious, food, and entertainment channels across Pakistan, the Middle East, the U.K., and Europe. The primary driving motivation behind setting up news organizations in Pakistan for saits is, according to Ahmed (2011):

> …to protect their assets and economic interests from being subject to surveillance by the taxman; to shield themselves from criminal charges and proceedings that will inevitably be directed at them by predatory politicians who use public office to attack rivals and their supporters; and of course, to protect themselves from being subjected to aggressive and imbalanced investigative journalism commissioned by editors in the pay of these politicians - rival news outlets that operate with little concern for public interest, few ideological commitments and no independence whatsoever from the patrimonial interests of their owners.[49]

Indeed, many of my elite interlocutors were keen to stress the fact that setting up a media organization was unlikely to be driven directly by profit motivation as very few news outlets generate revenue that exceed costs. In the next chapter, I will examine how Pakistani journalists negotiate their daily work, with elite professionals on the one hand rationalizing the

[49] Nobil Ahmed, "Qalam Ki Badmashi: Journalism, Corruption and the Informal Economy in Pakistani Media," *Urban Anthropology*, 40, 3–4 (2011), 461–462.

compromises they make in “sensationalizing” the news, and, how on the other, an increasingly powerless, lower to middle class cohort of young journalists, are put under pressure to produce news targeting mass audiences.

Chapter 3

"Maza Nahin Aya": Negotiating Sensationalism in Pakistani Television News Practices

> What I've come to realize after coming to "the dark side" is that our job is to give the news to people—and if enough people are not watching, then we're doing a disservice to the news as well. So, I feel that the ends justify the means. Using apocalyptic Hollywood footage to sell a story on climate change, or using Amitabh Bachchan saying a filmy dialogue to an underworld don to talk about real crime gangs, I'd say "Yeah, okay, that's alright"… if you aim to sell climate change, then that's a justified end. Can you imagine trying to get people to watch "An Inconvenient Truth" with Al Gore just sitting there and talking to you? (Bilal, Executive Producer, GEO News).

It was a rhetorical question, and before I could use the moment to push back, Bilal (pseudonym) soldiered on, defending his decision as an executive producer to introduce Hollywood film scenes of molten lava and thousand-foot waves crashing on cities as the kind of visuals required to hook audiences on a discussion of climate change on his primetime news show. Addressing himself as a former "print journalist snob," he recounts how he surprised even himself by transferring from his previous job as a political reporter at an English newspaper to "the dark side" of Pakistani journalism, i.e. Urdu television news. This dysphemism assumed various forms over the course of my fieldwork carried out in Karachi between 2014 and 2016, and its negative connotations continue to frame the public commentary on Pakistani news media. Since the deregulation of the electronic media industry in 2002, privatized television news channels have effectively transformed the nature of the national news culture in Pakistan. Indeed, the context of the emergence of these news channels weighs heavily on the evolution of the media industry over the past 17 years. It is important to note the specific timeline during which my fieldwork took place (2014–2106), as this chapter will not be able to cover the critical changes in management, increasing protocols of censorship, and restrictions that have occurred in Pakistani news channels in recent times, particularly during 2017–2019. I had confidently

assured my interlocutors back in 2016 that academic research takes years to publish, a fact that put many of them at ease during interviews, and also brought some wariness to the significance of my larger project, given the value of time-sensitive work in the news industry. Nevertheless, I believe an analysis that contextualizes the rise of sensationalist television news in Pakistan can lend itself to further questions on how certain broadcast news-making practices unsettles the quintessential image of independent mass media as the guardian of liberal democracy, particularly as the authority of television news journalism becomes increasingly destabilized at the global scale.

During General Musharraf's regime (1999–2008), Pakistan's economy was liberalized and his government ushered in an information revolution by implementing new media laws, which finally broke the state's 40-year-long monopoly on electronic media. While the issuance of TV broadcasting and FM radio licenses to private media outlets was largely seen as a positive development, there was no framework in place for regulating cross-media ownership, thus paving the way for powerful private investors to gain political influence. It was during the critical series of events of the State of Emergency in 2007 that the newly privatized media gathered much of its image as one of the political "game-changers."[1] Musharraf's envisioned liberalization of Pakistan eventually unraveled into a series of political blunders—highlighted and criticized by the many news channels he was so proud of having introduced.[2] The remarkable civil movement that demanded Musharraf's resignation from power in 2008 lauded the media for maintaining pressure on the military regime (Shafqat 2017)—a phase that required an evolving television industry to quickly turn revolutionary. Buoyed by their success as a fourth

[1] S. Akbar Zaidi, "Not 1999," *Dawn*, January 15, 2012, http://www.dawn.com/ news/688351/not-1999.
[2] Musharraf is quoted in Ahmed (2011): "All these [media] people sitting around are the result of my opening the Pakistan society of the media—they're totally liberated" (120).

estate, private Urdu-language news channels sought to capitalize on the aggressive tactics displayed by leading current affairs talk-show hosts who routinely antagonized politicians on-air, demanding answers from an inept government on behalf of viewing citizens. Heated arguments amongst talk-show guests over various crises inevitably involved the use of anti-Indian and anti-American rhetoric, peddled in religious conspiracy theories of "foreign hands" attempting to dismantle the Islamic Republic of Pakistan. Often accused of sensationalism and unprofessional conduct, these channels and their content regularly provoke a discourse of anxiety, notably found in commentaries on the media in the English press.[3]

Seasoned print journalists frequently bemoan the arrival of sensational, and more accurately, dramatized broadcast news packaging, where Bilal's use of Hollywood footage as described earlier would be considered a tame example. Sonorous voiceovers and dramatic video montages set to popular musical scores have become a regular feature in news packages, along with entertaining lyrics to align with the news of the day.[4] For many of my interlocutors, punching up the news with entertainment was not simply an aesthetic choice, it was an industry standard, practiced by more than 45 independent news channels, all of which were vying for the same slice of the advertising pie. Along with a transformed news broadcast style, current affairs talk show hosts have adopted increasingly aggressive interrogation tactics to antagonize politicians on-air. Drawing both local and international attention for their alarming acquiescence in stoking religious and sectarian conflicts, private news channels and their prime time anchors have been regularly accused of pandering to populist religious sentiments in a range of infamous

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[3] Abbas Nasir, "Prime-time Shame," *Dawn*, February 27, 2016, http://www.dawn.com/news/1242172/prime-time-shame.

[4] Pakistani news producers have borrowed this concept from their news counterparts across the border in India. The use of Bollywood music in news package montages is frequent, and yet the same music is quickly abandoned at any point of political tension between the two countries. Despite the many overlapping similarities of both postcolonial news publics, I have not attempted to introduce a comparison with Indian news media in this chapter (see Chapter 1).

episodes: from condoning assassinations in blasphemy cases, to providing airtime to anti-state militant organizations, or popularizing anti-government protests. While many of the news media professionals I interviewed would often pick out various aspects of dramatization to express their dismay at what television news has resorted to, they would end up acknowledging with a shrug that it was all part of "selling the news." Not surprisingly, this offhanded explanation was echoed largely by professionals in upper-management levels of television news channels, and as I will later show, filters through the employee hierarchy to mold the expectations of entry-level news reporters.

In this chapter, I am interested in exploring the ways in which a particular class of Pakistani broadcast journalists negotiate sensationalist practices in television news, specifically those who have transitioned to the production of Urdu television news after working with English language newspapers. My initial focus on this exclusive professional cohort does not aim to privilege elite liberal anxieties, but rather to understand the contexts from which their critiques arise, and the implications of their relationship to power. The sociopolitical ramifications of a privatized media landscape in Pakistan has led to the rapid growth of an industry that must rely on an available labor pool of largely lower-middle class applicants, with television news organizations having to train their entry-level employees on the job. Michael Hardt's (1999) characterization of the postindustrial informational economy describes labor regimes as predicated on transactions involving knowledge, information, communication, and affect. Arguing that "affective labor" is one dimension of what he terms "immaterial labor," Hardt suggests, "Since the production of services results in no material and durable good, we might define the labor involved in this production as immaterial labor—that is, labor that produces an

immaterial good such as a service, knowledge or communication."[5] Hardt points to how these sectors of the economy are "focused on the creation and manipulation of affects"[6] and insists that while affective labor was never outside the capitalist economy, it now represents "the very pinnacle of the hierarchy of labor forms."[7] Indeed, anthropologists and academics working with journalistic communities in a variety of countries have shown that this kind of affective labor manifests itself in many forms of producing news, particularly under the widely acknowledged transformation of the global news industry through digital media practices (Boczkowski 2009, Boyer 2010, Boyer and Yurchak 2010; Gursel 2015). In the case of Pakistani lower to middle class journalists, I will later describe how the practices entailed in such affective labor have to follow an industry standard, which means not only compromising ethical convictions in the line of duty, but also being willing to participate in the very real front lines of the ratings battles so ardently fought between private media groups and their owners.

For now, I will return to my focus on Pakistani elite news professionals, by foregrounding their anxiety surrounding affective Urdu television news, particularly as it mediates an increasingly complex set of claims on representation and authority in public culture. This anxious discourse becomes an important signifier of both the liberal desire for independent mass media in a modernizing society as well as the liberal aversion to mass-based politics. Through this lens, I am interested in looking at how the cynical disavowal of sensationalist practices in Urdu news television turns on the ways in which uneducated mass audiences are figured as an emergent consuming class in an increasingly urban and post-liberalized Pakistan.

[5] Michael Hardt, "Affective Labor." *Boundary*, *26*, 2, 1999, http://www.jstor.org/stable/303793, 94.
[6] Ibid., 96.
[7] Ibid., 90.

What are the ways, then, in which affective television news becomes a form of mediation that is both constitutive of, and produced by, the discursive and material forms of public culture?

Much of the hand-wringing over the considerable lack of ethics in Pakistani journalism plays out in the English-language print media. Listed as one of the official languages of Pakistan, the use of English indexes a framework of social difference—where the colonial remnants of the prestige of English continues to act as a marker that identifies fluent users as modern, critical-rational actors who, by the nature of this prestige, belong to the minority of the privileged few. This language divide is reflected in the variety of mass media available, with English newspapers that can be traced back to pre-Partition print, alongside the continuing transmission of BBC-Urdu Radio. The Urdu-dominated television industry, however, can be more recently located in the grip of advertising revenue that fuels private television programming. While regional language channels are few, they still manage to sustain their business operations in contrast to the confirmed failure of English language channels. The media landscape of recent years is a telling example of the effective ways in which privatization allows market forces to mold the propagation of certain channels vis-à-vis other social divisions, such as language.[8] Where state television had media policies in place to unify a disparate population linguistically, the aim of privatized media outlets includes diversifying their audiences' purchasing power by offering content in multiple linguistic realizations.

In 2004, an amendment allowing cross-ownership of media led to the consolidation of powerful media groups. While the first players on the scene were mainly prominent newspaper groups, quickly launching satellite television channels and FM radio stations, a number of business groups with commercial conglomerates moved into the media landscape to further

[8] For further reading on media and infrastructure, see Larkin 2008 and Rajagopal 2001.

stretch the lucrative scope of television advertising as well as building political capital for themselves. During 2014–2016, there were 45 independent news channels operating in Pakistan, and my analysis here will focus on the responses of broadcast journalists employed by three specific media groups—GEO, Dawn, and Express—all of which had launched English news channels in the mid-2000s that were short lived, (GEO English shut down in 2008; Dawn English had to switch language formats in 2010; and Express 24/7 ended in 2011). Originally hired for their elite English language skills, these broadcast journalists turned to Urdu-only news channels in order to remain working in the television news industry. My access to these interlocutors was no doubt facilitated by my own employment at GEO News prior to graduate school, in addition to cross referencing a particular social-professional network in Karachi that privileges Western-educated Pakistanis with cultural and social capital on their return. I was invited into media organizations to observe news production at work, I sat in during professional training seminars, and I would interact with my interlocutors at social events as well. While this elite class of journalists did not consider me as a professional peer, their responses during interviews clearly mark an assumption of our shared cultural capital through our fluency in English and higher education—and as much as I pressed for clarifications, the examples extracted for this chapter will illustrate how understandings of what "valid" news practices should be often went unarticulated in comparison to the derision of actual news practices currently in place.

The Costs of Attracting Advertisers

Bilal (pseudonym) is in his early thirties, relatively young to be the executive producer for one of the highest ranked news programs on GEO News and yet he is emblematic of the

kinds of rapid professional mobility granted to English-educated journalists in the news industry. Lured from the "echo-chambers" of liberal print media, Bilal was attracted to the opportunities of being able to reach a vastly wider audience through television news. As he mentions though, having the potential to access mass audiences does not always translate in gaining their attention:

> It's quite frustrating because you will do shows that you think are really good but there will be no ratings that day because your competitor is Dr. Shahid Masood and he's churning out conspiracy theories on the other channel about how Nawaz Sharif [then prime minister] and Raheel Sharif [then army chief] differ over the color of their ties! The challenge has been very real—in television, the numbers are really important. You want quality journalism certainly but you also want audiences—those numbers are so tangible; in TV ratings, those numbers are not only instant, they're also public. Television is so expensive to produce that you want, you *need* advertising (Bilal, Executive Producer, GEO News).[9]

Housed under the Jang Group, which owns the country's largest circulating Urdu newspaper, GEO News emerged as one of the first private Urdu news channels after the deregulation of the media industry in 2002. GEO quickly became an infamous brand for introducing a sensationalist news reporting style to a nation that had only known terse and sober news broadcasts from Pakistan Television (PTV), the sole state television network for decades. Bilal's frustration over losing viewers to talk show hosts peddling conspiracy theories on rival channels is both valid and ironic, given that this particular competitor, Dr. Shahid Masood, gained much of his fame through his years of hosting a current affairs talk show on GEO News itself. One of the many open secrets of the industry is that the astronomical salaries awarded to Pakistani primetime anchors ensure that their news analyst personality brand (and their audience following) can only be bought at a very high price.

[9] Personal interview, 2014–2016.

Figure 12. Promotional poster depicting SAMAA's ranking in August 2016.[10]

In 2016–17, advertisers spent close to 90 billion rupees with 38 billion *rupees* spent on television alone.[11] Operating on a business model that runs predominantly on advertising revenue, private media groups sell the highest number of commercial airtime spots on their news channels, with the top three highest percentages of these spots being bought by beverage conglomerates, cellular communication service providers and washing detergent brands.[12] In 2018, the number of cell phone subscriptions in the country reached over 150 million, figures that had competing cellular operators aggressively pursuing television advertising with increasingly cheaper call packages.[13] As one of my interlocutors explains below, popular cell phone services such as Mobilink and

[10] Photo by author.
[11] "Media Advertising Spend FY 2015–2016," *Dawn*, February 4, 2019, https://aurora.dawn.com/news/1142031.
[12] "Medialogic Monthly Review," May 2018, *Mediologic*, http://medialogic.com.pk/tam/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/5-Medialogic-Monthly-Review-May-2018.pdf.
[13] "Telecommunications Statistics," Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files//tables/rename-as-per-table-type/Telecommination_08_02_2021.pdf.

Telenor were largely interested in targeting mass audiences for whom even the slightest variation in cheap call packages would result in additional subscriptions. Reliant on this advertising money to stay operational, news channel owners shift this burden onto their news production teams, who must attract potential mass consumers to stay tuned into a news broadcast or a political talk show:

> Phone companies said we were catering to an elite audience who don't use their products. So, if there's an ad for Blackberry, they'll give it to us but they weren't giving us the "Paanch rupey ka call package" (Phone call packages for five rupees) and that's where we started to feel the pinch—we were spending about seven to eight crores a month, it was a huge amount and the return was barely two or three crores. I tried to balance it out but I told my team, look, we're switching from English to Urdu, so please be prepared to enter a gutter (Rehman, Executive Producer, Dawn News).[14]

Rehman (pseudonym) is a senior executive producer and one-time head of programming at Dawn News, a news channel owned by the Dawn media group, mostly known for publishing the largest circulating English newspaper in Pakistan. With the launch of its English language news channel in 2006, Dawn hired young graduates from private universities and recruited Western-trained broadcast journalists who had returned to Pakistan for the media boom of the mid-2000s. Within three years, the channel had to switch from English-language formats to Urdu and, despite its lag in the rankings, has managed to stay in business for the past decade. The switch to Urdu meant a number of changes: revamping the news broadcasts, firing the foreign-accented on-screen talent, bringing in local journalists and, according to Rehman, "entering a gutter." I pushed back on this characterization of Urdu news practices and asked for an explanation, having encountered such dismissive sentiment towards Pakistani news media one too many times; particularly from professionals like Rehman, who have extensive experience of reporting

[14] Personal interview, 2014–2016.

for Western news organizations (such as Reuters, BBC and The Guardian) and have risen to the top echelons of the professional class of journalists in Pakistan:

> Look, the Urdu media here is very rightist, very pro-establishment, and they come out with stories that they can't substantiate. They're more interested in speculating things and then begging their reporters to confirm it as news. It's not about language, it's about the style. I tried to run Dawn Urdu in the same format as we were running Dawn English, and we badly failed… the bigwigs are always saying we have to be more like SAMAA, or more like GEO, more awami-like' (Rehman, Executive Producer, Dawn News).[15]

Seeking Awami Audiences

If Dawn English had failed financially because advertisers were not interested in targeting an elite minority audience, then the lackluster ratings of Dawn Urdu in 2010 were a result of trying to run the Urdu news channel *as if* it were still an English-based news channel, and therein lay the "problem." Rehman's contempt for current news practices as they cater to awami audiences reveals not so much disdain for the teeming masses as an anxiety over the particular ways through which one would tap into such an audience while ostensibly delivering the news. This anxiety often took the form of dismissive embarrassment when an interlocutor would admit to crafting the origins of particularly infamous programs. During an interview with Ahmed (pseudonym), a senior executive at Dawn News, I listened patiently while he described in detail the importance of his news organization as the primary example of hard-hitting, quality journalism in Pakistan, working against the tide of sensationalist competitors. Meanwhile, these same channels were blasting away at a lowered volume on the wall of television screens on display in his office. He stepped out to receive a phone call and, on his return, he found me watching a screen where a shrouded body soaked in blood was splayed across the floor, the camera was zooming in and out, with sinister music fading away as the title of the show came

[15] Ibid.

bursting onto screen. It was one of Dawn News's most popular programs, a crime re-enactment show that took official crime reports and dramatized them in narrative form, complete with actors and dialogue. Ahmed returned in time to catch the title of the show, and he let out a loud chuckle behind me, "Oh shit, don't judge us based on this—these crime shows are just part of the news now. It's not that we want to do them, but it's what the audience wants!" One of the ways members of this particular subset of interlocutors attempted to disassociate their sense of professional worth from such kinds of programming was to shift the responsibility onto audiences that "didn't know any better." Another was to reference distinguished and seasoned print journalists, who now occupied CEO and editor positions in the organization as the main culprits behind exaggerated news content, clearly identifiable as those "knowing fully well." As Bilal described it:

> I remember it was my second month at GEO, I was talking to some senior journalists about packaging the headlines for a show [on black money markets] that night and this person, who is a *very* senior person in the organization says, "You should have a bundle of money and you should have someone flip through all the bank notes while saying 'gghrrr-rrr'" [the sound of banknotes being flipped through] and I laughed at him saying, "Seriously? With the sound effect?" And he said "Yes, yes, gghrr-rrr"—I was just staring at this guy, and I thanked him but of course I just brushed it off. And, now a year down the line, I'm thinking to myself, maybe I should use the bundle of money shot! [laughs]' (Bilal, Executive Producer, GEO News).[16]

While Bilal's narration of this incident allows us a brief glimpse of his initial disbelief that a senior executive he considered a mentor would provide such an idea, I am more interested in the moment of his reassurance that he *did* indeed brush off the suggestion as I believe it ties in with the earlier example of Ahmed's reaction to the crime show. What is it about the raspy exaggerated voiceover and the crude sound effects of millions of rupees being flipped through that troubles the sensibilities of a "former print journalist snob" or that of a rational, critical

[16] Ibid.

modern subject? In Ahmed's case earlier, why does the acknowledgement of successfully tapping into mass audiences seem to unsettle the liberal news media professional? Crime reenactment shows, lambasted as they are in elite print commentary as wildly unethical, have proven to be extremely successful for news channels to attract mass audiences and boost their ratings. Marketing executives will quickly point out the loophole that rationalizes showing dramatized crimes of passion on news channels—if the narrative arc of the show rests on actual police reports, the channel is justified in alerting audiences to the newsworthiness of such crimes while taking heavy liberties with the way in which they portray these re-enactments. On the one hand, we could explain this success through marketing and advertising metrics, taking seriously Ahmed's insistence that such shows only work because "The *audience* wants it!"—a phrase that at its core, validates the notion that marketing is merely a reflection of the deepest and truest needs of the people to whom it is addressed. But, on the other, we would still be left with confronting the stinging embarrassment of such an acknowledgment. For what did the production of successful sensationalist programming indicate, if not the realization of the postcolonial modernizing subject coming to terms with the remnants of their naïve and irrational past? Indeed, "being addressed as a member of a mass public means being interpolated as at once 'oneself'," as William Mazzarella (2013) has described the work of the open edge of mass publicity, "but also at the same time, a generalizable member of what is in principle the infinite, anonymous space of the 'public at large'."[17] This would suggest that the anxiety over fashioning news to appear *awami* is misplaced—it is not so much that elite executive producers are at a loss

[17] Mazzarella, *Censorium*, 37.

as to how to connect to mass audiences, but rather, it rests in the understanding that they know all too well.[18]

Class, Culture, and Crafting Sensationalism

The dilemma facing English-language print journalists now employed in Urdu news media meant turning away from a trained "BBC-model" of serious, sober journalism, and tuning their craft to a localized set of "dramatic" news practices. Warily recalling one of his first assignments of putting together a news package at Express News, Khurram (pseudonym) was nonetheless forthcoming. His news bureau chief sent him to Faisalabad to start producing local news stories for the primary reason that people rating meters (devices used for measuring television ratings) had recently been installed in the city's households:

> Once, there was continuous load shedding (rolling blackout—intentional electrical power shutdown), and a group of people had gathered to protest outside one of the power companies. We shot a few scenes of footage and sent it back to the chief in Lahore; he replied with a text message: "Maza nahin aya" ("That wasn't entertaining"), and he told us to gather more people, burn a few tires, raise louder slogans—so we did! Suddenly we had a sizeable protest with flames and an agitated crowd. All the news channels vans were reaching our Faisalabad protest site, and the event received considerable coverage, all the while those damn people meters ticked away (Khurram, news reporter, *Express News*).[19]

Similar to the interlocutors mentioned earlier, Khurram also transferred into television news after working as an English print journalist and his encounter with that ubiquitous catchphrase of the editing room "Maza nahin aya" resulted in his crafting the quintessentially angry South Asian crowd, conveniently packaged for the 9 p.m. news bulletin, complete with flaming tires. The phrase "Maza nahin aya" is not only an assessment—"This news package was not entertaining"—but it has acquired for many of my interlocutors, the salience of an unspoken

[18] See Mazzarella, *Censorium*, 105 for a full discussion of his theorization of the predicament of mass publicity in South Asia.
[19] Personal interview, 2014–2016.

truth: the news *can* be made entertaining, and you'll know it when you see it. In order to engage with this proposition seriously, I started noting the distinctions between what my interlocutors considered to be "sensational" news and "unethical" news practices and found that the boundary lines drawn between the two were sketched along the use value of that particular news story. Pakistani news channels are notorious for airing news without verifying sources and are certainly not unique in blurring facts in exchange for sensational headlines. In cases where the discussion involved celebrity news anchors, criticism of their sensational content was delivered swiftly and unanimously—the understanding being that when highly-paid media personalities pull in large numbers of viewers, they have a higher responsibility to deliver accurate news content without twisting facts to stir up controversy.

As described earlier in Chapter 1, the Taseer assassination in 2011 is quoted often as a prime example of a reckless media and belligerent news anchors. In her show, Meher Bukhari deliberately misconstrued then-governor Salman Taseer's efforts to advocate for a victim of a blasphemy case, and the anchor accused him of being a blasphemer himself during a live interview. He was shockingly assassinated a month later, and his death was largely seen by liberal elites as a senseless consequence of his vitriolic portrayal in the media.[20] Not surprisingly, a media executive in charge of Bukhari's show did not share this view when I asked about this particular episode as a glaring example of sensationalizing a sensitive issue: "Yes, it was my program. But Meher Bukhari cannot be held responsible, I cannot be held responsible, SAMAA cannot be held responsible—because look, I can ask you questions during an interview, however controversial they may be. But the answers that you give, only *you* can be held responsible for that."

[20] Waraich, "Why Did a Trusted Bodyguard."

Before we dismiss this poorly aimed attempt to shift the burden of accountability, the executive's response does expose the chain of command that broadcast journalists must navigate when weighing decisions on crafting "sensational" news. Barring a few rare exceptions, the editors-in-chief of most Pakistani news channels are de-facto also the owners of their individual private media groups—the political agendas of each news channel are thus identifiable by the content that they produce, whether anti-government or pro-establishment, depending, especially in 2014-16, on the particular history of the channel's CEO with the current ruling political party. The irony of young, untrained, and middle to lower class journalists reporting upwards to a chain of media professionals that ultimately ends with an elite, politically-motivated, 'untrained' editor-in-chief, was not lost on my interlocutors and was simply a sobering reality of the business model of much of the Pakistani media landscape. "Dramatic" and "emotional" news coverage was understood as an industry standard, along with the established use of popular music in news headlines and exaggerated speculations in an effort to "break" a particular news story first. For many, the boundary line between "sensational" and "unethical" lay in the greater purpose of the news story itself, as explained by Fatima (pseudonym), a senior executive producer:

> For me, the ends justify the means. If you are shining a light on an important issue, then you need it to be dhamakedar (explosive) and that's fine! But putting music to footage of a supermodel walking up to a court hearing or, I don't know—that looped footage of a policeman getting slapped, it has no real value. By value I mean, it has no impact on society. If you're not contributing to any substantial discourse of the society, it may not be unethical, but you're still doing news wrong.[21]

Upper-class journalists who expressed ridicule towards the state of current broadcasting practices in Urdu news nonetheless acknowledged that it was through such practices that channels were able to attract mass audiences and thus secure the advertising needed to keep them in business. The need to stay in business was of course often rephrased as Fatima's comment below

[21] Personal interview, 2014–2016.

illustrates, as the *responsibility* to deliver the news to "impressionable people" who made up the majority of the voting electorate and despite their pitied illiteracy, were now fluent consumers of the liberal free market:

> As broadcasters, I think that rather than giving in to the stupidity that people are already seeing, it's our *responsibility* to change mindsets. When you're sitting in a country where there are so many impressionable people and so much illiteracy, it's a responsibility to broadcast things which will change people for the positive. What else is the point? (Fatima, Senior Executive Producer).[22]

Interestingly, an example of this kind of "responsibility" that upper class journalists may assume to bear can be assessed in the following excerpt of my conversation with another female interlocutor. The senior executive producer of a political talk show, Uzma (pseudonym) was forthcoming about her decision to "reign in" the content of a program she might have otherwise sensationalized. As mentioned earlier in Chapter 1, the unofficial media ban on covering the Mumtaz Qadri funeral in 2016 resulted in a rare unanimous stance by television news channels to avoid or limit primetime programming on the state's decision to hang the murderer of Punjab governor Salman Taseer. According to Uzma:

> I really struggled with it. Of course, as a journalist I knew that we should be showing the funeral. There are two sides to a story, right? This is a man that thousands – no, hundreds of thousands of people in our country, they love him. We hate him, but the people, they love him. Our country has so many issues and if you know what's right and what's wrong then you have to choose between ideas. Where do you want your country to be? Why give this man any more airtime now that he's gone? There's no need to. This was really one occasion where all news channels said, 'Forget journalism, we don't want our country to be like this.'[23]

A security guard that killed his own client on the account of perceiving him as a blasphemer, Mumtaz Qadri was declared a hero by religious groups in Pakistan, and his funeral was attended by thousands of mourners. The irony that television news channels bore a large responsibility in

[22] Personal interview, 2014–2016.
[23] Ibid.

sensationalizing governor Taseer's mission to amend blasphemy laws in Pakistan as blasphemy itself was not lost on my interlocutors, but was quickly brushed aside as a tragic and disastrous consequence of an immature media industry. The decision then, five years later, to avoid covering the Qadri funeral, could be read as a lesson learned, but is all the more emblematic of the ideological divide between elite news producers, who assume to be accurately placed to convey "correct" messaging to the masses. When returning to conversations regarding sensationalist news content, it became increasingly clear to me that behind much of the defense of these "dramatic" broadcast practices, was the underlining assurance of a certain class of media professionals who considered themselves to be safely outside (if not above) the purview of their desired mass audience. Jennifer Hasty (2010) has suggested that one of the reasons the practices of news media have been understudied by anthropologists is that

> for an anthropologist schooled in controversies over the politics of ethnographic representation, there is something profoundly uncomfortable about the practices of news media, something vaguely reflective of our own discursive practices, more purely politicized but also more politically compromised than anthropology.[24]

Indeed, this discomfort is precisely why I would suggest that examining the practices of sensationalist news, as both a desperate attempt to gain audiences and a cultural logic of practice, would guide a deeper reflection on the ways in which authoritative statements on bounded notions of 'culture' are produced and circulated, especially as the range of these articulations emerges as increasingly valuable currency in a post-liberalized economy.

In her work on Indian regional news media, Sahana Udupa (2015) deftly avoids reductionist accounts of commercial media as merely serving private interests, and instead looks to formulate journalism's mediations in terms of "desire." Choosing a framework of desire, or in

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[24] Jennifer Hasty, "Introduction," in *The Anthropology of News and Journalism: Global Perspectives*, edited by S. Elizabeth Bird (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 133.

this case, aspiration, allows us to turn away from culturalist and particularist understandings of South Asia, and refuses the assumptions that there must be something essentially different with "Desi culture" and its journalism. Instead, Udupa (2015) says, a framework of desire locates these media worlds and urban landscapes as part of a broader wave of globalization that arrives with its particular class project of capital accumulation but "faces and foments multiple contestations shaped by colonial history, postcolonial state structures and a rich repertoire of cultural practices that are themselves shifting."[25] My earlier examination of the justifications of an elite class of journalists is not intended to sympathize with the commercial pressures of producing television news, but rather I am interested in tracing how an aspirational narrative comes to bear on the journalistic profession in particular ways in Pakistan.

Indeed, the struggles my interlocutors faced to maintain ethical practices in journalism can be viewed as what Bourdieu (1993) has described as "legitimation struggles." For Bourdieu, in any given cultural field, people are positioned differently according to their ability to influence the outcome of aesthetic disputes—these are ultimately power struggles, with dominant interests seeking to impose their values as legitimate. In the case of Pakistani television news, such disputes occur regularly within the cultural logics of news production, particularly against a backdrop of vast class differences amongst news media colleagues. The professional vulnerability of lower to middle class journalists is thrown into sharp relief when the work they are expected to produce, be it visually compelling spectacles, or reporting at the cost of falsifying facts, is both peddled by elite news professionals as the only way to attract mass/*awami* audiences and critically rejected as crass sensationalism.

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[25] Sahana Udupa, *Making News in Global India: Media, Publics, Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 206.

The Limits of Ethical Journalism

In 2013, the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists surmised that at least 18,000 new journalists had entered the workforce, of whom almost 70% had no formal training in journalism. The hiring of untrained media personnel is an indication of the ways in which young broadcast journalists in Pakistan are not only tasked with producing affective news, but are also expected to act as authentic cultural mediators between corporate news channels and the *awam*. Stereotypical examples in liberal elite commentary on recently recruited, untrained reporters being sent off to cover breaking news events, invariably frames them as scrambling through police cordoned areas after bomb explosions, contaminating crime scenes, or entering into the houses of the victims of such attacks, shoving cameras and microphones into grieving family members' faces and asking them inane questions in between their wails. Caught between the ratings race to deliver breaking news footage to their respective newsrooms and simultaneously scapegoated by their corporate management when they step out of bounds, the rawness of the untrained journalist has come to conveniently stand in for the media industry on its worst days. It is true that one cannot deny the reality of such instances, but while the marked class differences play out in a number of different ways between the kinds of broadcast journalists described earlier in this paper and the class of professionals I will now turn my attention to, I would argue that the prevailing discourse on the ethics of journalism in Pakistan becomes a productive site through which the differences between privileged and vulnerable media labor emerge as most apparent.

I met Sidra (pseudonym) at a training seminar for broadcast journalists in Karachi in August of 2016. She was in her mid-twenties and had started her career working as a reporter for an Urdu news channel three years before. The lecture on ethics that day was given by Quatrina, a prominent senior female talk-show anchor with thirty years of experience in English print, who

immediately launched into a tirade against the current state of Pakistani news media: "Tamasha zyada, khabr kam, (less news and more drama) entertainment, salaciousness, tabloidism! Journalism is jihad—back in my day, you had ink in your veins, but today you have *bijlee* current (electric current)!" During the Q&A, several seminar participants raised the same complaint about the types of stories their editors ask of them: they explained that if an editor wanted a news package on petrol prices for example, then they had already crafted a story on how people could not get to work because of a shortage of petrol. The reporters were then sent out to collect sound bites and vox pops of the assumed "frustrations of the awam"—only to sometimes discover that petrol stations were fully functional. Returning to the news office with this updated information, however, did these reporters no good, as they were first berated and then sent back out to *make* the news package according to the editor's script. Quatrina appeared visibly perturbed and I waited for her reaction to the inevitable conclusion: reporters admitted that they would convince people on the street to lie on camera about the lack of petrol and complain that they hadn't been able to get to work that day. Predictably aghast, Quatrina ominously warned her seminar participants that under no circumstances should they accept such unethical news assignments. Unfazed, Sidra asked:

> Sidra: But *how* do we do that?
> Quatrina replied: You simply refuse to do the assignment!
> Sidra persisted: But I'll lose my *job* if I don't carry out assignments
> Finally, Quatrina threw her hands up: Then you simply lose it, my dear. You'll find another job, but you can't compromise on ethics![26]

In the side glances and murmurs exchanged across the room, it was clear to Sidra and her colleagues that Quatrina knew little of the daily struggles they faced in their respective news channels. Indeed, it is within this gaping distance between journalists who were invited to guest

[26] Personal interview, 2014–2016.

lecture at training seminars and those who sought enrollment in them that the limits of professional aspirations in Pakistani news media appear most prominently.

Over the past decade, electronic media industry jobs became, and continue to be, extremely attractive as aspirational careers to Urdu-medium educated, lower to middle class youth in Pakistan. Overlooking their lack of journalistic training with the mandatory directive to learn quickly on the job, corporate television news channels promised young applicants relatively high salaries at entry-level positions, which in many cases, would be amounts more than their parents earned or ever would. My interlocutors among this class would certainly complain about the kinds of news they were expected to cover, but they would just as often mention the sense of adventure associated with producing news in a high pressure environment. They were proud to flaunt press identification that got them waved past security gates, and perhaps the aspect most earnestly expressed was the feeling of participating in a drama much larger than themselves. According to Appadurai (2004), such aspirations are "never simply individual (as the language of wants and choices inclines us to think). They are always formed in interaction and in the thick of social life."[27] I asked Sidra if the pressures of the job, the long hours on the road, the longer hours in the editing room, on top of management demands to make the news entertaining, ever pushed her to quit. She shook her head emphatically, saying "This is the dream. I could never imagine my family accepting my crazy working hours, but they are so proud that I'm a journalist. I could quit a channel, but I can't quit journalism." Indeed, many like Sidra did quit their channels—quite regularly. An open acknowledgment in the media industry is the failure of certain channels to pay their employees on time past the first month, with this trend worsening in recent years. Some of my interlocutors simply could not afford to wait out the

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[27] Arjun Appadurai, "The Capacity to Aspire: Culture and the Terms of Recognition," in *Culture and Public Action,* edited by V. Rao and M. Walton, M., (Stanford, CA: Stanford Social Sciences, 2004), 67.

three-month delay in salary payment and would anxiously apply to a different channel in order to get that first month's paycheck. Sidra's exchange with Quatrina, described earlier, was only one example of the stratified class differences within the media industry, additionally marked by who can and cannot place a higher premium on upholding journalistic ethics when faced with the threat of losing a job that paid on time. If there are enough news channels around for young journalists to switch to, there are also plenty of young hires to replace them. Human resources representatives at news channels are quick to point out that the limited resource-pool of trained news media professionals available in the early years of the media boom has been vastly diluted by a large influx of untrained applicants in the past 15 years, but are less forthcoming about the lack of funds to properly train incoming hires. Within this context we can then ask, how does the burden of producing sensationalist news mediate the vulnerability of lower to middle class media professionals who find themselves recruited into increasingly affective and precarious labor?

Gender and Class Hierarchies

In 2017, the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists reported that less than 5% of the estimated 20,000 journalists in Pakistan are women.[28] One can point to the increasing female visibility on television screens as prominent talk show hosts and news anchors, but these women present a tiny fraction of the already low numbers of women that choose to join the news media industry. According to a recent study in 2019, Pakistan's urbanization rate is the highest in South Asia, with over half the country's population living in urban centers,[29] yet its female labor force

[28] Adnan Rehmat, "Life as a Woman in Pakistani Journalism: Threats, Harassment, and Rejection," Media Support, https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Final-Report-Testimonies-Of-Women-Journalists-in-Pakistan.pdf.
[29] Nausheen H. Anwar et al., "Gender and Violence in Urban Pakistan," Safe and Inclusive Cities Project, March 2016, https://idl-bnc-idrc.dspacedirect.org/handle/10625/55684, 1.

participation rates are one of the lowest in the world (Sayeed & Ansari, 2019). While economic literature attributes a number of explanations for low female labor force participation rates in urban areas of South Asia—human capital constraints, lack of urban transport, labor market discrimination and the care economy (Haghighat 2002; Kazi 1999)—there is an increasing and much deserved focus on the actual and perceived threats of violence and harassment that shape women's mobility and access to work opportunities (Anwar et al. 2016; Gazdar 2003; Khan 2007; Sayeed et al. 2016). During my fieldwork, it was not rare to find that women working in highly coveted office jobs, be it multinational corporations, banks, telecommunications, textile companies, etc., mostly relied on their employer's willingness to arrange for private transport vans exclusively for female employees. Similarly, news media companies are seen as both "respectable" and "safe" for women and are desirable workplaces with lower entry barriers. On many occasions where I interviewed mostly male, upper level news channel management, my meetings would conclude with being transferred to a female employee, who would provide a guided tour of the news office. This is the manner in which I met Salma, a senior female reporter who had eight years of work experience between three news channels. Thirty-three years old, Salma was, in her words, "happily married to the news" and could not imagine a husband that would tolerate her working late nights the way her own family did. She showed me the studio set where she once slept under the anchor's desk the night that Benazir Bhutto was assassinated. She jokingly offered it as a litmus test—if the major roads in Karachi are blocked due to protests, you know your workplace is female friendly if you feel comfortable having to spend the night in the office. While many of the female journalists I interacted with said they generally felt safe and respected in the confines of their offices, they were quick to point out that the overwhelming imbalance of male-to-female journalists also limited the kinds of news beats afforded to them. In

a report authored by the Pakistan-based Digital Rights Foundation, a qualitative survey found that the organizational structures of media offices and the implicit gender stereotypes that prevail in newsrooms prevented women from being allotted politically sensitive or security-related reporting assignments.[30] That women are numerically disadvantaged in the profession creates an additional vulnerability of their pointed visibility, which allows for targeted harassment from the public, particularly via social media, which I discuss in greater context in Chapter 4. For now, I want to reflect on the impact of both class and gender for female journalists, and I will use an example from a breakout session during a training seminar where participants were sharing the problems they faced when trying to do their jobs.

Maha was assigned to cover the 2014 Sindh Cultural Festival and was part of the jostling crowd of journalists waiting for Sharmila Farooqi, a female adviser to the Sindh chief minister, to answer their questions. Maha's first question on the distribution of allocated funds for the festival received a curt "no comment." Emboldened, she waited for her next chance and loudly asked about the lack of qualifications held by the minister's appointees to oversee the festival operations. Instead of answering, Farooqi shot her down with abusive language, effectively telling her to shut up and know her place, all of which was captured by the many cameras present. When Maha returned to her office, she discovered that Farooqi had called her boss and complained that the channel had sent a "silly reporter, asking dumb questions." Maha recounted receiving phone calls and texts from colleagues who asked her if she was crazy—didn't she know that her own television channel was a major sponsor of the festival she was criticizing that day? She spent the rest of the morning editing her news package, keeping intact the footage of her questions and the abuse she received, but of course, her story didn't make it to air. Despite

[30] "Surveillance of Female Journalists in Pakistan," Digital Rights Foundation, https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Surveillance-of-Female-Journalists-in-Pakistan-1.pdf.

the interaction being recorded by other journalists present, competing channels were additional sponsors of the same festival, and the footage never resurfaced. Discouraged and upset, her only solace from this experience was her conversation with the channel's bureau chief who called to say he was proud of her and that she should keep asking tough questions. The rest of the seminar participants sympathized with Maha, lamenting that the same bosses that ask for aggressive reporting from their journalists, end up rejecting news stories that compromise the channel's sponsorship investments. From my conversations with the trainees after this session, it was clear that lower to middle class journalists were well aware that the affordances provided to elite journalists, both by management and by politicians during on-air interrogations, were not as easily available to them, and this disparity was more pronounced in the case of female journalists. I recounted Maha's story to a female executive producer who sighed knowingly on the outcome, and also commented on the predictable contempt a female politician would display towards a female reporter asking the wrong questions:

> EP: Women in any industry have to be aggressive, you have to be the bitch.
>
> Ayesha: So what did Maha do wrong?
>
> EP: Look, there are basic rules in journalism. You have to get one point of view, and you have to get the other point. There is a right and there is a wrong. It's not rocket science—if you can *feel* that you're doing something wrong as a journalist, it's probably wrong! So, you have to get the facts right. Actually, you have to *know* when it's the right time to ask a certain question, then you have to use your judgement and wait it out—and that's the problem with a lot of these new journalists, they haven't been trained properly.[31]

As was the case with Saima Kanwal, the "unknown" female reporter described in Chapter 2, the circulating industry discourse of the "untrained journalist" overlaps (specifically in instances involving female journalists) with a culturally pervasive discourse on women in South Asia, often centered on an argument to limit or contain female agency. Scholarly work has

[31] Personal interview, 2014–2016.

documented the contestation over the public circulation of images of South Asian womanhood (Bose 2002, 2006; Chanda 2003; John & Nair 2000; Kasbekar 2001; Kishwar 2001; Mankekar 1999) and indeed the "threat" of the "public woman" can be seen in the adjacent form of the female journalist, stepping outside the confines of her home, and especially when reporting from outside the bounds of her expected place within the class-based hierarchy in the news industry. If employment in television news channels provides the means for young women struggling to acquire or maintain middle-class respectability, then as I will later show in Chapter 4, it is also their visible association with news channels through which they become targets for harassment, intimidation, and threats.

Maintaining 'Independent' Media at the Cost of Self-Censorship

As scholars of Indian mass media have observed, the arrival of mass publicity prior to political democratization in many colonial contexts is often pointed out by postcolonial elites as explaining the 'in between' time that the masses are still stuck in, justifying the liberal tendency to reluctantly favor authoritarian forms of public regulation until political maturity is 'achieved' (Rajagopal 2001; Mazzarella 2013, Udupa 2015). Ironically in Pakistan's case, it was a military dictator's 'benevolence' that lifted the restraints of state media, in turn accelerating an information revolution that demanded the return of civilian rule. Once a beacon of progress for liberal elites, private news channels have since fallen from grace; their 'independent' status has become increasingly dubious as a number of recent scandals have revealed the corrupt relationships between media group owners and their top anchors with political parties and influential businessmen, who peddle their agendas through competing channels.[32] It is these very

[32] Dubbed 'Mediagate' in 2012, this episode led to allegations of bribery practices against celebrity news anchors and received widespread condemnation within the media industry

relationships that enable media groups to thwart the state's efforts to rein in sensationalist broadcasting. Indeed, the consequences for misreporting on issues pertaining to the civilian government, oftentimes in the form of slander and false quotes, are brushed aside with ineffective defamation and libel laws – the state continues to issue monetary fines and legal notices to news channels that pile up in dusty office corners, effectively rendering the government's electronic media monitoring unit a toothless watchdog.

On the other hand, the risks of misreporting on selected, sensitive issues carry a much graver threat. The consequences for Pakistani investigative journalism are extremely dangerous, particularly when journalists pursue news stories concerning the military, extremist militant groups, and cases of religious sensitivity, such as blasphemy. While much of the scholarly focus on Pakistan post 9/11 has been interested in issues of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism (Iqtidar 2011, Haqqani 2005, Toor 2011), little attention has been paid to the journalists risking their lives, and often paying a high price for the very stories that draw the attention of these expert analyses. As I will later expand on in Chapter 4, the disappearances of journalists working on such issues and the body dumps that follow serve to threaten the journalist community into practicing strict forms of self-censorship when reporting on sensitive topics.

Anthropological studies on mass media and its audiences (Abu-Lughod 2004; Lukacs 2010; Mankekar 1999; Mazzarella 2013; Nakassis 2016; Rajagopal 2001) have long complicated the notion that mass audiences are "passive" recipients, especially within the postcolonial context where television and other electronic mass media has been state controlled or in the hands of culture industry professionals who benefit from sharing the "dominant codes" of the nation-state (Abu-Lughod 1999; Hall 1980). While mass media have been viewed as powerful

(https://www.pakistantoday.com.pk/2012/06/14/mubashar-lucman-suspended-for-%E2%80%98off-air%E2%80%99-comments/).

tools for social engineering, one of the fallouts of this focus has been the perception of media institutions as static entities that function entirely as ideological apparatuses of governments. This approach deflects attention away from media producers as critical mediators, and their role in articulating and translating larger projects. The role of such professionals in the light of privatized mass media in Pakistan takes on a particular significance with both the historical context of state censorship and increasing mass electronic circulation of media forms. Thus, when Pakistani television news producers are tasked with packaging a news segment or designing program outlines for controversial topics on political talk shows, they must now imagine how to mediate both a narrative of "national interest" and an oppositional stance that would result in an informed debate while catering to the widest possible cross section of viewers to pull in high ratings. The vast differences in the socioeconomic spectrum that spans this viewing population requires that news media producers both acknowledge and construct "mass appeal" in forms that are then criticized for being sensationalist and populist by educated elites. In this regard, producers are thus engaging with the "open edge" (Mazzarella 2013) of the form of publicity engendered in the relation between the mass-media objects they create and the collectivities they presuppose and call into being. One of the outcomes of studying elite interlocutors in the Pakistani news media industry is a critical focus on anxieties over the material effects of sensationalist news as it circulates as a performative, affective force in public and political culture. Additionally, taking a closer look at the shared professional aspirations of both elite news media professionals and lower-middle class journalists allows for an expanded analysis of the ways in which the practice of journalism is necessarily rooted in local cultural logics. The attendant discourses that arise over its anxieties and standards can then be viewed not

so much as struggles of legitimation within a professional community, but instead as legitimate desires.

Chapter 4

"Marwa Na Dena"/ "Don't Get Us Killed":

Reporting between the Marginal and the Military in Pakistan

The bustling news studio had grown eerily quiet after the 9 p.m. news bulletin had aired; someone had kindly turned down the blaring volume on the wall of TV screens to a low rumble, and the night shift staff was slowly trickling in. I had spent the evening watching a production team prepare for their late night talk show and their animated conversations in their corner of the open floor plan were interrupted constantly—suggestions to edit sections of the show, demands for better, creative subtitles that would appear on screen, exclamations when new tweets were received from important sources and had to be included in tonight's show or else! Saleha was in her early twenties, the youngest of the team and the only female producer. I was deposited in her charge for that evening, and I was very aware of the fact that we were the only women in the office at this late hour, or at least as far as I could see. I asked if her family objected to her late work hours to which she replied with a laugh: "They're less worried about where I am, and more worried about what my colleagues will say on television which might leave me without a job!" Hashim wheeled his chair over to join our conversation and jokingly responded to Saleha: "Tell your family not to worry, we're all professionals here—a good journalist never reveals their sources, and a smart journalist knows when it's time to experience technical difficulties!" As head of the news desk at Dawn News, Hashim was a veteran journalist who also hosted a late night political talk show. Earlier in the evening, we had been discussing the differences between reporting in print media and television news, and he began to describe the following incident:

> Hashim: Once, our reporter managed to obtain the testimony of one of the wives of Osama Bin Laden, after he was killed. This reporter begged me to run the story on the air but I thought to myself—all these other channels will shamelessly copy the report. So instead, we wrote up the story and printed it in the *Dawn* newspaper and the next day all

> the international media picked it up. *The New York Times*, *BBC*, everyone was quoting us! It was great!
>
> Ayesha: But wasn't this kind of story the perfect fit for a 'breaking news' report on television?

Hashim shook his head in disagreement and continued:

> See, there are some stories that you can't claim exclusivity once it goes electronic—in fact, there are times when you don't even want to be the only one reporting! For example, remember when the government finally accepted that Ajmal Kasab (one of the militants in the 2008 Mumbai bombing) was a Pakistani citizen? We broke that story on TV, and I immediately got a call from GEO's news director asking me 'Yaar, is it true? Tell me honestly, aur marwa na dena! (Don't get me killed!)'. I said, 'Sir, you know me, you were once my boss, I'm telling you in confidence, the source is the Army Chief himself'—he quickly thanked me and didn't even wait to end the phone call, I could hear him as he yelled to his staff 'Oye, chala doh! Chala doh!' ('Quick, run the story!').[1]

Hashim laughed as he recalled that moment and said, "These are rare instances, but we do help our rivals out in such situations."

Over the course of my research in Karachi, it was clear that Pakistani news media professionals were well attuned to which kinds of news stories they could pursue, produce, and successfully circulate on the variety of media platforms now available to them. Eighteen years after the deregulation of the mass media, private news channels have established themselves as powerful players on the political spectrum, drawing both awe and disdain for their blistering critiques of politicians combined with their race for ratings. Despite their insistence on the "independent" nature of the electronic media (in contrast to the state's prior monopoly on television), broadcast journalists are highly attentive to the ways in which their work remains bounded by a number of factors including predominant commercial interests, complex relationships between media owners and the state and most particularly, an ambiguous ever-present tension with the deep state. Limited critical scholarship on the Pakistani military

[1] Personal interview, 2014–2016.

establishment has documented its penetration into virtually every sphere of public life, including the bureaucracy and the media, showing how through its allies, with both direct and indirect decision making, the military effectively dominates Pakistani society (Haqqani 2005; Rizvi 2000; Shah 2014; Siddiqa 2007). It comes as little surprise then, that Hashim shared the source of his breaking news story with a rival news channel given the particularly sensitive nature of the story—while social relations amongst journalists certainly weigh into such scenarios, there is more than journalistic fraternity at play in this moment. If we follow Hashim's reasoning, it was far safer to have multiple news channels reporting the same sensitive story, rather than claim exclusivity and become the targeted focus of any fallback. Pakistani news channels are notorious for airing news without verifying sources and are certainly not unique in blurring facts in exchange for sensational headlines. A number of recent scandals have revealed the corrupt relationships between media group owners and their top anchors with political parties and influential businessmen, peddling their agendas through competing channels, and it is these very relationships that then enable media groups to thwart the state's efforts to reign in sensationalist broadcasting. As described in previous chapters, the mainstream narrative of a rampant news media industry, unwilling to self-regulate its unethical practices and nonchalant in its response to government fines on objectionable television content, serves as the accepted backdrop of what a "free" media now looks like in Pakistan. As demonstrated by Prime Minister Imran Khan on a visit to the White House in July 2019, this backdrop is repurposed at both the national and international stage to rubbish claims of state censorship. Responding to a Pakistani journalist's

request to provide comments on the increasing restrictions on the media back home, Khan scoffed:[2]

> PRIME MINISTER KHAN: Pakistan press—to scorn Pakistan press as if there's curbs on it! Pakistan has one of the freest presses in the world. All you have to do is—since I've been the Prime Minister in the last 10 months—I mean, the criticism I have received from my own press: unprecedented. So, to say that there are curbs on Pakistan press is a joke.
>
> PRESIDENT TRUMP: When you say 'unprecedented,' it can't—Wait a minute. Wait, wait, wait. There's no way you're treated worse than I am. (Laughter.)
>
> PRIME MINISTER KHAN: (Laughs.) It's worse than you.

In the face of an obligatory discourse of liberal media freedom, how do journalists confront the inconsistencies of both state restrictions and self-censorship that challenge the practice of their everyday work? In this chapter, I analyze the logics of self-censorship against the shadow of the deep state, as practiced by news media professionals featured in my dissertation fieldwork in Karachi and Islamabad. The term "logics" denotes how words and concepts make sense in specific contexts; their intelligibility comes from the ways in which language and institutions are embedded in a social world of iterative actions and performative practices. Following Lisa Wedeen's (2008) work on the performative politics of words and deeds, I focus on the shifts in tone, the anxious laughter and the lengthy pauses that verbose journalists adopted when they would perform an inarticulate critique of the military. Anthropologists are well attuned to the task of employing our non-visual senses within the context of fieldwork as is evidenced by "sensuous" scholarship that explores soundscapes, tastes and dreams (Hirschkind 2009; Stoller 2010). Similarly, focusing on choice moments of laughter, the tension that can build up to it, and

[2] "Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Khan of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan Before Bilateral Meeting," White House, July 22, 2019, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-prime-minister-khan-islamic-republic-pakistan-bilateral-meeting/.

the silence that may follow an empty laugh, allows for additional layers of contextualization that may otherwise slip through the transcriptions of recorded conversations. Building on recent anthropological explorations of laughter as a marker of social relationships (Amrute 2017; Devlieger 2018; Jackson 2010; Mauss 2013), I will use this chapter to pay attention to anxious laughter exhibited by Pakistani news media professionals and argue that these enactments function as a means of calling upon the very real dangers of straying past the limits of investigative inquiry in Pakistan, and act to index the experiences of their colleagues pursuing critical leads on military activities, extremist militant groups, and cases of religious sensitivity. By paying attention to these performative practices, I will draw upon my interviews with Pakistani news media professionals to illustrate how the liberalized space provided to a deregulated media industry in current-day Pakistan turns on its compliance in maintaining a particular state narrative.

Let us begin with an example, where official comments provided to *The Guardian* for a 2019 news report on media censorship capture both an explicit acknowledgment of what media freedom entails and a refusal to recognize the limits of that freedom. Special assistant to the prime minister on information and broadcasting, Dr. Firdous Ashiq Awan, said:

> The current PTI government is providing the best and most effective environment for freedom of speech. Journalists are free to write what they want, and most news reports are against the government. These are just lies that the government is not allowing media to give coverage to opposition. The issue is that censorship is in the minds of some journalists and politicians.[3]

Indeed, many of my interlocutors would attest to censorship being "in their minds," but not in a manner consistent with the quote above. A report by the International Federation of

[3] Hannah Ellis-Petersen and Shah Meer Baloch, "'Extreme Fear and Self-Censorship: Media Freedom Under Threat in Pakistan," *The Guardian,* November 5, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/05/extreme-fear-and-self-censorship-media-in-pakistan-under-attack.

Journalists (IFJ) released in 2016 placed Pakistan fourth on the list of the deadliest countries in the world for journalists, with 115 journalists killed in the past 25 years. The disappearances of journalists working on sensitive issues and the body dumps that follow serve to threaten the journalist community into practicing strict forms of self-censorship when reporting on sensitive topics, commonly referred to as "red lines." These lines are drawn around issues that cannot be frequently reported on, and if such stories were to make appearances, the most exposure they would receive would be in a couple of English language newspapers. Prominent examples of red lines include: any negative coverage on socio-political conditions in Balochistan, the conditions in FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas), now Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa,[4] and the topic of missing persons, all of which receive little to no coverage in the mainstream Urdu media. Even when English dailies do publish critical opinion pieces on some of these issues, the actual reportage, which is the crux of journalism, is missing.[5] As Taimur, one of my interlocutors explained in late 2016:

> The red lines have always been there and they kind of become established and we kind of know, okay we can do this (story), we can't do this one. And then, they'll go and change the red lines. So then, Sabeen gets killed. That changes the red line. They attack Hamid. That changes the red line. Saleem Shazad gets killed. That changes the red line. And now, with this controversy they have against Cyril, it's pretty crazy…[6]

While I will later return to engage in a fuller discussion of the high-profile cases mentioned in Tamiur's quote above, for now it is important to note that these incidents represented critical shifts of the expansion or deepening of the boundary lines that demarcate the journalistic map of high-stakes reporting in Pakistan. During my transcription of the above audio excerpt, I found

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[4] Since Pakistan's creation in 1947, the Northern tribal areas—a rugged, impoverished swath bordering Afghanistan—have been ruled directly by Islamabad under a harsh colonial-era system of law, with omnipotent political agents exercising the right to impose collective punishments on tribes and to jail suspects without trial. In 2018, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) were merged into the country's administrative mainstream, becoming part of the northern province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK).

[5] Siddiqa, *The Friday Times*, October 2017.

[6] Personal interview, 2014–2016.

myself wanting to italicize "they" in the quotes above for emphasis, but I have chosen not to do so, precisely because Tamiur did not alter his tone when using this pronoun. I began searching through my audio recordings, noting where the shift in tone would take place among certain interlocutors, and where it would not. I found that it was during conversations where I would have to ask the inevitable follow-up question to confirm my assumption—"Who are *they*?" It was here, at this point where the responses from my interlocutors were accompanied by physical shifts in posture, audible changes in tone along with requests to go "off the record" largely depending on the context of the topic being discussed. The answers to my pointed question ("Who are they?") would produce a variety of terms—"the powers that be," "the deep state," "the status quo powers," "the establishment," but most commonly, a curt, matter-of-fact tone reserved for "the military" and "the military intelligence" would come about. The contextual circumstances of this practiced-hesitation were evident: here I was, a researcher with the privilege of returning to the U.S. on the next flight out, asking my interlocutors to go on-record with the root reasons for self-censoring practices in their professional lives as media practitioners. Despite my assurances of anonymity, and the added safety clause (in this case) that academic research takes years to publish, my interlocutors were understandably wary. That the Pakistani military has not and does not tolerate published criticism of its institution is no secret. Indeed, the clarity of that intolerance is historically documented by both stringent censorship laws that the Pakistani press has borne throughout multiple military regimes and the brutal consequences suffered by journalists who have attempted to evade them (Niazi 1986).

It is thus against a backdrop of over forty years of state censorship that the emergence of Pakistani liberalized mass media in 2002 becomes extremely significant. As described earlier in Chapter 1, the international commentary provided by political experts and analysts relied on the

trope of the rise of electronic media as an important change contributing to Pakistan's social milieu. Most of this media talk illustrates the watchdog status that some commentators attribute to private television channels, explicitly noting their contribution to supporting civilian-led democracy and positioning their emergence as a progressive force in society. With the development of rights-based discourses that include the freedom of information, how does the history of state censorship inform and shape the ways in which Pakistani media professionals negotiate their day-to-day work as they redraw the implicit and explicit boundaries of producing public discourse?

The Open Secret: Naming the Unnameable

Earlier in the dissertation, I analyzed the transformative changes that privatized television news channels have wrought upon the Pakistani political landscape, and in this chapter, I focus on the ways in which very little has changed journalistically, when it concerns reporting on the military.

To be clear, the military establishment is the most powerful institution in the country, but it is not the only threatening force that curtails investigative journalism—the police, militant groups, political parties, and criminal networks have all targeted journalists who choose to dig deeper in their reportage. Yet, unlike the latter groups, it is precisely the overt influence of the military and its associated agencies that pressures journalists to practice self-censorship as an implicit but open "secret." For my interlocutors, the acknowledgment of this open secret during their interview was accompanied by physical changes in posture, audible alterations in speech and nervous laughter that cued an understanding that we were now discussing a particularly delicate topic. If the influential power of the military is well-defined for the average Pakistani

citizen, then the open secret of not reporting on specific military-related stories is all the more ingrained in Pakistani journalists. Jodi Dean (2002) has argued that it is the public recognition of state secrecy that enables a democracy to manage the split between what political life is supposed to be and what it is seen to be, between its ideal type and its lived experience. She argues that "recognition of state secrecy—and the accompanying conspiratorial subtext to everyday life that it engenders—functions today to block political participation and curtail the possibility of truly democratic endeavors. Specifically, collective assumptions about the secret state (its capacities, interests, omnipotence) installs an ever ready alibi for failed or stalled politics in the public sphere, allowing the fantasy of democracy to coexist within its distorted reality."[7] According to Dean, if the conspiratorial rumor of the deep state serves to excuse the failure of actual politics, then it does not matter whether one could ever show that the deep state is actually in control, for it is the fantasy of such interference that serves to sustain a certain deadlock in American politics. In Pakistan however, it is upon the mangled bodies of journalists (those lucky enough to be found), where colleagues are able to confirm rumors of the deep state as it clamps down on inconvenient reporting. Where there have been courageous attempts to rupture the balanced management of that secret, swift consequences have followed. A number of factors play into the boldness of openly stating the military's role in curtailing investigative journalism in Pakistan, and even journalists who have obtained high positions in their professional hierarchies and socioeconomic class are not immune to the risks involved.

Let us consider the following case. In early 2014, Hamid Mir, one of Pakistan's most famous television journalists, broadcast a special report on the insurgency in the Balochistan province, highlighting the issue of "missing persons" and extralegal forced disappearances. On

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[7] Joseph Masco. *The Theater of Operations: National Security Affect from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014), 135.

April 19, 2014, Mir was on his way to broadcast a talk show in Karachi when he was shot six times by unidentified gunmen. Miraculously still alive, Mir was rushed to the hospital for surgery, and his employer network, GEO News, reacted instinctively, allowing Mir's brother to read a statement on camera. This statement publicly accused Zaheerul Islam, the then-director of the military spy agency, of attempting to assassinate Mir to put an end to the lead anchor's increasingly vocal opposition to certain military operations. In response, competing news channels surprisingly launched a multitude of conspiracy theories against Mir and his employers at GEO, some going so far as to claim the attack was an orchestrated publicity stunt by the network itself. Advertisers dropped the news channel immediately, plunging the channel into financial loss. One month later, the GEO Network issued a rather verbose public apology in both its Urdu and English newspapers, largely addressing viewers of its television news channel but more specifically the armed forces and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). A condensed version of the notice may be read as the following:

> After serious introspection, editorial debates, feedback and engagement with all parties, we have concluded that our coverage immediately after the tragic and unnerving attack on Hamid Mir on April 19th was excessive, distressful and emotional… This has caused deep hurt to ISI as an institution, the rank and file of the Armed Forces and a large number of our viewers. We deeply apologize hurting them all.[8]

For viewers who had grown accustomed to watching mostly sensationalist practices of news reporting over the past decade, the objective of this particular apology was well-understood. This statement not only acknowledged the questionable style of broadcast but, more importantly, was an admission of having crossed a line long held to be taboo. Indeed, the "deferential'"apology issued by GEO appeared as the final act in a much longer battle of gradually raised stakes between a civilian government and the military. This dramatic standoff, mediated through a news

[8] "Geo/Jang Group Tenders Apology to ISI, Armed Forces," *Dawn*, May 26, 2014, https://www.dawn.com/news/1108700.

channel's overt allegations of the ISI's involvement in a targeted attack on their primetime anchor, is just one example that highlights the unprecedented shifts taking place in the power dynamics of Pakistan's sociopolitical landscape. GEO was never able to fully recover from the economic backlash it experienced during the immediate aftermath of the Hamid Mir attack, and while the channel is still operational, my interlocutors at GEO were both optimistic about the channel's relevance in the news media industry and understandably cautious. Aatif, a senior executive producer in Current Affairs programming at GEO said in 2016:

> I'm frightened certainly because I've seen what the military—no, not the military, let's say the status-quo powers… I mean, I think the establishment is made of much more than only the military, so yes, I've seen what the establishment can do, but I've also seen what we can do. I've seen GEO come down from such a high, I mean it was almost finished. They used to say we had to turn the electricity off on certain floors because we were running on two minutes of advertising per hour—they just didn't have the money to pay the bills! And then now here it is again—when I joined in 2014, GEO was ranking about 6 or 7—today, it's a distant number 1 again. We're still at 60% distribution, we're cut off from cantonment areas - if you go into a cantonment area chances are you either won't get GEO on your local cable, or if you do it's on channel 96![9]

As can be gleaned from Aatif's quote above, being quoted on-the-record as talking about the "establishment" is a much safer term than speaking directly about the military in a negative light. And, yet, despite the lack of a direct correlation being articulated between advertisers and their fear of taking sides against the "establishment" (hence, maintaining their distance from GEO), we can safely assume this to be the case as we discover that television cable operators dropped the availability of GEO as a prime news channel in cantonment areas. Established during British rule and governed by the Cantonments Act of 1924, cantonment areas are permanent military bases of the Pakistan Army, effectively governed by and under control of the Ministry of Defense. Notably, the demographic character of most independence era cantonments has changed, as they are no longer primarily "garrison" areas, and include significant civilian

[9] Personal interview, 2014–2016.

populations and private businesses.[10] Indeed, residential cantonments can be considered as small-scale examples of how the military quietly operates within public civilian life. In order to contextualize the stakes of journalistic practices of self-censorship regarding the Pakistani military, it is imperative to understand just how pervasive the military has become in Pakistani society.

The Pakistani Military: A Class of its Own

The military gained prominence in the state apparatus soon after Pakistan's birth, as a result of the first war with India in 1947–1948. In their attempts to explain the civil-military power imbalance in Pakistan, scholars have attributed a number of factors that have sustained this disparity since the country's creation—the existence of external and internal threats to the state (Shah 2014), the possibility of civilian governments ability to undermine the military's institutional interests (Aziz 2008), the role of the United States in contributing to civil-military imbalance (Jalal, 1995) and the development of distinct economic interests (Siddiqa 2007). In her study on the penetration of the Pakistani military in the state, society and economy, Ayesha Siddiqa (2007) details the ways in which the military evolved into an independent class that ensured its share in the state and its decision making through creating institutional processes. It is not surprising that her aptly titled book *Military Inc.* (2007) is one of the few literature sources that researchers can access to better understand how the military operates in Pakistan. In laying out an overview of the military's historical interference in governance, Siddiqa examines the army's stake in its burgeoning economic empire that resulted from military control of the state

[10] "The Cantontments Ordinance, 2002," Ministry of Law and Justice, Islamic Republic of Pakistan, http://cbwah.gov.pk/assets/media/the-cantonment-ordinacne-2002.pdf.

for several decades (periods of direct military rule: 1958–1971, 1977–1988, and 1999–2008) where the military as an institution remained a top priority in budget allocations and government expenditure during the tenure of military dictators, almost always at the cost of the development of civilian institutions:

> The GHQ sought legal and constitutional provisions to establish its position in the power equation. The legal framework allowed the armed forces a permanent place in power politics as an equal member that was not dependent on civilian authorities for the protection of its core interests. Under this arrangement, the armed forces no longer remained an instrument of policy but acted as an equal partner in decision making. Furthermore, they could determine the security and internal stability of the state without constantly remaining in the political forefront. The military fraternity had developed sufficient economic stakes to not want a permanent exit from power. These interests, in fact, demanded that the dominant class protect them through legal institutional mechanisms, even at the cost of democratic norms and practices…It is clear that the process of institutionalization, could not have taken place without a commonality of interests with the dominant classes.[11]

Sociologist Hamza Alavi (1972), famously defined Pakistan as an ‘overdeveloped state’, by virtue of the overwhelming influence of its bureaucratic-military complex. According to him, the state plays a central role acting in the interests of three dominant classes:

> the landed-feudal class, the indigenous bourgeoisie and the metropolitan bourgeoisie…The military's stakes are intertwined with those of these three groups, making it imperative for the military and the other groups to protect each other's interests.[12]

Thus, the military's relevance for the country's politics is a result of the symbiotic relationship between military force and political power, especially of the ruling elite. While the Pakistani military's most popular business ventures are welfare foundations (Pakistani readers will be most familiar with these dominant economic players such as the Fauji Foundation, Army Welfare

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[11] Ayesha Siddiqa. *Military, Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy* (London and Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007), 83.

[12] Hamza Alavi, "The Structure of Peripheral Capitalism" in *Sociology of Developing Societies*, eds. Hamza Alavi and Teaedor Shanin (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1982), 172–91.

Trust, Shaheen Foundation and Bahria Foundation), Siddiqa (2007) lists additional military businesses as diverse in nature, ranging from smaller-scale ventures such as bakeries, farms, schools, and private security firms to corporate enterprises such as commercial banks, insurance companies, radio and television channels, fertilizer, cement and cereal manufacturing plants, and insurance businesses.[13] The success of the military's economic pursuits is often attributed to its disciplined character,[14] and its high status and prestige are enduring remnants of the might of the Army during British rule in the subcontinent. The continued maintenance of a professional, efficient and most importantly, loyal, army, was of utmost importance for the military elite in postcolonial Pakistan. The narrative of the military as appearing to reluctantly "save" civilian governments from themselves has been well-entrenched, and the Pakistani military always insists on immediate provocation as the trigger of its coups as Hussain Haqqani (2005), has noted:

> Ayub Khan came to power after a violent scuffle in the East Pakistan legislature; Yahya Khan took over after months of rioting against Ayub Khan; Zia-ul-Haq's coup was the result of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's inability to compromise with politicians protesting a rigged election and the possibility of civil war; and now the army had deposed Sharif because he was trying their commander and was possibly endangering his life. The army's ability to swiftly execute a military takeover within hours of a supposed provocation is often attributed to its having contingency for such occasions. Closer scrutiny, however, reveals a pattern of careful prior planning, including disorder in the streets orchestrated with the help of the reliable street power of Islamist political parties.[15]

Indeed, the strategic relationships the military has historically fostered with religious groups is conveniently left out of pro-democracy think-tank commentary when the dictators in question are

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[13] Siddiqa, 18.

[14] After the military takeover in October 1999, an ordinance that had previously forbid the sale of government land to other entities because of its high market value was withdrawn, and 240 acres were sold to the Defence Housing Authority (DHA) Karachi for a pittance of Rs.20 a square yard. In response to a journalist's question on the legality of Corps Commanders running Pakistan's premier housing project (DHA), General Musharraf retorted, "Why should anyone be jealous if some people made good money because of the exceptional efficiency of the housing society?" (Babar, 2019).

[15] Haqqani, *Between Mosque and Military*, 255.

serving American interests. In a 1999 article titled "Pakistan: Democracy Is Not Everything," Richard N. Haas argued:

> The coup that brought Army Chief of Staff Pervez Musharraf to power… should not be condemned out of hand. And it may well bring stability to a country and region where stability is in short supply… the greatest danger is a Pakistan that fails, a Pakistan where the central government loses effective control over much of the country, and in the process becomes a safe haven for terrorists, drug traffickers and zealots.[16]

That these "zealous" elements were once provided American funding, organizational support, and legitimacy at the time of the Cold War and the first Afghan war to act as bulwarks against the rising influence of leftist ideology in third-world countries, is of course omitted once such groups have outlived their usefulness (Iqtidar 2011). It is important to note that the structural differentiation between the "military government" and the "military institution" allows "the institutional military to delink itself from the discredited dictatorship and exit on its own terms."[17] If we presume the military's extrication from politics to be self-directed, then it stands that in the face of political opposition, military dictators have stepped down due to the loss of their main support base (i.e. the military institution). This distinction, between military dictators and the military as an institution, explains why even after a military dictator steps down, the military continues to preserve its power and while public opinion may be against military dictatorships, the overall support for the army is not only maintained but strengthened by private media networks.[18] In the post-Musharraf era, private television news channels openly celebrated the first democratic transition in the country's history in 2013, when Nawaz Sharif's PML-N replaced the PPP-led government. It was also during this time that civil-military relations were

[16] Ibid., 256.
[17] Aqil Shah, "Constraining Consolidation: Military Politics and Democracy in Pakistan (2007–2013)," *Democratization* 21, 6 (2014): 1007–1033 https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2013.781586.
[18] See Asher Qazi (2018). In his dissertation, Qazi explores how the Supreme Court has been able to leverage the delicate balance of civil-military relations to build and maintain its power.

rumored to be rupturing, on the basis of a deteriorating security situation, terrorism and political instability, which were reflected in the expansion of the military's role in counter-terrorism and its concomitant expansion of the Inter-Services Public Relations (Adeel 2015; ISPR), effectively putting most news organizations under direct informal supervision by the military establishment (Akhtar 2020). As we will see, the impact of this informal monitoring is amplified particularly when journalists and human rights groups report on news stories that do not align with the military's narrative.

Uncertainty and its Discontents

It was almost midnight on April 24th, 2015, and I was still browsing through all the social media updates on my laptop, reflecting on my experience just a few hours earlier. Contemplating a safely worded status to upload on my Facebook profile, I selected a low-quality photograph from the camera reel on my cell phone and decided to hit "post":

Figure 13. Participants of the "Unsilencing Balochistan" talk at The Second Floor, Karachi on April 24, 2015.[19]

> Tonight, I attended the talk "Unsilencing Balochistan" at The Second Floor (T2F). It was my first time at T2F and I was immediately taken in by the warmth exuding from this intimate space - a variety of hanging artwork, books crammed onto wall length shelves

[19] Photographed by author.

and bright local handcrafts in the corners. It was an open space, free to the public and welcoming—a rare space in Karachi. The director of T2F, Sabeen Mahmud (pictured here in the blue kurta) began tonight's event with laughter and joked, "no one has threatened to stop this panel so we're just going to start." It was an important, urgent conversation on the complete failure of the state to address the painful grievances of the people of Balochistan. A demand for the hundreds of their missing sons and fathers to be brought home. There was an engaging Q&A session where facts were shared and names were named. A friend leaned in next to me and whispered, "it's places and events like these that make me want to stay in Karachi." I nodded in agreement. After the event, Sabeen Mahmud was shot to death on her drive home by unknown assailants. #RIPSabeen—I am shocked by the violence that could silence you only by its fatality. I am saddened that I could not know you but I am grateful for your work, your passion, and your commitment to truth.

Mahmud's targeted death shook many in my liberal, upper class social sphere. The online outpouring of grief and shock represented the far-reaching impact of Mahmud's work as a social activist. Her insistence on building a community center devoid of the strappings of elite private spaces in Karachi (no cost of entry, no security guards) was itself a defiant social act, but it was the publicity that she bravely afforded to Baloch human rights activists that night that ended her life.[20] While immediate local news coverage on her death was abundant, there was little doubt that the elusiveness of her killers would remain conspiratorial as are cases where "unknown gunmen" are involved. In the initial reportage, it was unsurprising to note that it was only in international newspapers where Mahmud's friends and mourners could both articulate their suspicions and see them printed:

April 24th, 2015, *The New York Times*:
Mohammed Hanif, a prominent author and journalist in Pakistan who has written extensively on Baluchistan, said he strongly suspected that the military had a hand in Ms. Mahmud's death. 'There's no other way to interpret this,' he said. 'The Baluchistan problem is so huge, and Pakistani intelligence agencies are so

[20] In a newspaper article titled "Stifling Thought" (2015), lawyer Basil Malik noted how Pakistan's premier private university, the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), cowed to pressure from intelligence officials to cancel the very same panel discussion on Balochistan scheduled to take place earlier on campus in April 2015. Sabeen Mahmud's way of introducing the topic the night she was killed was both in reference to the canceled LUMS event and a chilling premonition of the aftereffects: "no one has threatened to stop this panel, so we're just going to start."

> paranoid, that they will not allow even discussion in a room full of people, let alone a TV channel or a newspaper.'[21]

> April 25th, 2015, *The Guardian*:
> 'A lot of people did say there would be blowback but nobody thought they could shoot someone dead like that,' said Taha Siddiqui, an outspoken journalist and one of Mahmud's many friends on Pakistan's liberal-left. 'Shooting dead seemed a little too brutal, something that happens only in remote areas of Balochistan,' Siddiqui said. 'But now they are doing it in Karachi.'[22]

Balochistan is Pakistan's troubled state, rich in natural resources, and bordering Iran and Afghanistan. A separatist insurgency has been raging for the past decade, with the Pakistani military consistently denying human rights abuses in the province. Baloch separatists are demanding independence from a Pakistani state that continues to extract the province's energy and mineral resources while oppressing its people. State authorities have demonstrated their sensitivity around Baloch human rights activists by placing prominent names on the Exit Control List, an official sanction used to bar criminal suspects or people involved in litigation from leaving the country. One such activist is the elderly Mama Abdul Qadeer, a 78-year-old who was speaking at Mahmud's hosted event in Karachi the night she was killed. In 2013, Qadeer walked 1,200 miles from the Baloch capital of Quetta to Islamabad to protest Balochistan's missing people, including his own son who was found dead and mutilated in 2011 having vanished in 2009.[23] Sabeen's murder highlights the continuing difficulties Pakistani journalists encounter, particularly regarding their inability to report on Balochistan. In an email following up one of our interviews in November 2016, Jamal wrote to me:

> One thing I wanted to follow up on was about the kind of access-censorship facing journalists—we are prevented from reporting certain stories simply by denial of access to

[21] Saba Imtiaz, "Gunmen Kill Arts Advocate in Pakistan After Human Rights Event, *The New York Times*, April 24, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/25/world/asia/gunmen-kill-arts-advocate-in-pakistan-after-human-rights-event.html.
[22] Jon Boone, "Sabeen Mahmud, Pakistani Rights Activist, Shot Dead," *The Guardian*, April 25, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/25/sabeen-mehmud-pakistani-womens-rights-activist-shot-dead.
[23] "Family of Balochistan's Missing and Disappeared Complete 2,000 KM March," February 28, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/28/families-balochistan-missing-disappeared-march.

> those areas (by the military). So I'd like to be doing more work from on the ground in FATA, for example, but the military tightly controls access there—even in areas where military operations are not ongoing. What that does is twofold: in addition to the obvious, it also creates an information black hole, so it's becomes difficult not just to report on stories one may hear are happening there, but indeed to even hear that those stories are happening at all.
>
> I face the same problem in reporting on Balochistan, from Balochistan. Without freedom to travel there without danger of abduction, interrogation or killing (mostly by the military but by other groups, too), it's almost impossible to verify accounts by either side of ongoing violence related to the separatist movement. We find ways around this—I arranged a video interview of the BLF chief (Baloch Liberation Front), for example, to be delivered to me through couriers, but these are far from ideal.[24]

Watching belligerent television news programming, it would be difficult to refute the vibrancy of a "free" and "functioning" media in Pakistan. On the other hand, located in the resigned tone of the news media professionals I interviewed were critical choices that must balance the daily risks of selecting which news stories to highlight, as my interlocutor Aatif explains: "Editorial control in any Pakistani news organization is not so much what you should do, but what you should *not* do. I am rarely told what I should do—but I am often told what not to do. There is a daily rundown, and more often than not, we have to leave stories out on the simple basis of a discussion of the pros and cons of each issue." He cited a particular example to me during our meeting in October 2014, in which we can see, indirectly, the stakes involved:

> I can tell you most recently was the media blackout on David Headley which was such a huge thing. No one was reporting on it. No one. And GEO's problem is very simple—that GEO is always the first to do this stuff but after the Hamid Mir, ISI, fiasco we had to be extra careful. Even if we do something we have to think twice, because 'will they be happy'? Whatever decisions we make, we make them as journalists but also as managers and we have to keep in mind that if we take such a big step that the channel shuts down again, we're not doing anyone a service.[25]

[24] Personal interview, 2014–2016.
[25] Ibid.

The 2013 sentencing of David Headley made headlines in international newspapers and was heavily covered in Indian news media.[26] That Headley is an American citizen who confessed to helping plan the deadly 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai, is indeed, an attention-grabbing news story. That he admitted to attending the militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) training camps in Pakistan, is a story that Pakistani news channels chose to ignore. The Pakistan military has officially denied any links with LeT, yet it's perilous ambiguity toward jihadi militancy is another "open-secret," and its history of casting a benign eye on some militant groups, while battling others that attack the state has been documented in academic analysis of terrorism in Pakistan (Haqqani 2005; Iqtidar 2011; Toor 2011). For Aatif and his colleagues, a news story that elicits a negative answer to the question "will they be happy?" essentially carries itself to an archive of unproducible television content. The same story, however, can and often does, translate into English-print news which, due to its limited readership, bears less risk than the inciting power attributed to Urdu television news. Unfortunately for investigative journalists in Pakistan, the uncertainty of whether or not they are working within designated zones is part and parcel of their investigation. A helpful insight on the mental stress of such working conditions was captured by my interlocutor Taimur:

> Not only is it that you're always walking on eggshells, but you don't always know the tensile strength of the eggshells that you're walking on. So sometimes, they're really weak eggshells and sometimes they're stronger. So that's kind of the problem. One, you're being careful all of the time—I think that is wired into everybody who works in this field but, the added stress is of knowing that these lines are changing. And they're up to be changed at any time.[27]

Indeed, the ever-shifting terrain of 'acceptable' reporting in Pakistan took a remarkable turn in 2016 when the country's oldest and most reputed English newspaper stood by their decision to

[26] Steven Yaccino, "Planner of Mumbai Attacks is Given a 35-Year Sentence," *The New York Times*, January 24, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/25/us/david-c-headley-gets-35-years-for-mumbai-attack.html.
[27] Personal interview, 2014–2016.

publish a controversial report. On October 6th, 2016, a news article with a fascinating headline appeared in front pages of the *Dawn* newspaper: "Exclusive: Act Against Militants or Face International Isolation, Civilians Tell Military." Written by assistant editor, Cyril Almeida, the article details a top-secret meeting between Pakistan's civilian and army leadership regarding militant groups that operate from Pakistan but engage in war against India and Afghanistan. The shocking implication of this headline and the furor that followed the story's publication—i.e., not simply the suggestion that the civilian government is capable of dictating guidelines to the military but the articulation of the 'open secret' of the military's covert support of proxy militant groups—is an instance that demonstrates both the implausible nature of such a conversation, and the incredulity of reporting a story with an extreme level of national sensitivity. The choice wording in the article drives this very point home:

> Addressing General Akhtar, the younger Sharif complained that whenever action has been taken against certain groups by civilian authorities, the security establishment has worked behind the scenes to set the arrested free. Astounded onlookers describe a stunned room that was immediately aware of the extraordinary, unprecedented nature of the exchange.[28]

The government swiftly reacted by "rejecting" the report and placed journalist Almeida on the Exit Control List—an intimidating tactic that drew the collective ire of the news media community on social media and denunciations from human rights groups:[29]

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[28] Cyril Almeida, "Exclusive: Act Against Militants or Face International Isolation, Civilians Tell Military," *Dawn*, October 6, 2016, https://www.dawn.com/news/1288350/exclusive-act-against-militants-or-face-international-isolation-civilians-tell-military.

[29] In a statement to *Al Jazeera*, Audrey Gaughran of Amnesty International said: "The travel ban on Cyril Almeida is a crude intimidation tactic designed to silence journalists and stop them from doing their jobs… Journalism is not a crime. They should be able to work freely and without fear. The Pakistani authorities must break with a longstanding practice of subjecting media workers to intimidation, threats, restrictions on movements, enforced disappearances and violence." See https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/10/11/pakistan-cyril-almeida-of-dawn-on-exit-control-list.

Figure 14. Tweets by Pakistani journalists posted on Twitter on October 10, 2016.[30]

In the case of the Hamid Mir incident discussed earlier, the subsequent public apology was issued by GEO, the news channel guilty of "offending" the military. In the Cyril Almeida case however, the Dawn group stood by the newspaper report, and facing the financial loss of government advertising revenue in its papers, refused to offer a retraction, issuing these words instead:

> Dawn would like to clarify and state on the record several things. First, this newspaper considers it a sacred oath to its readers to pursue its reporting fairly, independently and,

[30] Screenshot by author.

> above all, accurately. The story that has been rejected by Prime Minister's Office as a fabrication was verified, cross-checked and fact-checked. Second, many at the helm of affairs are aware of the senior officials, and participants of the meeting, who were contacted by the newspaper for collecting information, and more than one source confirmed and verified the details. Therefore, the elected government and state institutions should refrain from targeting the messenger, and scape-goating the country's most respected newspaper in a malicious campaign.[31]

In what can only be seen as the government's own "public apology" to the military, the Dawn group's decision to publish the government's "clarification" alongside the original report is note-worthy:

> Dispelling the impression created by the report, headlined "Act against militants or face international isolation, civilians tell military," [the spokesman for the Prime Minister's Office] said that intelligence agencies, particularly the ISI, are working in line with the state policy in the best interest of the nation, both at the federal and provincial levels to act against terrorists of all hue and color without any discrimination. Indeed the Army's and ISI's role and contributions towards implementation of NAP have been proactive and unwavering, the spokesman said. Meanwhile, the office of the chief minister of Punjab also denied the comments attributed to Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif in the news story. Dismissing it as a baseless table story, he emphasized that besides his respect for the institution of the armed forces, on an individual level he also had the highest respect for the present ISI Director General for his professionalism, commitment to duty and sincerity of purpose.

The Cyril Almeida case was an important harbinger for Pakistani news media, particularly given the fact that English-language newspapers are considered as one of the last enclaves of "true" media freedom, and indeed the very publication of the original report supports this notion. Tempting as it is to read Dawn's refusal of retraction as a sign of thriving, independent journalism, the fact remains that the state backlash against the news group only strengthened my interlocutors' fears of the military establishment's assertion of complete control over the press. Indeed, despite the emergence of private news channels as significant institutional players in emerging democracies, documented practices of self-censorship suggest the need for greater

[31] "PM Office Rejects Dawn Story Again," *Dawn*, October 11, 2016, https://www.dawn.com/news/1289344/pm-office-rejects-dawn-story-again.

attention to be paid to the contextual nuances that give specific shape to the relationship between mass media and democracy. If we follow Aatif's earlier reasoning on calculating the risks of shutting down a television news channel as "not doing anyone a service," we arrive at the somewhat deflated conclusion that self-censorship practices thus become necessary to practice the "business" of journalism, if not the spirit of it. When conversing with news media professionals that were additionally in management positions, I encountered this kind of sentiment frequently—"live today, to fight another day." It bears noting that for on-the-ground reporters, those in the front-lines of the ratings battles so ardently fought between channels, this sentiment takes the form of a grave reality particularly in the face of state harassment, militant threats and outright physical attacks. In spite of these setbacks, journalism in Pakistan continues to engender a commitment to ideals of truth-telling and factual reportage, exemplifying the tenacity of those that survive this profession. And what happens to our understanding of a democratic ideal of a free media, when the practitioners of that media are characterized by resignation, despair, cynicism and frustration? Analyzing practices of self-censorship requires us then to not only question what we mean by democracy in an age of deep mediatization but also to consider anew the factors conducive to the cultivation of democratic practices, even in the absence of safeguarding democratic principles.

The Privilege to Protest versus the Privilege to Report

On September 1, 2014, transmission services for the government-owned channels Pakistan Television (PTV) and Pakistan Television World had been halted. For a short half hour, Pakistani viewers were left wondering whether yet another military coup was under way. But while the tradition of seizing state broadcasting infrastructure surely reminded citizens of

military takeovers, this time it was not the sound of army boots storming the premises. Instead, hundreds of protestors from two political parties, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) and Pakistan Awami Tehreek (PAT) had breached the state television headquarters, destroying equipment and vandalizing state property. Army troops eventually did arrive at the premises, but only to clear out the building and restore transmission. This incident was not an isolated act of rioting protestors, but took place amid a much longer drawn-out confrontation between these political parties and the sitting government. Described earlier in Chapter 1, the combination of two parties, PTI and PAT, both headed by charismatic leaders and both with distinct grievances with the government, pulled together hundreds of thousands of people to a common site. *Dharna* takes the form of an aggrieved party sitting at the offender's door until justice is received. For 126 days, the longest record of protest in Pakistan, Imran Khan's PTI and its supporters culminated their Azadi March (Freedom March) by occupying the Red Zone in Islamabad—a generally secure and sensitive site surrounding the Parliament House in the capital city—demanding an independent inquiry into the rigging allegations of the 2013 elections and ultimately calling for Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's immediate resignation. Although the PAT supporters left the protest site after 67 days, the PTI was adamant in its demands and continued the *dharna* on its own, drawing larger media scrutiny to what was appearing to be an ineffective bargaining tool.

In an article titled "The Limits of Populism," Zahid Hussain (2014) noted what many pundits on television screens could not overtly say aloud during the coverage of the *dharna* protests—that the impetus for Imran Khan's demand for drastic change (i.e., the forced removal of a sitting prime minister through mass protest) must be either enforced by, or at least receive the approval of, the Pakistani military:

> The power matrix does not seem to have changed much despite the party's rallies drawing larger crowds. The only thing that has changed is that the party has lost its only ally with Qadri deciding to take a break from his quest for revolution. Being a shrewd operator, the cleric left the field after sensing there was no hope of a military intervention to help his cause.[32]

News media professionals and viewers watching at home were well aware that not only did the military have the ability to put an end to such prolonged protests but it was impossible to imagine the unique affordances allowed to both Imran Khan and Tahirul Qadri to occupy highly securitized avenues in the heart of Islamabad without the military's approval. The limited circulation of English print publications in Pakistan has so far resulted in a certain amount of flexibility within the margins granted to journalists by the military—consider, for example, the rumors of a military coup that were printed in a leading English news magazine, the *Herald*:

> There were rumors in the air… there were murmurs of a coup d'état. Other than General Shuja Pasha, the former intelligence officer who is known to be a close friend and supporter of PTI Chairman Imran Khan, the other name that was repeatedly brought up was that of Zaheerul Islam, the director general of the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Allegedly, the two were conspiring to create a rift between Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and Chief of Army Staff General Raheel Sharif… under the presumption that the dharna had the general's backing.[33]

This kind of commentary must be understood in the context of Pakistan's volatile political history, which bears testament to the fragile civil-military relationship since the country's inception. The military reign of General Zia-ul-Haq in the late 1970s is often referenced as the most damaging decade of state repression, where even the term "censorship" was thoroughly censored, as documented by journalists who endured that regime. When Zia-ul-Haq imposed martial law on July 5, 1977, the guidelines issued to the press two days later mandated that there would be no criticism of the armed forces, nor could any news story be published that could

[32] Hussain, "Limits."
[33] "General (retd) Zaheerul Islam: The Shadow Warrior," *Herald*, October 6, 2015, http://herald.dawn.com/news/1153259.

potentially bring the armed forces into disrepute. Newspapers were restricted by law from printing any news about the armed forces that was unauthorized by the Information Ministry (Niazi, 1993). While the 2002 liberalization of the media and the popularity of private television news channels gave media organizations unprecedented power to critique civilian governments and politicians, the state-manufactured sanctity surrounding military forces remained intact. If English language print publications (such as the *Herald*, mentioned above) could get away with so much as hinting at military involvement in government affairs in the post-liberalized era, Urdu news reporters were all too familiar with the fatal consequences of directly criticizing the military or its affiliates.

During the initial weeks of the 2014 *dharna*, any viewer tuning in to one of Pakistan's 40 news channels would have been hard-pressed to find news coverage of anything other than the nonstop studio airtime and onsite field coverage of the Islamabad protests. As one executive producer at Geo News exclaimed to me in disdain: "It was just ridiculous… they were dropping news bulletins to cover speeches. Nine p.m. was no longer news bulletin time, but nine p.m. was Imran Khan's nightly speech. For almost one hundred days!" (Qasim, personal communication, January 26, 2015). Prime-time current affairs talk shows were dedicated to nightly recaps of the "container speeches" of the day, and news bulletins were full of live footage from musical rallies with detailed commentary and vox pops of *dharna* participants. While the constant coverage should not have come as too much of a surprise in a heavily mediatized news industry, the stark contrast between a host of channels showcasing clear bias in favor of the populist protests was evident in the counter-bias displayed by the infamous channel, GEO News. Reflecting on this polarity during our interview, one broadcast journalist shook her head in amusement as she recalled switching channels at the time as viewing a different country on two opposing screens:

"You had one channel that was already establishing a 'Naya Pakistan,' (New Pakistan) and there was another channel [GEO] that had already thrown him [Imran Khan] into jail—it's insane how farfetched it was!"

Owned by the senior journalist Shakil-ur-Rehman, who inherited the country's largest circulating Urdu newspaper (*Jang News*) from his father, Geo News emerged on the newly privatized mediascape in 2002 as the brand image of one of the country's most powerful media houses. Infamous for introducing a sensationalist news reporting style to a nation that had only known terse and sober news broadcasts from the sole state television network, GEO's first-mover advantage had carried it to the top of television rankings for over a decade. Despite its notoriety for chasing mass audiences and throwing ethical caution to the wind in its quest to dominate the industry, GEO's track record on siding with the democratic process has remained consistent. According to news media professionals I interviewed, Imran Khan's *dharna* was seen as a national-scale distraction by "serious" news outlets and had all the telltale signs of a military hand behind the scenes to shake up a civilian government that was getting too comfortable in bypassing the army in both domestic and international concerns: "I think it had a lot more to do with the Hamid Mir fiasco, to be honest," recalls an executive producer at GEO:

> Everyone discusses this within the media that this [dharna] wasn't something Imran Khan could do on his own. How did he manage to hold the capital city hostage? Nobody else can do it—you have to have some sort of knowledge that if I'm standing here on top of this container, they can't touch me. And it was true, nobody could touch him. I mean, his supporters rush into PTV, vandalize state property, you've broken stuff, there's footage of this attack, you're supposed to be going to jail for this—why haven't you been caught? Why hasn't anyone taken you to task? (Ahmed, personal communication, February 8, 2015).

If the 2014 dharna fomented speculation within the media community on the military's implicit support for Imran Khan's political agitations, then the encroaching curbs on media freedoms in the run-up to the 2018 general elections confirmed those suspicions when he was elected as

prime minister. These restrictions included limited coverage of opposition leaders and the removal of prime-time slots to prominent journalists who publicly questioned the transparency of the elections. External pressures on media organizations arrived in covert form when printing presses were pressured to stop from publishing certain newspapers, cable operators were asked to cease broadcasting certain channels and big businesses advised against putting up advertisements with certain media outlets.[34] Such strategies of plausible deniability have been steadily building to a "new era" of censorship where unofficial and undocumented rules impact journalists psychologically.[35]

Attacks on the Media

On August 22nd, 2016, a crowd of protestors stormed the offices of two private news channels, ARY News and NEO News, ransacking the premises and setting fire to vehicles, including a police car. Television footage and uploaded YouTube videos later showed dozens of men barging into the media offices, smashing doors, windows and equipment with rods and batons. In a cellphone video documenting the aftermath at ARY, the viewer walks along with the camera, stepping over glass shards littering the floor, passing broken computer screens ripped from their cables and flung onto the ground. Within the same frame, the camera jostling amongst the many people crammed into the office, the viewer is able to watch an ARY reporter relaying the riot events using his own cellphone to report live from the damaged premises. Covered in sweat, the reporter is speaking loudly and emotionally, a pained expression fixed on his face as

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[34] Rabia Mehmood, "2018: A Year of Media Suppression and Rights Abuses in Pakistan," *Al Jazeera*, December 29, 2018, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2018-year-media-suppression-rights-abuses-pakistan-181229143544306.html.

[35] Asad Hashim, "'Silenced': Pakistan's Journalists Decry New Era of Censorship, *Al Jazeera*, August 15, 2019, https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/pakistan-journalists-decry-era-censorship-190813064754381.html.

he laments the destroyed office. This style of reporting at crime scenes was familiar to viewers of Pakistani news channels, and ironically, the target of this particular crime was "the media" itself.

ARY News blamed the Muttahida Qaumi Movement[36] (MQM) for the attack, a regional political party that once held a formidable amount of power over the city of Karachi (Pakistan's economic and financial hub) but has slowly seen its role in politics decline in the public eye—an outcome, the party insists, of a sustained state campaign to rid Karachi of its influence. Contributing factors also include the notable lack of media coverage provided to the party and the ineffective and increasingly bizarre messaging from the party's leader, Altaf Hussain, who lives in self-exile in London. ARY News claimed the attack was instigated by a teleconference speech Hussain delivered to his party followers in which he called for violence against various TV channels for their refusal to neither air nor provide news coverage to his speeches for over a year. In September 2015, the Lahore High Court directed PEMRA to ban all reportage of Hussain's speeches and even his photographs—Hussain was accused in court of committing treason for issuing an incendiary speech in which he lambasted the army and hinted top generals were involved in corruption.[37] The media ban on Altaf Hussain was an inverse compulsion of what Pakistani journalists had previously been subject to during the MQM's heyday when they were threatened with dire consequences if "favorable" party coverage was not provided in newspapers.[38] In an ethnographic study on "ordered disorder" in Karachi, Laurent Gayer (2014) describes the rise of the MQM in the 1980s and its complex relationship with state patronage. Tracing the MQM's origins as a student movement, Gayer argues that the party did not owe its

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[36] The MQM is the largest political party in Karachi and represents "Mohajirs" (i.e., Urdu-speaking "migrants" from North India who settled in Pakistan after the 1947 Partition).

[37] Wajih Ahmad Sheikh, "Altaf Media Blackout: Lawyers Demand Cancellation of Asma Jahangir's License," *Dawn*, September 29, 2015, http://www.dawn.com/news/1209722/altaf-media-blackout-lawyers-demand-cancellation-of-asma-jahangirs-license.

[38] "Media as a Target," *Dawn*, August 24, 2016, https://www.dawn.com/news/1279475/media-as-a-target.

success solely on the outcome of violent street-fighting, strong-arm tactics or political patronage, but rather on the party's ability to "reconcile official and unofficial resources, in a permanent dialectic of the legal and the lethal […] essential to the transmutation of power, through its transcendence, into sovereignty."[39] The party would later find that the same state interventions that allowed a politics of patronage would also enable outright repression, particularly through the role of the military, which from the very outset of Pakistan's history, has attempted to control the political process and gear the state towards maintaining what historian Ayesha Jalal has called a "political economy of defense."[40] Violent conflicts between the MQM and the Pakistani state date back to the 1990s with government-initiated military operations, ostensibly aimed at cracking down on all "terrorist" and "criminal" elements in Karachi and the greater Sindh province, but which were effectively campaigns to dismantle the MQM.[41] The coinciding emergence of private news channels in the mid-2000s and the escalation of violence in Karachi by new groups such as the Taliban, produced a hysterical media narrative of a lawless city, in desperate need of state (i.e. military) intervention. As Nausheen Anwar (2015) has noted:

> The story of the Taliban's arrival in Karachi spurred on by displacements in Waziristan; its takeover of certain sections of the city through 'land grabs'; and its involvement in extortion and enforcement of a parallel legal order have been told repeatedly. Such stories tend to reduce the city's experience of violence into a world of 'before' and 'after.' Since terror is mediated and recreated through narration (Taussig 1987, Feldman 1991), in the context of the general increase in violence in Karachi, the talk and mapping of violence in the media signals the intricate relationship between violence and the role of symbolism in which narrative discourse reproduces violence.[42]

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[39] Laurent Gayer. *Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City* (New Delhi: Hurst & Co Publishers, 2014), 120.

[40] Ayesha Jalal, *The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defence* (Cambridge, New York, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

[41] Vazira Fazila Yacoobali, "The Battlefields of Karachi: Ethnicity, Violence and the State," *The Journal of the International Institute*, 4,1 (1996), http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.4750978.0004.108.

[42] Nausheen H. Anwar, review of Karachi: Ordered Disorder and the Struggle for the City, by Laurent Gayer, *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal (Samaj)*, (May 27, 2015), https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/3891.

Indeed, as stated by many of my interlocutors, the media's critical role in reporting violence cannot be taken for granted in Pakistan, where the inability to report from particular provinces and conflict areas sends as much of a symbolic message as is the ease with which statistics of "violent" localities can be both published in newspapers and broadcast on television. To put this violence in numbers, we can consider a snapshot analysis of 1,726 deaths between January and June of 2013 by the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan which relied on newspaper reports when describing the sharp rise of violence in Karachi:

> Over the six-month period in 2013, as many as 73 people were killed in attacks deemed to have sectarian motives; 203 people were killed after being abducted; 545 people who did not have any overt political affiliations were killed in attacks; and 178 political activists (48 in June alone) were killed. The fatalities also included 92 policemen and 18 personnel of paramilitary forces. Dead bodies of 101 people were found in the city during the period under review. Bomb blasts claimed 92 lives and the Lyari gang war another 41. Forty-nine people were killed by robbers, and another 57 in police encounters.[43]

The importance of these alarming figures, and their public availability, becomes visible when they are held up to contrast the after-effects of military operations. In 2013, the "Karachi Operation" enabled military raids that involved detaining "suspects" off the streets from their homes and offices. The detention of suspects associated with religious militancy also included those associated with political camps—while much media attention was heaped on daily arrests, and audiences were presented with visuals of blindfolded men with recovered ammunition as uniformed military personnel stood by proudly, it remained unsurprising that news channels failed to subsequently follow up on the lack of prosecution and sentencing of those detained.

[43] "HRCP's Concern as Jan–July Figures Show Sharp Rise in Karachi Killings," Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, July 15, 2013, http://hrcp-web.org/hrcpweb/hrcps-concern-as-jan-july-figures-show-sharp-rise-in-karachi-killings/.

New Media, New Forms of Censorship

In March 2019, Pakistan reached 68 million broadband Internet users, a number that had tripled in the preceding five years.[44] Colorful infographics, statistics about increasing internet usage coupled with the promising potentials of online journalism often formed the basis of concluding sessions of the training seminars I would sit in on. When journalist trainees complained of their news stories being rejected by their bosses, citing either security concerns or a clash with the news organization's commercial or political interests, fellow trainees would implore them to self-publish on the internet ("you don't need permission on YouTube"). Half-hearted agreements on the liberatory promises of social media revealed the obvious repercussions of losing both their employment and chances of being rehired elsewhere, were they to defy orders to shelf particular news reports. While the Pakistani news industry has seen the proliferation of small online media news outlets, the growing importance of social media is seen to coincide with a contraction of serious reporting in the mainstream media. In 2017, a survey conducted with 412 journalists on the dangers of digital surveillance concluded that up to 84% of journalists felt that their right to freedom of expression was affected due to online monitoring and surveillance by state and non-state actors, while 63% of respondents said they manipulated or deleted information out of fear of being digitally surveilled.[45] The difficulties of conducting research on the indirect forms of censorship by state actors should not deter future research that is possible on documenting the coordinated nature of vicious social media campaigns that aim to harass, discredit, and intimidate journalists. On August 18, 2020, in a first hearing of its kind in the National Assembly, a parliamentary committee on human rights heard the complaints of

[44] Haroon Baloch, "Digital Dangers and Capacities: A Baseline for Human Rights Defenders' Security," Bytes for All PK, https://www.bytesforall.pk/publication/digital-dangers-and-capacities.
[45] Ibid.

twenty-four female journalists from various Pakistani media outlets. These testimonies stemmed from a joint statement issued online and was signed by dozens of female Pakistani journalists to highlight abuses they have encountered: "[w]omen in the media are not only targeted for their work but also their gender. Our social media timelines are then barraged with gender-based slurs, threats of sexual and physical violence," the statement said. "The online attacks are instigated by government officials and then amplified by a large number of Twitter accounts, which declare their affiliation to the ruling party."[46] The established presence on Pakistani social media of political party cyber armies, state sponsored trolls, and thousands of online volunteers ready to launch into hashtag wars, provides a rich site for analyzing the ways in which certain discourses materialize and circulate.

A growing set of literature in communication studies has sought to shed light on media transformations in transitioning democracies (Alhassan, 2007; Hughes, 2006; McCargo, 2003; Nyamnjoh, 2005; Waisbord, 2000; Wasserman, 2011; Zhao, 2012), effectively arguing against applying broad brushstrokes of developments in Western modernity as a global rubric. In their call to push "beyond the West," these scholars insist that prevailing theories of media privatization and commercialization cannot account for the distinctive architecture of media systems in regions as diverse as the Middle East, Africa, and Asia. In the case of Pakistan, privatization of the electronic media resulted in a transformed mediascape, with more than 100 television channels now operating after several decades of state television monopoly. While such rapid expansion appears similar to the staggering growth of the media systems of its regional neighbors, media liberalization in Pakistan should be understood in the context of its emergence,

[46] Steven Butler and Aliya Iftikhar, "As Ruling Party Fans Spew Online Abuse, Pakistan's Female Journalists Call for Government Action," Committee to Protect Journalists, September 16, 2020, https://cpj.org/2020/09/as-ruling-party-fans-spew-online-abuse-pakistans-female-journalists-call-for-government-action/

its reactionary phase, and, as I have described in this chapter, its constrained relationship with the deep state. Pakistani media professionals have a long history of engaging with self-censorship, particularly during the eras of military rule, when entire pages of newspapers would purposely be left blank to protest the denial of free speech, but self-censorship in the age of private television news cannot be as symbolically circulated.[47] Pressures on independent news channels to align with the establishment point of view have been steadily mounting in Pakistan and were most heavily felt by the media community during the run up to the 2018 elections. The situation has worsened in 2019 with news broadcasts being mysteriously blocked, journalists being forced to shut down their social media accounts, opposition leaders being banned from appearing on television, and fake viral campaigns threatening journalists run amok.[48]

While it would be certainly possible to pursue a textual or regulatory perspective on censorship in Pakistani television news, I would argue that choosing to focus on this issue ethnographically, allows us to explore news producers' ambiguous attitudes toward practices of self-censorship in a much more complex way. Broadcast journalists are only too familiar with the triggering effects of mass media and the ways in which certain content can provoke public responses. Reading such manipulation or the "politics of outrage" as enabling conditions of mass political action, particularly against a backdrop of what scholars of South Asian media have termed 'postcolonial publicity' (Cody 2015; Mazzarella 2013; Rajagopal 2011), we must also account for the ways in which such publicity allows the physical bodies of journalists to be subsumed by the very stories they choose to follow. In 2015, Zeenat Shahzadi was working on

[47] Zahid Hussain, "From Blank Pages to Blackout." *Dawn*, October 3, 2019, https://www.dawn.com/news/1512404/from-blank-pages-to-blackout.
[48] Steven Butler, "Opinion: Why Pakistan's Crackdown on the Press is Getting Worse by the Day," *The Washington Post*, July 22, 2019, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/07/22/why-pakistans-crackdown-press-is-getting-worse-by-day/.

stories related to victims of “enforced disappearances,” and she became Pakistan’s first female “missing” journalist. In October 2017, much of the news media celebrated her return after two years in captivity, praising security forces for “recovering” her safely. According to official reports, she had been abducted by “non-state actors and enemy intelligence agencies,” further adding that she had been rescued from their clutches. Tellingly, an editorial in Dawn News, could only go so far as to leave their readers with this cautious yet stinging statement:

> The circumstances of Ms. Shahzadi’s disappearance and ‘recovery’, the threats she had received prior to her abduction and the fact there was no ransom demand during her captivity, raise questions that lend themselves to but *one conclusion*… a journalist like this young woman, committed to actually seeking out the truth rather than acting as a passive observer, would be an asset in a civilized society. But then, Pakistan would have had to be a different country.

EPILOGUE

PAKISTANI NEWS MEDIA: OUT OF CONTROL, TOO MUCH CONTROL

On March 8, 2021, thousands of women across Pakistan celebrated International Women's Day by attending organized public rallies in large cities, which have come to be known locally as "Aurat March" (translated as Women's March). The origins of this particular march took shape in 2018, and for the past few years, both the size of its rallies have grown as well as the ensuing hyperbolic media commentary on the annual event. Religious groups in particular have attempted to ban Aurat March by filing lawsuits against the perceived immorality of such events, and members of provincial assemblies have given speeches on the floors of parliament condemning the women's movement.[1] On television channels, an abundance of controversial debates further instigated a mainstream public narrative against feminism and women's rights by decrying the movement as an infringement of Western culture, and an insult to religion and country. Of particular concern in 2021 was the calculated manipulation of audio clips in a video circulated over social media—distorted with fake captions and deliberately poor sound quality, the doctored video purported to show Aurat March participants chanting blasphemous slogans and was alarmingly shared by television news anchors and journalists on Twitter. Along similar lines, Aurat March organizers were accused on television of promoting anti-religious sentiments by parading a French flag in their processions and the burden was on the Women's Democratic Front, a grassroots feminist group, to painstakingly explain the differences between their flag colors and the French Tricolor. These incidents are glaring current examples of how a politics of disinformation has become increasingly weaponized on social media and finds its way to ratings-hungry television channels, where dismal choices of editorial oversight (or the lack thereof) are

[1] Reem Khurshid, "Media: The March of Disinformation," *Dawn*, March 21, 2021, https://www.dawn.com/news/1613626.

on full display.

As described in Chapter 1, the emergence of a privatized Pakistani media landscape in 2002 came amidst a backdrop of forty years of state-controlled television. With conservative, religious values central to the national narrative, any expectations of liberalized media platforms to exhibit secular traits quickly dissipated and a liberal elite minority watched television channels capitulate to the religious right. If the assassination of Salman Taseer in 2011 served as a warning of the dangerous inciting power of the media, then the years that have followed have witnessed the media's complicit role in strengthening the weight that religious sentiments hold in public discourse. In turn, politicians who rely on wielding such sentiments during election season find themselves unable to contain those very elements when they are in power. In November 2020, the religious group Tehreek-i-Labaik Pakistan (TLP) demanded that the government declare jihad against France in retaliation for President Emmanuel Macron's inflammatory comments on blasphemous cartoons.[2] A collapse in a series of negotiations resulted in the TLP effectively entering a hostile showdown with the government in April 2021, with violent demonstrations resulting in 11 policemen taken hostage and 4 police officials' deaths.[3] News channels reported continuously on the conflict, but with an inability to adequately critique the violent tactics of the TLP in fear of reprisals against themselves. Indeed, Pakistani news media professionals are no strangers to the hazards of their profession, and reporting from the site of large demonstrations can both allow for career-changing opportunities while risking life and limb. In Chapter 2, I detailed how my ethnographic research at a journalism training center allowed me to interact with young, entry-level journalists who were initially attracted to the

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[2] "'France will not give up religious cartoons' declared Macron in homage to murdered teacher," *The Local*, October 22, 2020, https://www.thelocal.fr/20201022/macron-vows-france-will-not-give-up-cartoons-in-homage-to-murdered-teacher/

[3] "Banned: What does the TLP want?" *Dawn*, April 20, 2021, https://www.dawn.com/news/1617844.

perceived glamor of working in television news, but quickly learnt to adjust their expectations amidst the daily challenges of producing attention-grabbing news content. Between the elite journalists who were instructors of training seminars and the entry-level journalists who were attending as trainees, an acknowledgment of what "works" in the news media industry was also ironically stressed as "undesirable" practices in television journalism—high-pitched news anchors, producers orchestrating mayhem by pitting politicians against each other during live talk shows, and exaggerated dramatized re-enactments of crime stories were only some examples. The fact that Pakistani news channels are marketed towards mass audiences forms a convenient excuse for elite journalists to mock the lively, entertaining news packages produced by entry-level reporters that cover otherwise banal stories—and it is within a self-distancing discourse that we saw the divisions of social class within Pakistani television journalism, heightened by the tension between claims of journalistic expertise and expert knowledge in reaching and attracting mass audiences.

In Chapter 3, it is the underlining assurance of a certain class of media professionals who considered themselves to be safely outside (if not above) the purview of their desired mass audience that unravels in an examination of how sensationalist news content is produced and negotiated—for the recognition of sensationalist news does not suggest that hardened journalistic expertise differentiates elite journalists from the common viewer as much as it implies that they too can be just as affected by television news that is produced to convey particular qualia. On a related note, we found that the state's efforts to rein in sensationalist broadcasting is routinely thwarted by the corrupt relationships between media group owners, political parties, and influential businessmen, ensuring that the consequences for news channels on misreporting (oftentimes in the form of slander and false quotes) are brushed aside with ineffective defamation

and libel laws. The power of the media to both protect its political interests and launch public attacks against antagonists ensures that the perceived "independence" of the privatized media sector is not only good for business, but also manages to present itself as a force to be reckoned with. Thus, the mainstream narrative in Pakistan of an out-of-control media is an important discourse to pay attention to, for when particular media houses find themselves cut off from government ad-spending and under indirect censorship directives, then it is not perceived as a damage to freedom of expression – even by sections of the media itself.

In January 2020, Faisal Vawda, a PTI government minister, was engaged in a heated debate on a television talk show, when to prove a point, he produced a well-polished military boot and placed it on the studio desk. In critiquing his political opponents who made lofty claims to champion civilian authority over the armed forces, he accused them instead of "laying down and kissing" the boot.[4] As described in my interviews with journalists, the euphemisms employed within the media industry to indirectly reference the Pakistani military are varied—the establishment, the khakis, the powers that be—with the 'boots' being another synonym on that list. The most powerful institution in the country, the army's supremacy over civilian governments is rarely openly discussed on television channels and Vawda's talk-show stunt was admonished by his party as a cheap point-scoring tactic performed in poor taste. That the articulation of the army's power in a presumably "favorable" light was censured is a clear indication of the limits on public discourse involving the military. The consequences for journalists on reporting on or criticizing the military and its activities are detailed in Chapter 4, and between the time of my fieldwork and the current year 2021, the space for dissent has been

[4] "Pakistan's Judges Briefly Stand Up to the Army," *The Economist*, January 25, 2020, https://www.economist.com/asia/2020/01/23/pakistans-judges-briefly-stand-up-to-the-army

increasingly tightened. Since 2017, Pakistan fell six spots in the rankings in the world press freedom index compiled by Reporters Without Borders, placing the country at a dismal 145th out of 180 countries.[5] Prominent journalists vocally critical of the military have been fired from television channels and remain unable to find employment in other media outlets, with newspapers and TV shows refusing to host their work. In an interview last year for a report in *The New York Times*, Talat Hussain, a former news show anchor at GEO TV said, "This is the first time in the 31 years of my career where I've seen a structural takeover of the media industry… We have dealt with fairly tyrannical regimes that were elected and dealt in repression, but it was episodic. This time it is structural and complete and it's hard to breathe."[6] Indeed, news of the stifling work atmosphere in media houses manages to circulate through elite Pakistani journalists' networks with their Western colleagues and it is through international reporting that we have accounts of external pressures on Pakistani media organizations such as printing presses directed to stop from publishing certain newspapers, cable operators encouraged to drop specific channels and big businesses advised against putting up advertisements with certain media outlets. With media houses pressured to align with the establishment point of view, journalists are turning to social media and the internet at large for sourcing and disseminating news.

In light of these shifting media trends, future research on Pakistani digital spaces presents itself as a particularly rich site, allowing researchers both within and outside the country to explore how users manage to upload content and access platforms despite a wildly uneven distribution of internet resources across the country. The state's efforts to curtail access and

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[5] "Ranking 2021." https://rsf.org/en/ranking.

[6] Maria Abi-Habib. "Abductions, Censorships and Layoff: Pakistani Critics Are Under Siege," *The New York Times*, August 3, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/03/world/asia/pakistan-media-abductions.html.

clamp down on social media platforms is routinely witnessed by Pakistani internet users, with authorities citing immorality, obscenity, and even national security reasons to ban and block social media applications. Grassroots organizing work by civil society organizations such as the Digital Rights Foundation in Pakistan have taken up the mantle to push back against the state's curtailment of the digital rights of its citizens and would prove to be an important resource for scholars interested in this field of study.[7]

Within the broad arc of this dissertation project that focused on the production of television news, I have spent only a brief amount of time considering certain contributing factors to the politics of Pakistani media, which can each be further pursued as a separate object of study that can lead to promising avenues of research: be it the early years of state controlled television, the historical forms of state censorship under military rule, the complexities of an inefficient state regulatory body, the politics of cross media ownership and corporate interests, and of course, the military's influence on the media industry. Future academic research on the news media in Pakistan will hopefully continue to shed light on the fact that while we might initially focus on the celebrity personalities under the bright studio lights, the politicians in sensational headlines, and viral instances of questionable journalistic practices, it is the daily work experiences of ordinary people that produce and deliver the news to us, who have both the courage and conviction to strive against an onslaught of challenges in an overwhelmingly precarious profession.

[7] Digital Rights Foundation. https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/.

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