Chapter 16
New Media and Hegemonic Discourse in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Cell phones in the Sahara, Internet in Burma, cable television in Pakistan: modern media developments are finally touching the far flung reaches of Earth. With the arrival of these innovations come myriad uses, effects, and consequences. Once again the debate on the emancipatory utility of these media is renewed as these media reach deeper into global society. This chapter states that the effects of the 'new media' may not be what we expect with respect to the democratization of society. The analysis shows that ideological hegemony is not only alive and well, but might even thrive in these new media. To scrutinize these effects, the chapter focuses on the impact of Pakistani cable television on identity and culture discourse through the lens of three topics: identity and the new communication technologies; ideology, power and the new media; and new media and new popular cultures.

INTRODUCTION

Cell phones in the Sahara, Internet in Burma, cable television in Pakistan, modern media developments are finally touching the far flung reaches of Earth. However, it needs to be accepted that the rate of diffusion of different media varies across the globe. While many developed nations have had television since the 1940s and cable television since the 1960s, other nations still do not even have cable television. This chapter starts with a consideration of what qualifies as 'new media' for a large portion of the world. It is argued that in a country like Pakistan, cable television qualifies as a new medium just as the Internet and its many innovations are in Western nations. The discussion then moves on to the effects of the popularization of cable television in Pakistan. The chapter will look at the impact of cable television on identity and culture discourse through the lens of three topics: Identity and the new communication tech-

nologies; Ideology, power and the new media; and New media and new popular cultures.

Haythornthwaite defines new media as "the implementation of any medium that is new to the adopting unit" (2002, p.386). Keeping this definition in mind, cable television can be seen as a new medium in Pakistan. Cable television has been a late arrival to Pakistan primarily due to the lack of availability of infrastructure investment. Prior to the arrival of cable television, Pakistanis had two options; a handful of state-sponsored television channels or multiple 'foreign' channels accessed through satellite dishes. The latter option, due to high personal cost, was limited to only a very few households in Pakistan. This all changed with the arrival of cable television five years ago. Similar to the explosive growth of the Internet in Western countries, cable television channels multiplied rapidly in Pakistan. In the last 3 years alone, there has been a 132% growth in the number of channels. The result of this rapid expansion has been that the government has been able to exert little influence on the regular broadcast of all except the news channels. The audiences, long used to a controlled diet of state sponsored fare, are now beset by a multiplicity of viewing choices. However, the question to ask is that does this ever increasing menu of cable channels enhance the marketplace of ideas in Pakistani society? Or are the channels merely pouring old wine into new bottles when it comes to identity, power and cultural discourse?

Looking at cable television from the perspective of identity, over the last few years, cable television has become the battleground where an identity for Pakistan is being forged. Citizens and audiences are surrounded on all sides by different identity pulls through the multiplicity of unmonitored and uncensored programming available on cable. The traditional 'elite discourses' have again gained the loudest voice in this new medium – this includes religious elites, social elites, and political elites. Of course, this tension is further exacerbated by indiscriminate and massive exposure to foreign broadcast channels. This struggle for precedence

in dominant discourse is made more complex by the post-colonial and partition trauma of the country. Sixty years after gaining independence from the British Raj and separating from India, there is still a raging debate as to what constitutes the 'identity' of Pakistan or a Pakistani. In this vacuum of a historic identity, many 'groups' have stepped into the vacuum to birth an identity for Pakistanis. With the arrival of cable television, the public discourse is inevitably co-opted by the privileged few because they control both the means of production and the access to media. The effect is that of magnifying the voice of elites and magnifying the voicelessness of the 'other'. Of course, there are some channels attempting to challenge this trend but the result is pillarization rather than dialogue.

This then leads us to the consideration of how propagation of ideology is subservient to who already holds the power to define discourse as cable television emerges as the predominant medium in Pakistan. One way of reinforcing elite hegemonic discourse is through the use of local 24-hour news channels. These are some of the most prolific types of channels, numbering 15 at last count. A few of these 24-hour news channels are also among the most watched channels on cable. The predominance of certain stories and perspectives on these cable news channels leads to the monopolization of public discourse. This is affected through agenda setting, in that some issues are given prominence while others are ignored. Though, superficially, there are programs and channels that espouse the 'common man', but again these are drowned out by higher funded, partisan channels. Also, the method of coverage favours the elite, since topics are treated in a manner that is episodic and reductionist. Furthermore, since the 24-hour news channel format is so new and requires a large influx of both human resources and information, the producers in the channel have to depend on the most readily available resource. Therefore, the politicians, experts, and even the talk show hosts are from the same social strata. Finally, through

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