Tamasha Politics: Journalism, democracy and illusory dissent in Pakistani media

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The violent deaths of dozens of Pakistani journalists including Saleem Shazad have grabbed headlines across the world in recent years. Little of substance is known, however, about the media and its relationship with politics in Pakistan - remarkable given the explosion of satellite news channels after 2004. Is journalism a progressive force in Pakistan? Beyond the heroic martyrdom of individual reporters killed in battle, a close look at the reporting of key moments in recent Pakistani politics suggests coverage is often elliptical, invariably idiosyncratic and at times, downright bizarre. Particularly notable is the propensity of an ever more intensely television-mediated parliamentary politics underlain with institutional wrangling to descend into theatrical farce and spectacle [tamasha] for the cameras.

Probing beneath the surface to consider the dynamics of media infrastructure, ownership and corruption within the production process offers useful explanations as to why and how the media in Pakistan has a tendency to distract audiences from issues that are integral to the establishment of substantive democracy in Pakistan - even whilst it forges a public sphere in which the daily drama of current affairs is widely debated by a public whose numbers are growing exponentially.