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Significance of Presentation on Pakistan Studies

This presentation sought to bring together two dynamics that are increasingly reshaping public discourses and spaces in specific locations across Pakistan: the proliferation and growth of literary festivals and the rise of information and communications technologies (ICT).

Regarding the former, since the advent of the Karachi Literature Festival (KLF) in 2010, these types of events have spread to Lahore, Islamabad, and smaller Pakistani cities, and one of their purposes is to intervene in public discourse in order to create a space for open discussion and cultural exchange. The KLF itself has grown exponentially in the five years of its existence, and its recurrence in that city has prompted interest and critique about the festival's functions, especially in terms of its stated purposes. At base, the KLF's social functions begs questions about the types of communities it inspires, as well as how/whether it effectively reshapes a sense of the 'public' for its participants.

These questions about participants and communities connect the cultural dynamic that is the KLF to the other dynamic of concern in this presentation: the rise of ICT. More specifically, this presentation included analyses of how festival organizers and participants represent the event on the internet and via social media sites. The virtual presence of the festival matters because of the near saturation of smart phone technologies in Pakistani urban settings. This saturation points to a more far-reaching incursion by the festival into newly established and ever-expanding 'public' spaces that expand far beyond the local geographies of the festival itself. Further, the incorporation of the festival into participants' personal social media identities also suggests a reconfiguration of the individual in relation to the broader social that can be called a 'public'; in other words, a redrawing of a public/private divide may be occurring.

Thus, while the presentation's dual focus on the popularity of literature festivals and ICT is itself germane to Pakistan studies, the questions it raises about the reconfiguration of the individual vis-à-vis the public in contemporary Pakistan may spark additional research and commentary across disciplines concerned with Pakistani artistic production, communication, and culture.