

EASA Media Anthropology Network
E-Seminars Series
<http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm>
27th E-Seminar Discussion

**“From Audiotapes to Videoblogs:
The Delocalization of Authority in Islam”**

Dr. Nabil Echchaibi, University of Colorado-Boulder

Discussant Dr. Emilio Spadola,
Colgate University

April 28 – May 12 2009

Abstract

Today, a new breed of charismatic and media savvy religious figures are reinvigorating internal debates on Islam by drawing large audiences across the Muslim world and the Muslim diaspora in the West. Using satellite media, websites, blogs, and videoblogs, these new religious celebrities are changing the nature of debate in Islam from a doctrinaire discourse to a practical discussion that focuses on individual enterprise as a spiritual quest. These leaders themselves have become religious entrepreneurs with sophisticated networks of message distribution and media presence. From Amr Khaled and Moez Masood, two leading figures of Arab Islamic entertainment television, to Baba Ali, a famous Muslim videoblogger from California, Islam has never been better marketable. Satellite television and the Internet are becoming fertile discursive spaces where not only religious meanings are reconfigured but also new Islamic experiences are mediated transnationally. This delocalization of Islamic authority beyond the traditional sources of Egypt and Saudi Arabia is generating new producers and locales of religious meaning in Dubai, London, Paris, and Los Angeles. This article examines the impact of celebrity religious figures and their new media technologies on the relativization of authority in Islam and the emergence of a cosmopolitan transnational audience of Muslims. I ask if this transnational and seemingly apolitical effort is generating a new form of religious nationalism that devalues the importance of national loyalties.

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Tue Apr 28 00:42:10 PDT 2009

Dear All

I'd like to welcome you to our 27 EASA media anthropology e-seminar. The seminar will run on this mailing list for two weeks from now until Tuesday May 12. The working paper, by Nabil Echchaibi (University of Colorado-Boulder, USA) is titled: "From Audiotapes to Videoblogs: the Delocalization of Authority in Islam" and you've still got time to read the PDF version available at <http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm>

Nabil Echchaibi is assistant professor at School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Colorado at Boulder. He earned his PhD in Mass Communication at the School of Journalism at Indiana University - Bloomington. His research focuses on the intersections between Islam, Arab popular culture and the media. His work has been published in several international communication journals. His book on the role of diasporic media among young Muslims in France and Germany is forthcoming with Lexington Books. Echchaibi's other area of research is new media and their impact on journalism. His co-edited book with Adrienne Russell on international blogs and political activism, *International Blogging Identity, Politics and Networked Publics*, is recently published by Peter Lang Publishing.

The discussant will be Emilio Spadola is assistant professor of anthropology in Colgate University's Department of Sociology and Anthropology. He specializes in modern Islam in Morocco and in the Muslim world more broadly. His research and teaching focus on mass mediation of communication and ritual; language, media, and subjectivity; and history and theory of anthropology. His current book manuscript concerns the mass mediation of Muslim curing rites in twentieth century urban Morocco, in particular, their competition and convergence with nationalist and revivalist stagings of the technologized "call" to consciousness.

His publications on media include: "Writing cures: religious and communicative authority in late modern Morocco," *Journal of North African Studies* (In press). And "The Scandal of Ecstasy: Communication, Sufi Rites, and Social Reform in 1930s Morocco," *Contemporary Islam: Dynamics of Muslim Life*. Vol. 2, No. 2, July 2008.

How the e-seminar works: Today, Emilio will be posting his comments directly to the list, after which Nabil will respond. The discussion will then be open to all.

Please bear in mind that these sessions can only work if we have wide and sustained participation, so all contributions are very welcome (short or long comments and/or questions). To post, please write directly to medianthro at easaonline.org, i.e. not to me.

Thanking our presenter and discussant for their efforts, it's over to Emilio now!

All the best, Sigurjon.

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Tue Apr 28 09:52:32 PDT 2009

Response to Nabil Echchaibi's "From Audiotapes to Videoblogs"
4/28/09

First and foremost, I offer many thanks to Nabil Echchaibi for his excellent and enjoyable paper. Many thanks, too, to Siguron for inviting me to respond to Nabil's work, and to all participants in the list who make this forum possible. Thank you very much!

My response consists of a summary of the paper's main points and guiding questions; a closer reading and comment on the relationships between this paper and media studies in/of the Muslim world; and, finally, some questions/suggestions for Nabil (if I may) based on the theoretical aims and ethnographic material of the paper.

Points and Positions:

Echchaibi's paper examines the digitalization and commercialization of da`wa—the long-standing tradition of Islamic outreach or "the Call to Islam"—via satellite television and the Internet in and intersecting the Arab world; more specifically, it addresses the transformational force of this "digital da`wa" (1) for modes of Islamic authority and sociability previously defined by Arab nation-states. Given the thick Euro-American fog of orientalism and fear surrounding Arab Muslim media, Nabil begins, very helpfully, with dispelling any notion that Islam, because non-Western, is anti-media—"as if mediation were foreign to Muslims" (3). In a more pointed comment on media studies of Islamic revivalism, and think-tank policy proposals, he rejects two very disparate but common assertions that digital da`wa is mindless or irrational: on the one hand, that this kind of Islamic communication and practice is shallow and apolitical because commercialized and mass-mediated (4), i.e., that digitality "empt[ies] religion of its critical and political potential" (29); and, on the other hand, that it inspires overly political, i.e., irrationally "militant" and Jihadist Muslims who have explicitly sought to impose Islam on secular Arab states.

With these assumptions put (as much as they can be) to rest, Nabil's paper focuses largely on Arab world dissemination and reception of digital da`wa in terms of local or national-state structures already defined by mass mediation. For Echchaibi specifically digital da`wa encompass several social trends, including:

- 1) The aggressive "marketization and gentrification of da`wa" (13) for middle and upper class Arab-Muslim publics.
- 2) The attendant displacement/supplementing of older social worlds and authorities of analog (audiocassette) da`wa by "entrepreneurial Arab da`ia[s]" (28) who command "small media empires" (9).
- 3) The "delocalization" of previously state-sanctioned and "nationally-defined" (6) Islamic institutions of authority and influence.

Apropos of these trends, the paper poses two questions:

1) Are these digital market-spaces of the call "deliberative and empowering for individual Muslims"? (5)

And,

2) Insofar as transnational (digital) da`wa "delocalizes" prior institutions of "nationally-defined Islam" (6), does it go so far as to "cancel out the nation-state as a terrain of action" (5)?

His responses to these questions, and his broader conclusions, are extremely helpful for reading current mass reception in the Arab Muslim world, and its relationship to national publics riven by class differences.

Empowering Muslims:

The first question of deliberative space and empowerment revisits basic problems of culture industries: "Given the commercial nature of Islamic media today and their close ties with the world of entertainment, how genuinely deliberative can this space really be?" (5). The paper seems, however, to leave aside this general problem of consumer thralldom and distraction, focusing rather on the mediatic production of an open forum, beyond prior authority structures, for "gentrified" audience participants: "Both satellite television and the Internet have reshaped the terms of religious debate and recast Islam as a new field of contestation by ordinary Muslims" (28). Indeed, Echchaibi seems to conclude in favor of deliberative space, for marketization or "commodification [via digitization] enables a critical space where Islam is experienced under alternative protocols of sociability" (29).

Echchaibi is very clear in asserting the middle and upperclass standing of this deliberative audience, a welcome clarification of prior studies that tended to ignore the uneven access to digital communications in the Muslim world (Eickelman and Anderson 2003). For Echchaibi, moreover, the effects of digital da`wa move beyond the act of debate to a broader retransmission of the call to Islam not only in communicative acts, but in "social action and participation" (24), "public participation, civic engagement" (4). As the paper makes clear, this da`wa-inspired action is not "Islamist" in the sense of calling for an Islamic state; it is not jihad, but ijtehad, personal interpretation of the Qur'an coupled with community action as the personal transmission of its message. Nevertheless, digital da`wa emanates, Echchaibi shows, from beyond national horizons and thus challenges (Arab) Muslim "secular states"—its state spokesmen, its mosques, its own TV (including digital-satellite) channels—and it rubs the wrong way. "Arab governments," Echchaibi writes, "do not appreciate too much civic engagement." (22-23).

Challenges notwithstanding, however, Echchaibi's research concludes that, for all its transnational infrastructure and dissemination, new digital da`was privileges a kind of "think global, act local" ethos for the comfortable classes—a fully domesticated civic commitment to national communities: digital da`was are "not only creating distinct spaces for political discourse and action, but they are also helping their followers imagine new pathways to fulfill their roles as virtuous citizens within the framework of the nation" (27).

Questions and requests for clarification:

This very welcome work questions and contributes to a field of Muslim world media studies (and some policy-oriented literature) concerned with new media, authority, and globalization. (See Eickelman and Anderson 2003, Hirschkind 2006, and Salvatore 1997 in Echchaibi's bibliography.) His framing of social trends is likewise conversant with this literature, especially where he asserts that a generalized authority available to "ordinary Muslims" is displacing a once-exclusive Islamic authority, defined through "'village Islam'" (28), and, more recently, through specific social and state institutions.

This prior literature, however, attributed these same displacements to earlier mechanical and electronic technologies, among them print (Robinson 1993) and audiocassette technologies (Eickelman 1985); indeed some of the personal practice/pious community concerns Echchaibi notes in satellite TV are identical to those remarked by Messick (1996) on radio fatwas in Yemen. This is not to say—at all—that digitization is inconsequential; Echchaibi makes a very clear and compelling case for the "gentrification" of da`wa that complicates the persistent association of da`wa with underclass populations, and dovetails with recent exciting work on Islamic revivalism as neoliberal. But it is to request (of a future draft or future research, perhaps) a thicker description of specific elements he has in mind of

1) the da`ias' versus their audiences' "bold mediation of Islam" (24), and,

2) the established authority structures they transgress.

Regarding the second point, for example, it is unclear to me whether by "alternative protocols of sociability" (29) Echchaibi means the vast array of smallscale social norms—i.e. "'village Islam'"—across the Arab world; or the norms of sociability in repressive states (Egypt, Morocco are examples) and/or diasporic sites (the US); or the norms of sociability in the newly established "capitals" of digital da`wa, Dubai (28). Here Echchaibi's global insights could use ethnographic location to identify historical conditions of mediation, including mass mediation of Islam, from which digital communications differs; e.g., to determine social-historical continuities and ruptures between mass-analog and mass-digital communications; and, moreover, to discern contemporary differences between satellite TV and Internet audienceship.

Regarding the first point, this paper provides a very clear picture of the "entrepreneurial Arab da`ia" (28). Echchaibi's insights regarding re-transmission also point to the social-historical specificity of late modern, globalized, gentrified middle- to upperclass revivalists. At times paper seems to conflate the two; that is, it equates rare "celebrity da`ias" (14) as ordinary Muslims (page)—i.e., not scholarly trained—with their audience as likewise "ordinary" (page), i.e. members of a mass audience. This conflation is not accidental or inappropriate to Echchaibi's argument that public participation is an extension of digital da`wa, that, whether via Internet publishing or civic action, audiences "produc[e] [reproduce?] religious meanings," "[T]he widening of the religious circle from the traditional mosque to the airwaves [] empowers a bigger audience not only to act as a receiver, but an active producer of religious meanings" (20).

Nevertheless, Echchaibi's example in this citation is still celebrity talk-show hosts (20); and celebrity da'ias command "small media empires" (14) and thus a far greater communicative capacity than their audience.

What about that audience which retransmits the call? To say the least, this provides Echchaibi an opportunity to theorize da'wa movements as signifying practices (contra Mahmood 2005). To fully grasp the specificity of the gentrified audience, however, one must address a basic premise of modern mass consumption and identity, namely: that the masses, rather than privileged objects, persons or centers alone, publicly signify (are in some cases obliged to signify) cultural, national, religious identities, etc.

- How are personal piety movements, including older cassette-based movements, also concerned with public presentation, i.e. with the obligation to carry out da'wa? More specifically,
- How have print and cassette da'wa publics anticipated the digital da'ias'—and YouTube's—exhortation to "broadcast yourself": to purchase, wear and otherwise perform signs of revivalism—and thus to re-transmit them? In what more specific ways is digital da'wa "amplify[ing]" (8) or refiguring older mass communication and community in the Arab Muslim world?

Thanks again to Nabil Echchaibi for his marvelous paper, and thanks to EASA for this opportunity to read and respond!
-Emilio Spadola

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Tue Apr 28 09:54:23 PDT 2009

Dear all,

Thanks to Emilio Spadola for his response.

It is over to Nabil Echchaibi now!!

All the best, Sigurjon.

Nabil Echchaibi [Nabil.Echchaibi at Colorado.EDU](mailto:Nabil.Echchaibi@Colorado.EDU)

Wed Apr 29 22:38:54 PDT 2009

Response to Emilio's Spadola's comments on my paper
"From Audiotapes to Videoblogs"

I'm grateful for this unique opportunity to share my work with a large community of scholars. I'd like to thank Siguron for inviting me to submit my paper to this forum. This is indeed an innovative conduit to scholarly exchange and collaboration. Many thanks to

Emilio Spadola for his generous and extremely thoughtful comments on my paper.

My response will address one major point Emilio raised in his questions and requests for clarification section:

--Whether there is a radical shift between mass-analog and mass-digital da'wa. Are there socio-historical continuities and ruptures between the two modes of mediated da'wa, he asks.

My argument (and perhaps I should make this clearer in the paper) is that the shift in access to and the production of da'wa messages has occurred across class lines. The difference between the mass-analog and mass digital da'was lies precisely in the ability of the latter to popularize da'wa beyond underclass populations. The melding of religion/spirituality with new digital technologies and trendy market consumption makes this kind of da'wa not only more appealing to younger and wealthier audiences but also more nurturing of a class-wide desire to maintain public and private morality. The transition to digital da'wa does not mark a radical break with analog da'wa, but it certainly has accelerated a trend of democratization of da'wa as a vocation as opposed to an exclusively government or religious establishment-sanctioned job title. This restructuring of da'wa as an alternative model to the religious bureaucrat predates modern media technologies like satellite television and the Internet, but the popularity of these platforms have secured the new da'was I'm talking about not only easy exposure but considerable following as well. Previous mediations of da'wa through print and other technologies like audio cassettes and radio have not produced as wide an impact on large segments of the population in Muslim countries as have newer forms of this mediation.

Another manifestation of this reformulation lies in the ongoing widening of the boundaries of what constitutes da'wa and where it can be practiced. The boundaries of digital da'wa are indeed quite porous. Popular television channels like the ones that feature the work of Amr Khlaed and Moez Masood use anything from fiction to reality television to music videos as da'wa meant to reinforce individual piety. The video blogger Baba Ali uses comedy and film for the same purposes. Ahmed Abu Haiba, the mastermind behind entertainment da'wa on satellite television, has recently launched a 24-hour Islamic music video channel which will push the boundaries of what falls within the purview of da'wa even further: rap artists and music reality tv shows among other racy tv formats.

All these new forms of mediated da'wa are competing with more traditional da'wa formats and spaces like the sermon (khutba) and the mosque. Whereas Hirschkind's work on cassettes and the piety movement in Egypt valorizes the role of Islamic sermons as a key site of social and political critique in the Middle East, my argument (of which this paper is only a preliminary reflection) is that this new da'wa with its unique stylistic and delivery features, which it partially borrows from the oratorical traditions of the Islamic sermon, can create a space for public deliberation and criticism, which in turn escapes state control of religious messages. The cassette sermon piety movement in Egypt reappropriated the use of the sermon to promote new practices of dialogue and contestation. The new da'ias I'm writing about in my paper and their emerging religion media culture have gone beyond the sermon and created innovative religious formats which may function as competing spaces for acquiring religious knowledge and learning how to create and sustain an ethical mode of living.

My preliminary discussion of this new class of da'ia media personalities will certainly benefit tremendously from a more ethnographically-informed enquiry into the politics and practices of these emerging religious media empires which I agree with Emilio should not be equated with the audiences they target. I'm hoping to do some more fieldwork in the Middle East and among less institutionalized da'ias who use the Internet in the next coming months to probe further historical differences in the role aural and visual da'wa media play in the shaping of pious Muslim individuals.

Again, many thanks to Emilio Spadola for his extremely helpful response and I look forward to more feedback from other users of this forum.

Nabil Echchaibi

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Thu Apr 30 01:01:36 PDT 2009

Dear all,

Many thanks to Nabil Echchaibi for his response to our discussant, Emilio Spadola.

The floor is now open to all to participate with: short questions, long questions, comments and/or critique.

Please bear in mind that these sessions can only work if we have wide and sustained participation, so all contributions are very welcome.

All the best, Sigurjon.

Becker, C. (Carmen) [c.becker at rs.ru.nl](mailto:c.becker@rs.ru.nl)

Thu Apr 30 02:34:22 PDT 2009

Dear all,

thanks a lot to Nabil and Emilio for sharing your thoughts with us! Nabil's paper has inspired me to write my first post to the list and end my lurking existence. I will plunge right into it...

I have two points/questions to share which partly pick up Emilio's remarks and, I have to admit, are also linked to my own research. I am researching (PhD project) how Dutch and German Muslims (mostly inspired by Salafism) (re-)produce/do/make/practice meaning and knowledge in computer-mediated environments.

1. Delocalization of authority in Islam

This is a very strong and important point. Others like Mandaville and Eickelman/Anderson have called it pluralization or fragmentation. I like your term "delocalization" since it nicely catches the idea that something that has been there and evolving before (Islamic authority) is taken to other places, environments.

Taking this point further, this delocalized authority is also re-localized in new settings and contexts. I think it is a point taken that "something" is happening to authority. The really interesting question is then: What actually happens to authority in these new environments/contexts? How does a da'i successfully claim his authority? How can we grasp this authority(ies) in terms? Among the huge variety of "Islamic" products and possibilities on the internet and in Satellite TV, how do they convince their followers that their "Islam" is the right/good/authentic/authoritative Islam? You have mentioned the importance of media styles. I think their use and adaptation is quite important to authenticate and authorize a message.

2. And the "ordinary" Muslim?

As Emilio has already mentioned: The same questions about authority can also be asked of the Muslim "consumer"/"prosumer". How do Muslims make a choice among the "Islamic" products when surfing on the net or listening to a da'i? What do they actually do with the knowledge/ideas/meaning they find there? In my research participants are very much concerned with the "authenticity" and "trustworthiness" of the content they find on the internet. I have found the same question and different strategies to deal with this in different Muslim contexts.

The aspect of empowering you mention is very important although I think it is also important, at least in the beginning, to avoid connotations such as progressiveness, pluralization or democratization. I prefer to understand the term in the sense of "making able": For instance, in some computer-mediated environments like online discussion forums Muslims interact with others, the technology and the numerous knowledges and meanings traveling under the label "Islam". In this

interaction, authority and meaning are reproduced. At the same time the boundaries between consumer/producer are very much blurred or even eliminated. People tell me that is empowering in the sense that they have access to Islamic knowledge of all kinds (as far as it is digitized), can use it thanks to search and copy/paste functions and can do all kinds of things with it. But it is also partly experienced as a huge challenge and responsibility because they have to find a way through the (Islamic) information overload. One avid Muslim internet user (non-Salafi) framed it as a struggle to uphold the unity and purity of Islam in the midst of the information jungle. Lately, I have noticed that some people retreat at least temporarily from forums or chat rooms on Islam because they experience a "burn-out" and are truly overpowered. One wrote that he cannot meaningfully process the information any more and it is better to take a time out.

I would love to hear some thoughts on this. I have tons of further questions because your paper hits important and intriguing points. I'll keep these for later occasions.

Again, thanks a lot to you!

Carmen

Carmen Becker

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Fri May 1 03:45:08 PDT 2009

Having reviewed the second edition of *New Media in the Muslim World*, Nabil's research strikes me as being a terrific update on that earlier 'new media' work from the 1990s.

My question has to do with the 'new mediators' profiled in the paper. You mention that these media entrepreneurs are skilled at navigating very different contexts and media platforms across international borders. But I'm wondering how they adapt their public performances to these varied contexts - and in doing so perhaps (re)produce and transform those contexts and platforms. For instance, the ethnic Chinese local leaders I worked with in suburban Malaysia don't operate in the same way when interacting on a local 'community' web forum and on their own personal blogs. As you might expect, personal blogs seem to lend themselves to a more individualistic, technopreneurial persona than the communitarian platforms. Are similar online persona switches at work in your field sites?

Many thanks for a great paper

John

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Nabil Echchaibi Nabil.Echchaibi@Colorado.EDU

Fri May 1 07:57:26 PDT 2009

Thank you for your questions and comments.

Carmen: you're right that any delocalization is going to engender a re-localization in new spaces in which da'ias deploy old and different stylistic features in order to assert an alternative authority. This is achieved not only through the melding of religion and new media technologies but also in a discourse carefully crafted to have an impact on audiences with varying degrees of religiosity. An important element in the da'wa narrative of the da'ias I mention in my paper is lived experience, and 'dangerous' lived experience I should add. The fact that someone had a nearly-deadly encounter with drugs or was born religious again sets up an interesting contrast with the traditional da'ia who's generally perceived as pure, un-erring individual. I can't tell you how many times Khaled for instance mentions the fact that he's done it and seen it all on the other side of the 'fence' and that righteous life in the service of God is much better off. This potentially positions the viewer to compare Khaled, a once 'brittle but life-experienced' individual who's arguably learned from his mistakes, to a traditional da'ia whose preaching might be seen as removed from the temptations of daily life. I'm not arguing that da'ias like Khaled and Masoud are exactly what they claim to be, but this is certainly a powerful discursive technique that deserves thicker analysis.

We certainly need more audience research to find out if these newly-established religious authorities are indeed perceived as such, or if users/producers are solely confused about what they see as a dizzying outpouring of religious talk, as you're finding out with your research. Having said that, the empowerment dimension of this new speech lies precisely in the fact that users are now producers of these religious meanings. It's true that except for the videoblogger in my paper, both Khaled and Masoud are part of a privileged class of media producers, but a number of people today participate in these new spaces with or without any religious expertise, and to some extent, that is power enough.

I'll answer John's important question about adapting da'wa to different media formats later on today.

Thanks,
Nabil

Ursula Rao u.rao@unsw.edu.au

Sun May 3 16:25:54 PDT 2009

Dear Nabil, dear all,

Thanks you for this fascinating paper. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it and I think it is a very interesting contribution to debates about producer/consumer. Thanks a lot.

I wanted to ask you about the term da'wa. You (and others) seem to be using it to describe a number of different practices from preaching, to cassette culture and blogging. I was unclear about what established these various practices as belonging to the same type, is it the consciousness of the producers, an academic (or theological) practice of naming or an attitude of reception, or all of these? I was also wondering how (evolving) theological discourses about da'wa interact with/impact on/are influenced by the doing of da'wa. Maybe rather than taking the term for granted you could elaborate more on how da'wa is established as orthopraxis. I would like to know more about how the interpretation of what constitutes da'wa is embedded in shifting consciousness of what is (good) Islam.

Best

Ursula

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Emilio Spadola espadola_at_mail.colgate.edu

Mon May 4 13:44:45 PDT 2009

Dear Ursula, and all,

Thank you many times over--this is an excellent question! I agree that da`wa is under-theorized/under-thought in my reply to Nabil, as it indeed is in Islamic/Middle East studies. What a lacuna! You've inspired me to write an article on da`wa and modernity. That will have to wait for a bit, but let me respond in brief by commenting on what I see as an important social-historical relation between da`wa and mass media with direct relevance to Nabil's paper, namely, the modern institution of broadcast, reception, and the "democratization" or, rather, massification, of authority.

As I understand it, da`wa, the Call to Islam (from Arabic for summon, call, appeal or demand, even invitation) has long meant to proselytize Islam to non-Muslims, or to enjoin fellow Muslims to proper practice, locally understood. But da`wa itself was not itself a mandatory practice, like prayer or alms-giving. Historically, i.e., from the "classical" period of Islamic jurisprudence (7th-13th centuries), to the twentieth century, it was legally only the duty of Muslim political leadership. Only in the early 20th century did Rashid Rida, an Islamic modernist jurist and editor of a widely read modernist journal (al-Manar, meaning "beacon" or "minaret") reinterpret da`wa as a duty for all Muslims. To put it in the terms

of our discussion, according to Rida--a major producer of da`wa-- anyone, rather than a single authoritative voice or institution, could and should summon others to Islam.

Rida's own work of da`wa took a distinctly modern form, i.e., a mass call to an anonymous audience, that Nabil argues "digital da`wa" is displacing. (Rida's was an age of new mass movements --Islamic as well as nationalist-- in the Middle East, with terms like "the People" referring for the first time not to "commoners" but in various cases to a national, ethnic or religious community.) There is a critical link between this early mass da`wa and digital da`wa: Rida meant for his literate audience, once summoned, to enact da`wa as an everyday obligation, carried out in speech, in dress, in acts. That is to say, in a way that, for Nabil, "digital da`wa" begins to realize, Rida meant that everyone could--should--also transmit the call to Islam. To my thinking, to clarify/define da`wa in its multiple forms (as you write, "from preaching, to cassette culture and blogging") would necessarily address this relationship between the mass audience and the capacity of anonymous anyone to send--in the most basic sense of signify--religious messages. It would require thinking about Islamic da`wa as both a strictly technological act, but also, a kind of everyday identity politics in which Islamic acts become "Islamic"--i.e, acts of citation and signification. It could well be this breadth of "sending messages"-- available to bloggers, media titans, and consumers of "Islamic" merchandise and fashions--that gives da`wa its varied quality today.

A genealogy of the concept of da`wa very much needs to be clarified, and I would aim to do so first by identifying the media conditions, broadly construed, under which mass audienceship amongst Muslims has made possible, or demanded, "ordinary" Muslims' re-transmission of the call.

Emilio

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Nabil Echchaibi [Nabil.Echchaibi at Colorado.EDU](mailto:Nabil.Echchaibi@Colorado.EDU)

Mon May 4 21:13:19 PDT 2009

Hi Ursula,

Thank you for this important and insightful question about what constitutes da'wa in Islam and how this integral practice of the religion has evolved through time. As Emilio rightly pointed out, there is indeed a dearth of research on the institutional (and I would add the semantic) history of da'wa and its adaptation to modernity. That would be a great topic for a book manuscript. The way I understand the institutional history of da'wa is exactly as Emilio suggested through his overview of Rashid Rida: a 20th century model of a modern da'wa designed for political and social revival and to be enacted by

everyone. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was instrumental in carrying da'wa outside the mosque into cafes, homes, schools and clubs and later using mass media technologies as books and audio cassettes. Of course, the massification and relative democratization of da'wa then meant the popularization of the Islamic corpus and in the eyes of some religious authorities the sacrificing of methodological practices and doctrinal substance. Famous scholars/da'ias like Al Banna and Sheikh Kishk later on were vehemently attacked on similar grounds.

Where I see "digital da'wa" marking a shift from the modern mass da'wa is not so much in just the novelty of the technologies used like satellite television and blogging, but more in the doctrinal boundaries crossed as da'ias adjust their da'wa to fit new media platforms. Again, as I said in an earlier email, some of the stylistic features of these digital da'ias are very similar to older versions of da'wa, and much like in that older mass mediated version where da'ias had to adjust their messages to a mass audience, the same applies to digital da'ias.

The more radical shift in the kind of da'wa I'm arguing about lies in the fact that unlike the political nature of mass Da'wa as enacted by revivalists/reformists and the Muslim Brotherhood later on, digital da'wa seems more commodified even if appearing equally committed to social change. If da'wa in the last century (and more so in the last 50 years) was a site for power contestation and dissenting politics, digital da'wa seems to offer an attenuated political edge and a commodified tamed religious discourse.

Nabil

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Tue May 5 23:25:23 PDT 2009

Dear All

We are now just over one week into our current e-seminar and we've had good discussion so far of Nabil Echchaibi's working paper titled: "From Audiotapes to Videoblogs: the Delocalization of Authority in Islam."

A PDF version of the paper is available at
<http://www.media-anthropology.net/workingpapers.htm>

All contributions are very welcome (short or long comments and/or questions).

All the best, Sigurjon.

Yasmin Moll [yasminmoll at gmail.com](mailto:yasminmoll@gmail.com)

Wed May 6 06:40:10 PDT 2009

Dear all,

Thanks Nabil for your very interesting paper - as a PhD student who has been undertaking preliminary fieldwork in the Cairo offices of Iqraa and Al-Resalah over the past two summers, I found your take you on the "digital dawa" broadcast on these channels quite stimulating

for thinking about some of the issues I have come across on this topic while in the field.

I have two comments that tie in to both your paper and some of the points Emilio and others raised so cogently:

1- the medium of tele-vision

A question which hasn't come up yet in the discussions is what exactly is at stake in positing the notion of a "pious viewing" within a religious tradition usually associated with an oral/aural piety (mystical "visions" notwithstanding) and how does this tie in to the tele-visual medium. While religious preachers have appeared on television since its introduction into Egypt, the Islamic televangelism of Khaled et al marks the first time that the very fact of being on television, the materiality of the medium itself with all its technological capabilities, was made an integral part of the performance. The glitzy studio, the lighting, the panning between the da'ya and his rapt addressees, the music montage introducing the show, the computer-generated title images - these elements were as integral to the homiletic message as the Qur'anic parables and prophetic stories which constituted the discursive substance of the programs. And for the television da'iyas, contra the cassette-sermon ones, it deeply matters that one can SEE them - educated, young, attractive, obviously well-to-do - working the camera, inhabiting spaces of modern technology, yet still maintaining a high commitment to Islamic practice, as their middle-class audience should, too (so the message goes). Indeed, the Islamic media producers are highly-conscious of embodied communication, tightly-controlling what is allowed to appear on their pious screens and what cannot - a modest dress-code is mandated for the studio audience, for example, while women's cleavage in street-footage is blurred out. A producer at Al-Resalah told me that they are very careful about filming in public locations such as shopping malls because they cannot always control what might appear in the background, specifically women not conforming to the station's interpretation of what constitutes acceptable Islamic attire. Viewing such women would undermine the pious efficacy of the "sacred event" being broadcast. And on the consumption side, for many Egyptian Muslims I talked to tuning into an Islamic channel is seen as a moral act, a willful choice to improve the self through a shunning of non-Islamic media which may be corrupting to that self in what they project on the screen - scantily-clad women, sex-scenes, glorified violence and so on. At the heart of this choice, then, is a concern with vision and visuality that I think opens up an important aspect of this topic.

2- "Ordinary people" and "authority"

The questions Carmen brought up about how "ordinary" exactly are the producers and consumers involved in this new dawa and the one regarding the relocation of religious authority attending digital dawa can, I think, be productively thought about together. Al-Resalah's website breaks-down the target audience by programming percentages as follows: only 10% for "devoted religious people," 40% for youth, 30% for "women and the family" and 10% for "the elite" (www.alresalah.net). More generally, the website maintains that the channel is for "ordinary people" as opposed to those well-versed in

Islamic knowledge. (Of course, the channel's definition of "ordinary people" does not include the vast majority of people in a region rife with poverty, illiteracy and non-access to satellite media.). This official line is also spouted by the channel's employees, with one telling me that channel's programming are "Islam-lite" for "people who don't know much about religion." This imagination of the audience as "lax" Muslims in need of religious education calls for, as Nabil points out, a particular discursive strategy on the part of the daiyias where the best way to "connect" with this audience is to narrate their own journey from laxity to piety. Thus, Amr Khaled's authority to preach derives not from a mastery of the authoritative textual canon of the Islamic tradition and its attendant disciplinary practices of study, reflection and deliberation, but rather from his projected status as an "ordinary Muslim" who struggles to lead an Islamically-correct life in a world where it is manifestly difficult to do so. He has authority not because he is different from the audience he preaches too, but because he is one of them - "ordinary." (This is of course very similar to some of the dynamics at play in Christian televangelism).

These are few of my thoughts offhand for this e-seminar - looking forward to more discussion!

best, Yasmin

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Wed May 6 08:31:56 PDT 2009

Greetings all,

I've been following with great interest the various postings since Nabil's paper and Emilio's response. My call out to everyone echoes Yasmin's important and well-articulated suggestion to focus on the medium specificity of television at this time and in these particular iterations (and this follows on the implications presented by the greater array of means available for dawa digitally, which Nabil and Emilio brought to our attention).

As Yasmin represented so well, the **type** of television--the character and quality of images presented--is crucial in this medium-as-messaging as much as any content of the homilies offered. Following Anderson's ideas of an imagined community of strangers to be identified with, viewers of the highly-produced dawa programs are offered specific types of role models (modestly-dressed, materially prosperous, politely attentive in aspect, comfortable in the highly artificial setting of a media production facility), which suggest ideal behaviors to emulate not only as moral subjects in the religious sense, but as modern citizens in a larger project of subjective formation and the ongoing contest over how different versions of "being modern" might be aspired to and negotiated.

Another question that I am interested in, which Nabil touched upon but

I believe might be explored further are the translocal/transnational implications for the wider and wider dissemination of dawa of different specific types, and the sorts of competing assertions for influence that Emilio suggests when anyone can now blog and post their own version of what piety might look like--and unknown others might well pick up on and receive them. What happens, for instance, when some one's message "goes viral"--but is perceived by others as impious? What is the place or likelihood for parody in such less-controlled settings for media?

My own work has been mostly concerned with how popular music in Morocco has been effected (and affected) with the development of a greater range of media possibility in recent generations, but a significant component of that for me has been the issue of a porousness between any perceived divide between the secular and non-secular in the practice of not only music but popular culture more generally in contemporary Morocco and how different mediations impact that. This is by-and-large a less self-conscious and pro-active mode than the proselytizing impulse of dawa, but definitely relevant in the larger continuum of social and cultural formation at this time. So I am looking forward to hearing more of others' thoughts on these questions of media and dawa.

Best regards,
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Zeynep Gürsel zgursel@umich.edu

Thu May 7 09:49:39 PDT 2009

Dear Nabil, Emilio, and all.

Thanks for a very interesting discussion. Foremost, thank you Nabil for presenting your work and responding to comments to thoughtfully.

Your paper raised several questions for me put forth only two here:

1. I find very compelling the discussions around real life experience as a basis for religious authority as demonstrated by Ardekani, Masoud and Khaled who did it all and then chose the right path. Is this foundation of religious authority or appeal exclusively male? Are there women who rise to prominence as Islamic guides while acknowledging a sinful past? You gestured towards this with the discussion of former Egyptian women who then appeared in studios with colorful veils and the footnote on Heba Qotb but I felt that this particular issue merits more in-depth commentary. After all unlike the male web designer, accountant, TV producers Qotb is a sexologist. Do you mean that her show is also perceived as a mediated da'wa? There seems to be a conflation of all women in this section of your paper from Egyptian actresses to pious women afforded new public space

to Qotb. Or are you trying to give a sense of the media backdrop against which this is all taking place. Similarly I thought it might be relevant to mention what the Turkish series that has dominated TV screens across the Arab world is about. I would also be interested in whether the same audiences are watching the series and Hannibal TV's programs.

2. While I appreciate your focus on the delocalization of authority and the transnational nature of the umma that I would argue is both being represented and constituted by mediated da'wa, I found myself asking "Where?" throughout the paper. Where were you speaking to veiled women for example? The paper itself is completely transnational jumping from Egypt to Tunisia, to Dubai to LA to London. Yet how are you so sure that the audience for Baba Ali is a young Western Muslim audience? Given the transnational unspecificity in the paper, I wasn't completely sure on what you were basing your claim that "both the reception and the intentions of its practitioners remain primarily inscribed in the context of the nation and how to improve it."

Perhaps another way to ask my question would be to say, and here I am grateful to John Postill for importantly bringing in the example of Malaysia and how his leaders adapt their performances to the locality of their audiences, where are you not considering and is there something particular about the transnational but not universal Islamic contexts that you are considering. For example, how might your argument change if you were looking at blogs in Turkey where government itself is creating new public spaces for the articulation and constructions of political and religious identities? Or how is the type of *ijabiyya* and civic mindedness encouraged different from the spiritual trainings provided in workplaces in contemporary Indonesia analyzed in anthropologist Dar Rudnyckyj's work on the intertwining of spiritualism and neoliberalism ?

Finally, I found Yasmin's comments about medium specificity very convincing and want to point to Brian Larkin's carefully situated work on Hausa responses to cinema in Northern Nigeria as a well argued example of addressing the ontology of a particular medium at a particular time in a particular place. (Signal and Noise, p. 135)

This is by no means a suggestion that you need to or should talk about global Islam or include more sites but rather to perhaps provoke some ideas since it sounds like you might do more fieldwork soon and also to suggest that you make the rationale behind your choice of sites more explicit and acknowledge how that shapes your conclusions.

Thank you again for a very interesting and thought provoking paper and thanks to all other discussants for a lively conversation.

Sincerely,
Zeynep

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Nabil Echchaibi [Nabil.Echchaibi at Colorado.EDU](mailto:Nabil.Echchaibi@Colorado.EDU)

Mon May 11 13:08:57 PDT 2009

Hi everyone,

Sorry it took me some time to respond to the very stimulating comments Yasmin, Brian and Zeynep have made about my paper. This past week was exam week for us here in Boulder, Colorado and I literally just finished my grading a few minutes ago.

I believe the discussion of my paper has opened up some interesting paths for me and others to look at Da'wa and its mediation. I appreciate all the comments and thank you Zeynep for your constructive discussion and your tips for further literature on this topic. To answer your questions: the evidence that I used about Baba Ali's audience was provided to me by Ali himself through a Google analytics application of his website. As to your other question about how I concluded that the reception and intentions of da'wa practitioners and their media messages are inscribed within a national framework, I was reacting to the uncritical deployment of the term Umma and how that might generate the wrong perception that Muslims who are exposed to this mediated da'wa will necessarily subscribe to a transnational political and religious identity that renders irrelevant the space of the nation. I agree that part of the paper needs some better wording and conceptual thinking.

I also like to respond to Yasmin's important request to reflect some more on the medium of television and how it affects da'wa. This is certainly how I would like to frame this research. I believe that religion is re-appropriating tele-visibility not only to purify the tele-visual experience and rid it of its "debauched" nature, but also to expand and unsettle the rigid boundaries of the religious experience away from traditionally religious settings, and some of the unsettling is becoming difficult to control. Some scholars have argued that conjoining media and religion today amounts to a pleonasm at best because religions have always been mediated through symbols, signifiers, sounds, images, etc. While mediation has always been part of religious practices, what we're witnessing today is not merely a recycling of that imagery or a mere visualization of aural

spirituality. This is not only about re-training the wandering eyes of viewers back into pious virtue. The embodied experience of tele-visibility, with its incredible arsenal of "sacred" imagery and consumable commodity sets forth an uncontrollable feeling of sensorial subjectivity that keeps expanding as Islam gets more and more mediated this way. The producers of da'wa I'm writing about can control their studio settings, their footage of public spaces, the dress codes of their audiences, but what they can't control is where the medium (television and visual culture in general) can and will take them next. What we've seen in the last few years in terms of da'ias and Islam in general inhabiting up until a recent past un-imagined media spaces (reality tv, music videos, and other racy formats) is indicative of this loosely-scripted interaction with the visual medium. In a few years time, we've transitioned from a studio-set type of da'wa with Amr Khaled in 2005 with LifeMakers to a Cafe set for Moez Masoud's The Right Path. Sure, da'ias negotiate with their producers and (Saudi) funders where the boundaries should be drawn, but these media franchises are now market-based operations and their bottom line is not limited exclusively to the moral virtue of their target audiences. From a consumer perspective, this kind of dignified religious consumption of television is welcome and encouraged through more consumption and interaction, and this will eventually drive Islam and da'wa into more uncharted territory with interesting implications.

Thank you again.

Nabil

Sigurjón B Hafsteinsson [sbh at hi.is](mailto:sbh@hi.is)

Mon May 11 23:33:15 PDT 2009

Dear all,

The e-seminar is now closed!

I want to thank Nabil Echchaibi for submitting his paper, our discussant Emilio Spadola and members of the list who shared their interesting thoughts, comments and criticism.

Transcript of the seminar will be available on our web site within few days.

This winter we've had six e-seminars. They are:

28 April - 12 May 2009. Nabil Echchaibi (University of Colorado-Boulder): *From Audiotapes to Videoblogs: the Delocalization of Authority in Islam*. Comments: Emilio Spadola (Colgate University)

17 February - 3 March 2009. Jay Gabriel (independent scholar, USA): *Getting involved: independence and recursivity in the journalistic field*. Comments: Per Ståhlberg (Stockholm University, Sweden)

6-22 January 2009. Ulrika Sjöberg and Ingegerd Rydin (Halmstad University, Sweden): *Discourses on media portrayals of immigrants and the homeland*. Comments: Kira Kosnick (Goethe-University Frankfurt am Main)

2-13 December 2008. Barcelona Post-Workshop E-Seminar.

22 October - 5 November 2008. Eric Rothenbuhler (Texas A & M University): *Media anthropology as a field of interdisciplinary contact*. Comments: Ariel Heryanto (University of Melbourne)

1-15 September 2008. Jay Ruby (Center for Visual Communication, USA): *Towards an anthropological cinema*. Comments: Peter Ian Crawford (University of Tromsø)

We will now take a break for the summer and begin the e-seminar series again in the fall.

If you are interested in submitting a paper to the working paper series please contact me for further information.

All the best, Sigurjon.

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Tue May 12 11:33:14 PDT 2009

Hi all,

I would like to thank Sigurjon for inviting me to submit my paper to the medianthro discussion list, Emilio for his thoughtful and useful response to my paper, and all of you who read and sent out comments and suggestions. This has been an excellent experience and I'd recommend it to anyone who values peer review.

Best regards and I look forward to reading more e-seminar papers in the fall.

Nabil