

**Comment on Nabil Echchaibi's Working Paper "From Audiotapes to Videoblogs",
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from Emilio Spadola (Colgate University)

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 ijihad, 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`ias privileges a kind of “think global, act local” ethos for the comfortable classes—a fully domesticated civic commitment to national communities: digital da`ias 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[ying]” (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