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Index

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Facebook as Embodiment of Social Relations and Piety among American Muslim Women

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Abstract

Based on a three-year-long ethnographic research on a group of young Turkish-American Muslim women, affiliated with a faith-based social movement, I explored why these young women turned to Facebook to maintain their religious sisterhood after their graduation from high school and how their media choice and use of Facebook contribute to their Muslim subject formation. Drawing from literature on ethics and morality and employing a discourse-centered approach to language and culture provide me with frameworks and tools that help to move beyond the homogenizing and prescriptive concepts like "media niche" and "networked ore digital religion" in this study. Through these frameworks, I demonstrated that their media choice and use is more about their ethical becoming as Muslim subjects rather than solely being about medium itself or performing religious identities. Besides, their moral project, that is becoming better Muslims, rely not only on religious codes and norms but also on everyday social norms and values. This study particularly demonstrates how new practices of mediation become part of existing and old ethical debates and therefore is important in shedding light on the media choices of individuals.

Keywords

Media choice, Facebook, friendship, ethics, morality, Muslim subjectivities

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The social network sites (SNS), like Facebook, has become embedded in the everyday lives of a wide range of individuals, both in the United States where it originated and throughout the world. Facebook opens up a new social space for both new and already-existing forms of sociability, networking, self-expression, and self-display, allowing communication across time and distance (Jones, Schieffelin, and Smith 2011; Miller 2011). Several scholars across disciplines studied the use of Facebook by focusing on user practices and motivations. These studies generally argued that even though Facebook has the potential to connect with a vast number of new and existing contacts, many use it to stay in touch with existing friends (Ellison et al. 2014; Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield 2007). They emphasized the way Facebook is used to generate and maintain social capital through the ease of connection with heterogeneous social ties.

Another trend of research explored the media selection in relation to users' interpersonal networks (Dimmick, Feaster, and Ramirez 2011; Liu and Yang 2016). Facebook in these works is seen as a choice among many others that is primarily used in the early stages of friendship (Yang, Brown, and Braun 2014) and for less intimate contacts (Dimmick, Feaster, and Ramirez 2011) whereas synchronous media rich in social contextual cues are argued to be used with more intimate contacts as they promote emotion and affection expression (Dimmick et al. 2007; Dimmick, Feaster, and Ramirez 2011). Most of this type of scholarship employed quantitative-based approaches and quantifiable variables in exploring media choice and motivations. On the other hand, some scholars examined media choices at the intersection of media and religion by using qualitative methods and demonstrated how religious motivations, values, and norms shape religious communities' use of media (Bellar 2017; Campbell 2012) and how media actually transforms religion (Campbell 2007; Lundby 2013). In these studies, scholars mainly employ the concept "networked religion" to demonstrate the ways "online practices are often clearly embedded in the values or systems of offline culture," (Campbell 2012, 68) and how "the relationship between online and offline religious practice is continuously blurring" (Bellar 2017, 114).

In this study, employing frameworks from philosophy and anthropology, I explore media choice and motivations and their link to moral worlds and ethical subject formation among a group of young Turkish-American Muslim women to move beyond the essentialist "media niche" studies and the studies that primarily focused on "networked religion" and "storied identity." These studies do reveal important aspects of media design and affordances and how religion shapes media and how media transforms religion. However, the literature on "media niche" lacks the user perspective whereas the literature on "networked religion" and "storied identity" primarily employ traditionally recognized categories such as religion, religious, and identity.

To better understand the complexity of media choice among this group and its link to their moral worlds, following Jarret Zigon (2013, 202), I employ the concept "moral assemblages," that could be defined as "unique conglomerations of diverse and often contradictory discourses as well as diverse and sometimes incompatible embodied moral dispositions." This framework allows me to understand how religion is part of their moral projects and not only interact but also interanimate other value systems that they are part of. Furthermore, I employ "subjectivity" and "subject formation" in this study following Foucault (1997) and several anthropologists (Mahmood 2005; Rabinow 1994; Zigon 2013) instead of solely examining identity performances as subjectivity encompasses "multidimensional relationship" that one has "to others, to things, and to ourselves" whereas "identity" can be seen as "points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" (Bettie 2003, 32).

This study is based on a three-year-long multisited ethnography among a group of young Muslim women that are affiliated with a faith-based transnational movement, known as the *Gülen* movement. During my multisited fieldwork, I participated and observed their online and offline social and religious circles in addition to conducting semi-structured interviews with them. To examine the complexity of their media choice and motivations and their link to their moral worlds and ethical

becoming, I utilize approaches from a discourse-centered approach to language and culture, primarily conducted discourse and genre analysis from a semiotic perspective (Urban 1991).

Media Choice and Relational Distance

The current landscape of digital communication technologies provides individuals with a variety of possibilities to select and adopt to cultivate and maintain different levels of interpersonal relations. To map the current landscape of digital technology use in relation to user's interpersonal networks, some scholars employed the theory of niche (Dimmick et al. 2007; Dimmick, Feaster, and Ramirez 2011; Ramirez et al. 2008). According to Dimmick, Feaster, and Hoplamazian (2010, 27), a *niche* "is that area within the resource space where one media form outcompetes or is superior to other media forms." More specifically, if a medium has superiority over others in fulfilling certain needs of its users in a given situation, it is argued that this medium has a niche. Scholars, who employed the niche theory to study the media selection in interpersonal relations, mainly with one's friends, argued that people turned to different communication channels based on relational distances (Yang, Brown, and Braun 2014; Kim, Sohn, and Choi 2011). Primarily, they maintained that the level of intimacy among the communicators influences individual's media choices and, therefore, the interactive media that are synchronous and rich in social-contextual cues (e.g., phone calls) are chosen over others since they are argued to be promoting the expression of emotions and affect. On the contrary, the media that are asynchronous and has less social-contextual cues (i.e., instant messages [IM] and email) are used in communicating with less intimate contacts (Dimmick et al. 2007; Dimmick, Feaster, and Hoplamazian 2010; Dimmick, Feaster, and Ramirez 2011).

Yang, Brown, and Braun (2014) including SNSs in their study examined the use of different communication channels based on the developmental level of a relationship among college students through taking the perceived salient media features' contribution to the observed patterns

into consideration. They found that college students' media choice follows a sequence that is tied to the stages of relationship development in addition to individual (gender) and contextual factors (geographic distance). More specifically some media channels are seen as more intimate and used with closer acquaintances. Facebook, seen as less intimate, is primarily used in the early stages whereas instant messaging and cell phone, seen as more intimate, are used as the relationship progresses. In their study, Liu and Yang (2016) further investigated the strength of the association between media niche and friendship closeness. Their findings revealed that mobile phone calls and texting positively correlated with friendship closeness compared to IM, SNSs, and online gaming. In collectivist cultures, however, they found a stronger association between friendship closeness and use of SNSs and online gaming. They suggested that this could be due to the social norms of these cultural groups that influence the media niche. In general, they argued that media and channel niches are not fixed; they would vary, to some extent, by the social influences experienced by the users.

Other scholars have also reported similar findings on the influence of culture on SNSs use. For instance, in their study, Qiu, Lin, and Leung (2013) showed that the same SNSs users showed different behavioral patterns when using one American-based and one Asian-based SNSs that are seen as technically equivalent due to the perception of the Asian-based one as having more collectivist norms. Another study, conducted by Kim, Sohn, and Choi (2011) in which media users from different nations compared, similarly found that SNSs are primarily used by US users with more individualistic focus to reach and maintain a larger network of causal relationships whereas Korean users being from a collectivist culture leaned towards maintaining a smaller network with intimate acquaintances.

In these studies, the focus is primarily given to medium and how each medium has a niche that makes it superior over others in the current media landscape in a given situation. When talking about niche, they included several dimensions, mainly when, where, and whom used

a certain media. In the whom dimension, Yang, Brown, and Braun (2014) talked about the intimacy of medium and how it matches the intimacy of relations among users whereas Kim, Sohn, and Choi (2011) showed the cultural dimension of the whom and how it affected individual's media use. All of these scholarships see what a medium is and does as intrinsic to the medium itself to a certain extent. Even though these studies consider user differences both culturally and socially, these dimensions have been considered in an essential and prescriptive way.

Religion, Media, and Identity

Heidi Campbell (2012), going beyond the essentialist and prescriptive approaches to media and the internet, highlighted the social and religious dimensions of media use and argued that more emphasis should be given to user's religious practices both online and offline and their interconnectedness to everyday practices. In this vein, Rashi and McCombs (2015) examining the employment of the internet by *Chabad*, an ultraorthodox Jewish movement, for their community outreach programs from an agenda-setting theory standpoint found that their media motivation and use came from the communities' core religious beliefs and teachings, hence the religious texts in this case. Similarly, Bellar (2017) studying the app choice among a group of Evangelical Christians found that they shifted their core religious practices from offline platforms to the mobile contexts. Another study by Johns (2015), on the other hand, surveying the religious Facebook users showed that they find Facebook as a vital platform to support their religious communities and organizations' offline programs.

These studies, however, either looked at the use of the internet among religious communities and—or individuals or examined media choice for explicit religious purposes. Some scholars challenged the perception and employment of "media" in media studies and "religion" in religious studies (Lundby 2013; Meyer 2013). Meyer (2013), for instance, argues that it is important to study religion as mediated that is to understand it through material mediations. In this vein, Eisenlohr (2010) by seeing

media use as part of an everyday mediation argued that the choice and reliance on cassette sermons among Mauritian Muslims as mediators of immediacy could not be solely understood through technologies themselves. Instead, this capacity is rooted in broader notions and practices of Mauritians that lead them to attach such capacities to these media. In addition, Hoover (2013) calls for explorations of "Third Spaces of Digital Religion" that is beyond the traditionally recognized categories, such as private and public, formal and informal media contexts and to put the emphasis on practitioners as actors. In this study, following these goals and drawing from anthropology of ethics and anthropology of media (Madianou and Miller 2012) and employing semiotic approaches, I examine how this group of young Muslim women see their media choice and use as part of their larger moral project and how this, in turn, helps them contribute to their ethical becoming as better Muslims.

Moral Worlds, Media Choice, and Ethical Subject Formation

As argued by Michael Lambek (2010, 1), ethnographers "commonly find that the people they encounter are trying to do what they consider right or good, are being evaluated according to criteria of what is right and good or are in some debate about what constitutes the human good." Similarly, in this ethnographic account, I find this group of Muslim women repeatedly asking the ethical questions, like how to be a good Muslim and how to be a good sister, more importantly how to keep in touch and emulate prophets *vefa* (religious loyalty) in contemporary world. With the ethical turn in social sciences, ethics is now seen as an inseparable aspect of the human condition (Lambek 2010). The terms morality and ethics both refer to a sense of right or wrong, what constitutes the human good and practical judgment and agreement on proper behavior. Some distinguish between morality and ethics (Foucault 1997) whereas others use them interchangeably (Deeb 2006; Lambek 2010). In this study, I use them interchangeably.

Individuals make several ethical choices throughout their everyday lives by drawing from several different moral rubrics. These ethical

choices are not merely decisions made based on judgments but also about norms and values in action that are tied to ethical subject formation. In understanding ethical choices and action among this group of young Muslim women, I draw from Jarret Zigon's (2013, 202) concept of "moral assemblages," that could be defined as "unique conglomerations of diverse and often contradictory discourses as well as diverse and sometimes incompatible embodied moral dispositions." The use of the moral assemblage approach allows me to take into consideration not only their media ideologies, and media affordances but also the social and cultural worlds that they are part of. In fact, this moral assemblage approach comes to embody their media choices as inseparable from their everyday lives and hence their moral worlds and subject formation as Muslims.

I primarily employ the term "subjectivity" and "subject formation" in this study following Foucault (1997) and several anthropologists (Mahmood 2005; Rabinow 1994; Zigon 2013) instead of solely examining identity performances as subjectivity encompasses "multidimensional relationship" that one has "to others, to things, and to ourselves" whereas "identity" can be seen as "points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" (Bettie 2003, 32). Furthermore, I see that being a subject is an ongoing process of becoming a subject (Butler 2004). Thus, a person needs to repeatedly practice oneself and form oneself through drawing from codes, norms, and values, and hence bringing them into action, and at times reappropriating them.

Methods and Participants

This study is based on over a three-year-long multisited ethnography that has been conducted both online and offline from 2009 to spring of 2012. Research participants are a group of young Turkish-American women who are affiliated with a faith-based social movement, known as *Gülen* or *Hizmet* Movement. Between 2006–10 they attended a private high school that follows a secular curriculum in East Coast US affiliated with

the movement. Their active participation in the movement's social and religious events (e.g., interfaith dialogue events, Turkish cultural center, weekly religious social gatherings, and retreats) brought these women together. There are twelve women in the group. During the first year of my participant observation, they were all high school students except the mentor of the group, Hulya, who helped their socialization process both academically and spiritually.

I first met Hulya through email when she was referred to me by a friend to answer her questions about a graduate program at my university in 2006. During my email communications with her, I added her as a friend on Facebook and continued to follow her through Facebook. Her interaction with several other young Turkish-American women attracted my attention, and in autumn of 2008, I started conducting online ethnographic research on their group interactions and identity on Facebook with their informal consent and initially followed them through Hulya's Facebook page. Once I get my formal consent, I became Facebook friends with all of them and began to conduct online and face-to-face interviews with the group members in addition to start participating in some of their local events. During my participant observation, I discovered that all of the group members are affiliated with the *Hizmet* Movement. Upon this, I began to conduct participant observation in social and religious events of the *Hizmet* Movement in the US *Hizmet* ("voluntary service" in Turkish) refers to the principal focus of the movement.

In this ethnographic endeavor, through focusing on connection and mobility rather than static location, multisited fieldwork emerged (Amit 1999) in addition to emphasizing "the system of relations" of my research participants instead of viewing them as "situated subjects of ethnography" (Marcus 2012, 19). I initially began to observe and participate in their interactions on Facebook on a daily basis where I was visible at times and invisible at other times. As pointed out by Hine (2015, 57), "mutual visibility for ethnographic purposes" may not have to happen solely through the primary online medium,

Facebook in this account. My online participant observation directed me to participate in and observe several local social and religious events of these women and the movement (i.e., Thanksgiving reunion, religious gatherings, and retreats). Participant observation was employed as the core method of data collection, accompanied by face-to-face and online discussions and interviews (recorded and transcribed with their consent). I employed a discourse-centered approach to language and culture (Urban 1991) and semiotic approaches in mapping and analyzing online and face-to-face discourse events, instances, and genres to understand the meaning that they attach to Facebook, their media choice and use of Facebook vis-à-vis their larger moral projects, that is becoming better people and Muslims.

I argue that language and more specifically the semiotic circulation of discourse, be it a discourse event, an instance, or a genre, is an important means in understanding not only the ideologies, moral worlds, and subject formation of individuals but also the meaning of social media for its users and the ways new media technologies have been embedded in everyday social and ethical lives of individuals (Peterson 2006). As argued by Urban (1991, 1), to understand individuals' and cultures' values, norms, and ideologies, it is not necessary to get into their heads. Instead, there are easily available "publicly accessible signs, the most important of which are actually occurring instances of discourse." I not only examined the circulation of keywords, like "Facebook," "friends," "sisters," and "Muslim," et cetera, among this group of Muslim women, but also different genre forms that they used in their online and offline interactions. Mapping genres and approaching them dialogically provide me with a better understanding of the ways they use Facebook and incorporate it into their everyday lives (Briggs and Bauman 1992).

Background

During my participant observation, I found that their participation in *Hizmet* circles brought them together and helped them cultivate

their religious sisterhood. In addition, their perception of "friendship" and their use of media have been greatly influenced and shaped by the teachings of the movement. The *Hizmet* movement that they are affiliated with is a revivalist movement that emphasizes a socio-spiritual approach to renewal and progress which links traditional individual moral persona and embodied practices with communal and social values of everyday life. The movement, inspired mainly by the work and philosophy of Fethullah Gülen, who is a controversial Muslim cleric that lives in the US. Gülen shifted the primary focus of his adherents from the cultivation of one's self through self-discipline towards attracting God's mercy through serving humanity in the everyday as ethically-responsible moral subjects.

In his sermons and writings, Gülen (1996) portrayed a pious person as one who not only focuses on conventional embodied forms of piety, such as praying and veiling, but who also cares for and serves others regardless of their faith. In this vein, Gülen encouraged *Hizmet* volunteers to contribute to society through education, in particular by founding secular private K-12 schools, first in Turkey and then throughout the world (Walton 2014). One such private school brought these young women in this study together, in addition to their participation in other *Hizmet c*ircles on the East Coast of the United States. I participated in different *Hizmet* circles, specifically in their social and religious gatherings and events, both online and offline. Even though the movement is very large, most volunteers only interact locally with their sisterhood—brotherhood circles. Typically, there is an appointed *abla* (elder sister) for a sisterhood circle, who should not only be knowledgeable in religious texts but also a sincere movement volunteer. This group of young women formed one such circle with twelve members, including their elder sister Hulya. Their *abla* acts as their friend and spiritual mentor by organizing weekly *sohbets* (religious gatherings) and other social events. In these *sohbets*, they benefit mainly from two sources, Nursi's commentary on Qur'an and Gülen's books and sermons. It is usually the *abla* who chooses a topic and reads from one of these texts and explains them by giving examples.

Sohbets are informal. And the *abla* acts as the discussion leader and facilitates learning through engaging these young women in the topics discussed.

In my participation in their circles, I understand that the key principle of the movement is the belief that serving humanity is serving God. However, serving humanity in different ways requires one to act sincerely. The cultivation and maintenance of sincerity start with, first, cultivating the sincere relations with one's sisters and brothers in the *Hizmet* as could be seen in a quote from the exegesis of Qur'an read by these women in one of the religious gatherings I attended:

> To imagine your brothers' virtues and merits in your own selves, and to thankfully take pride at their glory. The Sufis have terms they use among themselves, "annihilation (passing away from our individual conscious being) in the shaykh," "annihilation in the Prophet;" I am not a Sufi, but these principles of theirs make a good rule in our way, in the form of "annihilation in the brothers." Among brothers this is called "tefânî;" that is, "annihilation in one another." That is to say, to forget the feelings of one's own carnal soul[1], and live in one's mind with one's brothers' virtues and feelings. In any event, the basis of our way is brotherhood; it is not the relationship between father and son, or shaykh (a spiritual guide) and follower; it is that of true brotherhood… Our way is the closest friendship… The essence of such friendship is true sincerity. The person who spoils this true sincerity falls from the high pinnacle of this friendship, possibly to the bottom of a deep depression. There is nothing onto which he may cling in between. (Nursi 1996, 21st Flash)

Tefânî is the notion through which one can cultivate a pious persona and get closer to God through successful cultivation and maintenance of religious companionship. To practice tefani, they believe in emulating

[1] In Islamic theology, the *nefs-i emmare* (carnal soul) is the primitive stage of the soul that is open to evil inclinations.

Prophet's *vefa* (religious loyalty) towards one's sisters and brothers in the religion. To better understand their Facebook use, it is important to understand their perception of friendship in their close-knit circle. In the following sections, I will first discuss how their perception of friendship has been shaped by different social and religious registers and then move to the discussion of their choice and use of Facebook vis-à-vis their morality, sociality, and piety.

Sociality, Morality, and Piety

This group of young Turkish-American Muslim women sees sociality as a necessary aspect of one's piety. In this vein, they aimed to cultivate and maintain strong social ties with their sisters in their group. In our discussion on what brought them together and how they see their relational ties, they referenced *Hizmet* in particular and Islam in general. For instance, one day when discussing their group and friendship, Ayse commented "it is the *Hizmet* that brought us together," similarly Hulya mentioned, "our most important common ground is the Hizmet indeed"[2]. She further added, "if you ask any of us about our group, they'll tell you at the beginning we were isolated people but the *Hizmet* and the teachings of the *Hizmet* connect us and allow us to create our sisterhood." They all then referred to the teachings of the *Hizmet* and Islam directly and indirectly in our discussions on their friendship. As we were talking in their group, for instance, Merve commented, "we are not just connected to each other only with past memories here or there. We are sharing so many unique things that cannot be touched by hands, cannot be seen with eyes, and cannot be heard with ears." She then summarized her comment by stating, "what holds us [our group] together very tightly really comes from the teaching of religion that we love each other for the sake of God and we together try to walk to him hand by hand." All of the group members like Merve either

[2] Most interviews were conducted in Turkish and I transcribed and translated them into English. All names are pseudonyms. During my participant observation from 2009–12, I conducted over one hundred semi-structured and informal individual interviews in addition to conducting over forty group interviews and discussions.

directly or indirectly use quotes from the chapter on *ikhlas* (sincerity) and *uhuvvet* (religious friendship—sisterhood) from the *the Risale-i Nur* (exegesis of Qur'an).

In these instances, by circulating several intertexts—decontextualized and recontextualized discursive elements (Silverstein 2005)—generated from different discourse forms and genres of the *Hizmet* movement (i.e., "loving each other for the sake of God," "seeking God's pleasure," "do not want any favor for our love," "loving each other without any other reason but for God;" Nursi 1996[1936]; 1998[1934]), these Muslim women indexed their alignment with the *Hizmet* movement in particular and Islam in general. Furthermore, through an ontological lens which appreciates that there are different ways of inhabiting the world, in addition to different perceptions and constructions of it, I observe that they see their friendship with their sisters in their group as an extension of their relationship with God since being pious requires them to cultivate and maintain intimate and sincere relations with one's sisters in the *Hizmet*. One day in our discussion with Serra, she told me:

> I heard from Hocaefendi (referring to *Gülen*) that our sisters in the Hizmet is like stars, whomever we cling onto can bring us closer to God. Seeing my sisters and interacting with them reminds me God and brings me closer to God.

Similarly, Ayse told me that:

> My sisters is like my compass. Whenever I felt lost or sad, interacting with them makes me happy and reminds me God… reminds me that I am not alone, and I am not here only for myself.

In my participation in their face-to-face gatherings and Facebook interactions, I observed that even though they draw from the teachings of the *Hizmet* in seeing their sisters as a way to be with God and get closer to God, they draw from everyday social rubrics in maintaining and furthering their social ties with their sisters (Vicini 2013). Similarly, Vicini (2013), studying

a group of young men affiliated with the *Hizmet* movement in Turkey, found that "it is by relating to each other" that his interlocutors "lived and understood their own place in the world as Muslims." Vicini, finding everyday sociability as an important aspect of how his interlocutors become better Muslims, argued that if the focus was only given to those actions that are geared toward ethical self-discipline, like prayer, he would not be able to understand and analyze everyday sociability as an important aspect of his interlocutors' lived religious experiences and their ethical becoming. Correspondingly, this group of young Muslim women in the Hizmet, created an understanding of piety and moral selfhood that requires them to cultivate and maintain intimate social relations, primarily with their religious sisters, in their everyday life. However, their group's dispersal to different geographical locations throughout the United States and Turkey after their graduation from high school created a moral puzzlement, as voiced by Sera, on how to emulate the Prophet's *vefa*:

> We have been dispersed to different parts of the world now and we cannot see each other as often as needed to fulfill our religious duty of vefa (loyalty) anymore. And thus, I am not sure how we should understand and show our vefa now… I judge myself by asking the question, "Do I need to be more engaged with technology now?" Well obviously I do, but I don't know how much engagement would be appropriate. And big sisters and big brothers are not saying anything about it. They go, like, "yeah, vefa is important," but now there are long distances among us and how should I now need to show my vefa in the age of technology?

As could be seen from Sera's comment, at first, they were puzzled and tried to find ways to maintain their relational ties with their sisters as their big sisters and brothers in the Hizmet, that are their mentors, were not saying anything specifically about the use of technology and only keep reminding them practicing *vefa* is crucial. Consequently, their understanding of piety and moral selfhood collides with an understanding and use of a social media platform, turning them to Facebook. Some of the group members were already active users of Facebook, while others joined Facebook after

their dispersal. Through mapping discourse genres and forms before and after dispersal, I observed a significant routine change that also showed a shift in their media ideologies, that can be defined as "a set of beliefs about communicative technologies with which users and designers explain perceived media structure and meaning" (Gershon 2010, 3), surrounding Facebook. More specifically, between 2009–10 it was more about having fun whereas from 2010 to 2012 Facebook became a crucial tool to practice a culturally valorized form of sociality (religious sisterhood, *uhuvvet)* and pious personhood (*ikhlas* and *tefânî)*. Before discussing the changing meaning of Facebook for these women by focusing on discourse genres and forms used on Facebook, I will first discuss their perception of Facebook and why they chose Facebook among many other tools to keep in touch after their dispersal. In our discussion on and off Facebook, these young Muslim women constructed Facebook as their group's locality and hence as a social space to enact religious principles of piety after their dispersal. When talking about what Facebook is and what kind of tool it is for them, they changed the topic to their group, and vice versa. For instance, in our discussion with Emine, she commented:

> Facebook is a way to be with my sisters. How should I say? For instance, I tried to deactivate my Facebook account twice. But I feel that something is missing from my life. The only reason for me to come back to Facebook is to keep up with my group and their conversations.

When talking about their group, Merve changed the topic to Facebook:

> Our group! This is why we keep our Facebook accounts open. In our group, we have Beyza, Kubra, Rana, Emine, for instance, she did not have a cell phone for some time and Hulya, she is in Turkey right now, and we are seeing them on Facebook, keeping up with them. Otherwise we cannot keep in contact.

By 2010, even though they all turned to Facebook to maintain their sisterhood, they also began to see the negative sides of Facebook for

their religiosity due to its connection to voyeurism and gossip. They believe that everyone has *nefs* (carnal soul) and learning much about others' private lives on Facebook might lead them to gossip about others, that is to talk behind their back in their absence. Thus, there were cases where they deactivated their accounts. However, they all came back to Facebook after seeing that they cannot show their *vefa* to each other through other means. In addition to constructing Facebook as a crucial way to be with their sisters in their group, they also referred to their youth identities and sociality in their choice of Facebook. For instance, in one of our discussions, Burcu emphasized how religious sisterhood requires one to show *vefa* (religious loyalty) and how Facebook helps them to enact this religious loyalty as a new generation:

> We try to be vefali (being religiously loyal) to each other. We're a new generation and we cannot always find enough time to ask how our sisters are. But via Facebook we can follow our sisters. Then messages like "where have you been?," "Are you ok?" started to be circulated within our group.

Not only in interviews but also in their Facebook interactions among themselves, they underline the importance of Facebook in practicing *vefa* in multiple instances. For instance, when Hulya posted on Facebook to let their sisters' know that she might deactivate her Facebook account, Burcu commented as follow:

> **Burcu** evet cok buyuk bir slusturacak. bnm icin olacak! tel desen bs. this is all we have [it would negatively affect me! cell phone is also bs. this is all we have].

As it could be seen from their narrations above, these Muslim women not only draw from the discourses of *Hizmet* and religious sociality in choosing Facebook to enact religious principles of piety, their youth identities and hence sociality also influence their choice of Facebook in interacting with their sisters after their dispersal. More specifically, as they began college, they had less time to navigate and use some other communicative channels.

However, it was not just about time but also about the device availability and money. Not all of them at the time had smartphones and—or free wireless plans to interact freely with their sisters. In addition to ease of communication, Facebook was a very popular site among high school and college students during those years and could be accessed from a phone, tablet, PC and—or a laptop. Throughout my ethnography from 2009–12, I observed that this popularity also contributed to their use of Facebook. In the absence of the availability of other mediated forms, they see Facebook differently from other media tools due to the fact that it allows them to share more as they could post pictures, and share media, update their statuses, write on each other's walls, use private messaging tool, like and comment each other's posts and pictures, and use the chat tool. As a result of this intense sharing via Facebook, which is argued to be much more than that through other communication means, Facebook makes them feel that they are together as a group. The following quote from Merve during our group discussion summarizes what kind of a space Facebook is for them:

> It [Facebook] is a means that we could be together in the same place and at the same time when we are dispersed physically. We cannot always be at the same place [at the same time]. For instance, I can talk with Emine on the phone. But there we cannot be together as a group at the same time. But this could happen on Facebook.

Merve then continued her discussion on Facebook and differentiated it from other communication tools used among group members:

> Since we are dispersed now, we use social media more. Facebook like is for me just means that, I mean there is msn, skype, other programs but we can post pictures, be together as a group.

Similarly, Ayse emphasized that Facebook allows them to share which she argues is better in practicing *vefa*:

> With Facebook, we can share more and do more with our hacilar ["pilgrims" to refer to her sisters]. We also sometimes use Skype,

> Msn, WhatsApp… But it is not enough. In Facebook, we can visit each other's walls, we can tag each other in a photo or in a post, we can send quick messages to each other… how should I say… I really need Facebook to keep up with my sisters.

They also talked about how Facebook is just fun for them from 2009–10 and how then it became a vital tool to be with their sisters in their group. Burcu, for instance, emphasized the change from enjoyment to piously-motivated social use of Facebook in one of our discussions:

> It [using Facebook] was a desire and an ambition for us at first. I guess just to have a Facebook page. We were using it just to use it. But now it became like a necessity. We need it to keep our group together.

Furthermore, in our discussion with Rana, she also drew attention to the shift of focus in their use of Facebook:

> Now we're dispersed. In 2009, we were together and Facebook was just fun for us and… to entertain us. We were using it for fun. But now it connects us and allows us to keep up with [each other].

After their dispersal, these young Muslim women in a transnational movement began to see Facebook as their group's locality and hence as a social space to enact religious piety in their everyday lives through participating in a community and its broader movement. In one of our online group discussions, Ayse responded to a comment made by Sera, as follows:

> I know Facebook is not enough to show my vefa toward you [referring to her sisters in the Hizmet] and to do uhuvvet. But we do not have any other means now to keep in touch. Some of you deactivated your Facebook accounts to try to find other tools to keep in touch… but you all came back to Facebook at the end. I told you this [referring to Facebook] is all we have and all we can use right now to keep in touch.

However, enacting religious principles of piety does not require these young women to turn to Facebook but to cultivate and maintain a culturally valorized form of sociality (*uhuvvet* and *tefânî*). Their everyday sociality and morality as Turkish-American youths, instead, turned them to Facebook after their navigation and use of other communication tools. In the absence of other means to keep in touch with their sisters, they primarily looked for a tool that would resemble their everyday conversations and give them that group feeling. The ethical question of how to properly keep in touch and maintain their relational ties as youths turned them to Facebook and its affordances.

Facebook is (for) Fun; Facebook is (for) *Vefa*

When I began to work with this group of young Turkish-American Muslim women on Facebook, not all of them had a Facebook account, and in general, Facebook was used as a space to continue talking more about what they had done in their face-to-face interactions in addition to teasing each other to initiate fun talk. Thus, most of the discourse forms and genres used on Facebook during these early years both generated and contributed to the symbolic capital that is being humorous on Facebook (Bucholtz 1999). In fact, cartoons were very commonly used. In these cartoons, funny tagging practices were important in making fun of each other, and I argue that they serve as the "generic framing device" that marks the beginning of a genre of fun talk (Briggs and Bauman 1992). The following excerpt is a common example of their use of cartoons and funny tagging practices in their community of practice. Hulya posted a cartoon to Facebook in 2009 and tagged Burcu, Emine, and Kubra on it.

Excerpt-1:

Kid: We began to study the multiplication table today
Father: Gosh I cannot endure this kid's talking. :)))))))
Tagged: Kubra, Emine, Burcu
Posted on October 22 · Comment · Like

Burcu
my dear husband, our son is like you :D
Thursday, 09:42pm

Emine
haha :D idk y but I was always assigned to a male character in cartoons. Burcu seems to be a better fit for a male character.
Thursday, 09:45pm

Sumeyye
haha I love it :D My dear Emine you're becoming more charismatic as you grow. What's going on man :))
Thursday, 09:45pm

Hulya
you look great with a moustache my dear Emine :)))))) jk ♥
Thursday, 09:48pm

Emine
haha yes my dear friends I'll grow moustache then :p since sister Hulya wants it :p btw, thank you my dear Sumeyye you're the only one who finds me charismatic :p
Thursday, 09:55pm

Kubra
multiplication table sister Hulya. its been way too long since i passed the multiplication table Sister Hulya, and last time i checked i was still a girl :) but gotta admit, looooove the parents..:D
Thursday, 10:06pm

Hulya
love you :)
Thursday, 10:19pm

Omitted posts

In addition to cartoon use, these women also used group pictures where funny effects were created via using Photoshop and actual funny photos of their group members. During 2009–10, they were spending most of their time interacting face-to-face with their sisters at school in addition to the movement's local religious and social gatherings and events. Although they saw Facebook as a medium where they further their group relations via humorous conversational and media exchanges in 2009–10, it was not considered vital in that period by the group members. After their dispersal in 2010, however, they began to see Facebook not as a communicative medium to use for the sake of play only but a medium for communicative practice that is vital in keeping contact with their group members in their particular localities. Those who were not on Facebook were forced to open a Facebook account. Some group members opened an account for those who were not on Facebook at the time of their dispersal. Facebook by 2010 became a locality for their group where they got together, interacted with each other via sharing posts, media, links to media, and pictures, and enjoyed their shared time and resources.

After their group's dispersal, most of the conversations that took place among these women on Facebook served as phatic communication since all the communicative practices helped them to mark alignment with each other and maintain their group relations in the absence of other means. More specifically, two types of genre were employed very frequently in their interactions on Facebook, "greeting" genres and "emotional" genres. Especially "greeting" genres were almost absent in the data prior to their dispersal. This type of genre is usually initiated by a common greeting phrase either in English or in Turkish. In addition, by 2010, I observed a significant increase in "emotional" genre use that has been accomplished through Facebook posts, comments, photos, and sharing media and—or links to media. In the following section, I discuss the use of new discourse forms and genres by these women on Facebook. I will support my points via providing examples for each form from my online ethnography and will discuss their link to offline genres and genre forms and their contribution to constructing an emotional discourse on Facebook.

From Genres of Fun to Genres of *Vefa*

The changing media ideology surrounding Facebook and its use among these young Turkish-American Muslim women became apparent through the examination of discourse genres and forms used on Facebook. As Briggs and Bauman (1992, 147) suggested "when genre is viewed in intertextual terms, its complex and contradictory relationship to discourse becomes evident." In this vein, I examined these new genre types in intertextual terms to better understand their link to face-to-face interactions. More specifically, looking at the phrases that mark the generic frame of "greeting" genres, I understand that these women in the absence of face-to-face and phone interactions transmitted their daily discourse routines to Facebook to fulfill the notion of *vefa* (loyalty) to their sisters. After their dispersal, I observed frequent use of "greeting" genres either between two or all group members. Sometimes they just greeted each other as a way to check if they were there and reachable when needed. For instance, one day Hulya posted the following post on Burcu's wall and then Burcu greeted her back.

Excerpt-2:

Hulya
Hey!!
Like · Friday at 1:46pm near Ankara, Turkey ·

Burcu
hey!! :)
Saturday at 12:15am · Like

Similarly, Esra greeted Emine and Emine greeted back.

Excerpt-3:

Esra to **Emine**
hi my dear Emine ♥
Like · See Friendship · October 1 at 3:42pm · Privacy:

Emine likes this.

Emine
hii my dear Esra :) how are you?
October 1 at 9:43pm · Like

Sometimes, they just greeted each other as seen in the excerpts above. However, mostly they not only greeted each other but also sought information and learned about their sisters' whereabouts in their diverse localities. They either began with a "how are you?"—or "where are you?"—type phrases or pretended that they are knocking on someone else's door or ask someone if they are there. For instance, in the following excerpt, they greet each other and ask about their whereabouts.

Excerpt-4:

Ayse to **Emel**
what is up?
Like · See Friendship · 16 hours ago · Privacy:

Emel
I'm in a steamboat right now. What's up with you my sister?
16 hours ago · Like

Ayse
I'm helping my little brother and sister with their homework till morning. They're giving too much homework sighh.... these people are crazy. What's up where are you going with a steamboat?
16 hours ago ·Like · 1person

In these "greeting" exchanges, they frequently used the notion of "voice" ("ses" in Turkish) pretending that they would like to hear each other's voices as in face-to-face encounters.

Excerpt-5: Burcu's post to Hulya's wall

Burcu
whereeeeeeeeeee are you??? Let me hear your voice :(
November 30 at 5:17pm · Like · Comment

Hulya
here I come here I come I'm here now, did you miss me? ♥

Excerpt-6:

Merve
Heyyy Emel pleaseee let me hear your voiceee
Like · 6 hours ago ·

Emel
voice check 123 :))
ohh honey! I really missed you guys give me a call sometime :))
what's up? Did you meet with Burcu's?
Saturday at 11:38am · Like

Omitted posts

During my ethnography, I found that these young women see their Facebook wall as an extension of their physical embodiment and visits to each other's walls as an extension of physical social relations. One day Emine posted to Burcu's wall:

Excerpt-7:

Emine
my dear Burcu what's up?
Like · See Friendship · Sunday at 8:41pm · Privacy:

Burcu
my wall said it was very glad to see you :)) I'm fine my darling how about you?
Monday at 4:01pm · Like

Emine
I also missed your wall :) I'm somewhat fine how about you? I heard that you finished reciting the whole Qur'an in Arabic May Allah accept it / *Monday at 8:16pm · Like*

Omitted posts

As mentioned, Facebook wall is seen as similar to their physical locality, like a home. Consequently, they pretended to knock on each other's walls during their visits on Facebook. In the excerpt below, Emine visited Hulya's wall by pretending to knock on a physical door.

Excerpt-8:

Emel
knock knock knockkk :) here I comeeeeeeee ♥

Hulya
where were you sister, it seems you weren't here for a century :)
Friday at 11:45am · Like

Omitted posts

In addition to "greeting" genres, they began to use "emotional" genres frequently on Facebook. Prior to their dispersal in 2010, they were using fun talk as a way to mark their emotional states indirectly. However, after their dispersal, they began to use more affective and emotional displays on Facebook to express an affective stance and hence affective alignment with their sisters in their group. In their affective performances, they employ an affective register (Irvine 1990), and this register is multimodal (i.e., images, cartoons, etc.) and intertextual, weaving in diverse genres, such as "greeting" genres, "emotional" genres, fun talk, song lyrics, and poetry. Displays of emotion were also performed through tagging practices. They tagged some of the group members, who were not present on the photos posted, just to give the message to those that they had been thought of (Excerpt-9).

Excerpt-9: Merves's photo album

Group picture posted here
Like · Share

Hulya, Emine and Burcu like this.

Omitted posts

Merve
I tagged you in that empty space under me :)
May 6 at 9:05pm · Like

Omitted posts

When I talked to Merve about this tagging practice, she told me they want to show their sisters that they are thinking about them and they miss them. Almost everyday, either one or more group members explicitly or implicitly shared their emotions with each other on Facebook. Sometimes it takes the form of a brief explicit statement of affect, like Hulya's post to all group members (Excerpt-10) and Burcu's post to Merve's wall (Excerpt-11).

Excerpt-10:

Hulya
awwww :(i really miss seeing you every friday [referring to their Friday socioreligious gatherings] :(
November 3 at 6:06am · Like

Excerpt-11: Burcu posted the following on Merve's wall

Burcu
January 11 near XXXX
I would like to hold your skinny belly very tightly and do not want to leave you anymore! ♥

Merve
don't leave me ♥
January 11 at 10:15pm · Like

The excerpts presented above demonstrate how this group of women employed an affective register and perform affective displays through Facebook use. They marked their affective alignment and hence social intimacy through affective performances in and through Facebook (Irvine 1990). In addition to explicit enunciations of affect, they used songs, song lyrics, poems, and photos as enactments of affect. Sometimes they just share it with one of the group members by posting it directly to her wall (See Excerpt-12 below). At other times, one group member shared her feelings with all by posting them to public space and tagging all (See Excerpt-12 below).

Excerpt-12: Ayse to Merve

[Line 1 was taken from the lyrics of the "Move Along" song by "The All-American Rejects"]

Ayse
February 11
I just thought of you. Here's how: my hands were cold so I thought hands are shaking cold, then I said these hands are meant to hoooollldddd, speak to me.
Like · Comment

Merve
Ayseeeeeee!!!! this was so nice thoughh .... :) you got my favorite part! ;)
February 11 at 2:04pm · Like

Ayse
:) ♥ :D something like that so
February 11 at 2:14pm · Like · 1

Merve ♥ :)
February 11 at 6:48pm · Like

Excerpt-13:

Emine
One should have companions; mature, wise, that could read the life from its memory
Who makes you think what you did not
Who could hold you safely on acrobat's rope
Who could eat fire for you if needed
[poem shortened]
I'M GLAD YOU ARE IN MY LIFE.... ♥
5 people like this · Like · · Share ·

Emel
:) thanks
April 13 at 7:37pm · Like

Sumeyye
I'm glad that you're in my life Emine too .. I'm glad you all are in my life
April 15 at 3:52pm · Like

Emine
:) ♥
April 15 at 6:48pm · Like

Burcu
you're being loved ♥
April 16 at 10:32pm · Like

Emine
you too you too :)
April 17 at 6:44pm · Like

The employment of affective performances and "greeting" and "emotional" genres on Facebook commonly after their dispersion to different

geographical locations indexed the ways in which this group of young women show their *vefa* to each other. As argued by Briggs and Bauman (1992), when we look at these emergent genre forms in intertextual terms we can better understand their relationship to previous discourses. Before their dispersal, when I was participating in their face-to-face social and religious gatherings, I observed them using greeting genres when they see each other. However, these greeting genres were not at all present in the Facebook data before their dispersal. Similarly, the emotional genres were not present in the data before 2010. After being dispersed, in aiming to find ways to be together, and to maintain their social interaction with each other, they turned to Facebook and this is also evident in the employment of different forms of genres on Facebook. Consequently, they employed Facebook as a vital medium of communication to show their *vefa* to their sisters in their group in the absence of the availability of other mediated forms.

Conclusion

My initial aim was to study codeswitching practices of this group of young Turkish-American women. However, as argued by Lambek (2010), I find them frequently asking ethical questions and striving to become better Muslims. Drawing from Islam in general and the *Hizmet* movement's teachings in particular, they see their sisterhood as a necessary aspect of being Muslims and becoming better Muslims. They were feeling well and secure in their faith when they were around their sisters during high school. However, after their graduation from high school, as they began attending college in different cities throughout the United States, they faced with a moral dilemma, that is how to keep in touch with their sisters as their sisters remind them of God and help them maintain and further their relations with God. After trying several other tools, like the Messenger app, text messaging, WhatsApp, they all turned to Facebook and began seeing it as a vital way to keep in touch with their sisters and enable continuous sharing.

Their media choice cannot be solely understood by looking at medium itself (Madianou and Miller 2012). The literature on "media niche" and

scholarship that examines media choice vis-à-vis relational distance is still heavily quantitative, medium-based, and work with traditional and homogenized concepts. This study by working with these young Muslim women demonstrates that their notion of "friendship" has been influenced and shaped by their religious teachings and hence cannot be examined by only using the homogenizing terms such as "friend" and "relational distance." Furthermore, their choice of Facebook is not only about its niche and affordances. It is more about how these Muslim women imagine and use it through the perspective of their moral rubrics and hence their moral worlds.

This study by employing frameworks and methods from anthropology of ethics and anthropology of media contributes to literature on media choice through linking the media choice to the moral worlds and ethical becoming of these Muslim women. They negotiate their media choice and Facebook use through their ethical frameworks. It is part of their moral projects and, hence becoming better Muslims. There have been studies that approach media choice and use from a user-based perspective standpoint. However, there is too much religion in the current literature on digital religion that mainly prioritizes the religious and their religious use of media. Even though this group of Muslim women sees *vefa* as a necessary aspect of their religious piety, they draw from everyday social rubrics when deciding how to show *vefa* in the contemporary world. Thus, although *vefa* is a religious duty, how one's show *vefa* can be better decided socially and turning into everyday. Employing the concept of moral assemblage helps me move beyond the traditional and homogenizing concepts like "religion" and "religious" and allow me to study mundane everyday practices and use of media as part of religious and moral projects of these women. As argued by Hoover (2013), I explored the "Third Spaces of Digital Religion" that is beyond the traditionally recognized categories, mainly sacred and secular in this case, and put the emphasis on practitioners as actors that are tailoring their relationship to other and to things, like media.

Furthermore, their choice and use of Facebook is also about their subject formation as Muslims. As they evaluate how to be a good sister after

their dispersal to different geographical locations through their moral rubrics, this then helps them to contribute to their ethical becoming as not only becoming better sisters but also becoming better Muslims. Subjectivity is a continuous process (Butler 2004) that requires one to act based on moral norms and codes, and hence draw from one's moral world. As they negotiate how to practice *vefa* and began using Facebook in this vein, their choice and use of Facebook helps them to become better sisters and Muslims in the everyday.

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From Deception to Inception: Social Media and the Changing Function of Fake News (Lessons from Egypt 2013)

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Abstract

The continued political influence of fake news despite the unprecedented accessibility of corrective information raises a pressing question: How can fake news impact publics which recognize its inveracity? Building on and developing Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky's theory of "cognitive endowments," this article unpacks the mechanisms by which news endows hypotheses, models, references, and relations that impact public assumptions of what might possibly be true, even when the news itself is perceived as false. Following from that, the article argues that the unmediated information exchange social media gave rise to might empower fake news; for although it facilitates the news' repudiation, it also amplifies the reproduction of its endowments. This theorization is exemplified by reflecting on fake news reports, falsely referenced to CNN and BBC, about the headcount of protestors mobilized against the democratic regime in Egypt. Despite the extensive refutation of the authenticity of this news, it facilitated the political conditions for a military coup against this regime; not by positing the headcount as factual, but by setting up a politically productive controversy around it.

Keywords

Fake news, social media, post-deception, cognitive endowments, Egypt

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Introduction

The uprisings in Egypt 2011 prompted scholarly reflections on the effectiveness of social media in disrupting authoritarian control over information. in an authoritarian media context flooded with regime propaganda, social media was instrumental in various ways. It created alternative venues for direct communication (Hamanaka 2020; Castells 2012), enabled real time coverage of state-censored events (El-Shahed and Tayie 2019; Abdullah 2011), brought together alternative epistemic communities (Kuebler 2011), opened up critical public spaces (Gerbaudo 2016), and pressured traditional media platforms to uplift their professional standards (Harb 2011). Overall, this new media space enabled informational resistance to authoritarian deceit, giving rise to a significant, albeit short-lived, optimism about the use of social media as an emancipatory space.

Fast-forward two years, social media was effectively repurposed for authoritarian propaganda.[1] Relying on fake news emerging from Facebook and Twitter, a military coup framed itself as a popular revolution and forcefully shut down the nascent democratization project. The most significant of this news was an alleged headcount, falsely attributed to CNN and BBC, which claimed that 33 million civilians demonstrated against the democratically elected regime on June 30, 2013. Notwithstanding the extensive refutation of the authenticity of this news, the alleged headcount was widely referred to by politicians, journalists, analysts, and military leaders as unverified yet suggestive evidence challenging the electoral legitimacy of the democratic regime. The centrality of the news created a paradoxical situation in which its persistent flagging as fake did not shut down the repertoire of coup apologism it instigated.

[1] While this article focuses on the context of Egypt, the trend of utilizing social media as a space for authoritarian propaganda extends far beyond this case-study. a report by the *University of Oxford's Computational Propaganda Research Project* found evidence of social media manipulation campaigns in 48 countries, where at least one political party or government agency used social media to manipulate public opinion (Bradshaw and Howard 2018).

Reflecting on that paradox, this article examines the political influence of fake news on publics that recognize its inveracity. This examination speaks to two emerging bodies of literature: One that highlights the continued political influence of fake news after and despite of its public renunciation (Guo and Vargo 2020; Saffieddine and Ibrahim 2020; Baron 2018; Fuchs 2018a; 2018b), and another that emphasises the possibility of maneuvering unmediated communication to empower political manipulation (Seneviratne 2019; Gunitsky 2015; Vishwanath 2015; Morozov 2012). Combined, these works challenge the tempting presumption that access to corrective information, something that social media made exceptionally attainable by easing unmediated communication, essentially disempowers fake news.

What remains lacking is a theory of the mechanisms by which fake news that is recognized as untrue still impacts the social discourse on what is regarded as possibly true and what is not. This theory stems from the conception of news not as a mere piece of information but as a speech act: an epistemic endowment which enables new debates and hence new knowledge possibilities. Drawing on cognitive psychology, this article unpacks the mechanisms by which the utterance of fake news, even if eventually renounced, endows hypotheses, models, references, and relations that impact the social recognition of things. It then highlights the ways in which the unmediated information exchange social media facilitates empowers such endowments. Finally, the article exemplifies this theorization by reflecting on the mechanisms by which the aforementioned fake news enacted the epistemic conditions that facilitated the military coup in Egypt 2013.

Bullshit: Fakery beyond Deception

The academic works that came most closely to this article's inquiry are the literature that built on Harry Frankfurt's (2005) famous essay *on Bullshit* (Mackenzie and Bhatt 2020; Hopkin and Rosamond 2018; Davis 2018; Ball 2017). in this essay, Frankfurt theorized a form

of nontruth that is distinct from lies, referred to in colloquial English as *bullshitting*. "Someone who lies and someone who tells the truth are playing on opposite sides, so to speak, in the same game" of truth-claiming (Frankfurt 2005, 60–61). Bullshitting does not. It abandons the game altogether and rather operates in a field of post-truth or postfact in which the issue of factuality is entirely irrelevant. What matters in "bullshitting" is rather what the nontruth tells, what it reflects, about the political subjectivity of its propagator (McIntyre 2018; Waisbord 2018; Cooke 2018).

Viewing fake news from that perspective reveals the alternative functions it might play beyond deception. Those include the fostering of generic disbelief (Andrejevic 2020), the signaling of abidance to particular virtues or allegiance to particular groups (Ball 2017; Beyerstein 2016), the gesturing of specific ideological commitments (Wakeham 2017), or simply the displaying of power manifested in being able to bullshit and get away with it (Wedeen 2015). in all such cases, fake news is conceived as operating in the political, rather than the epistemic, field; its main enterprise being hegemony-construction not truth-confiscation.

This political enterprise, however, is not entirely independent from the condition of epistemic resonance with what is socially conceived as possible. as Čavojová et al. (2019) note, statistical analyses of the variance in the reception of fake news show that audiences do not take up and reproduce all fake news that reflects their political inclinations. Rather, they selectively reproduce some and reject others, in which "the more profound a statement is, the more it is likely to be shared." This variance is indicative that some limits to what could be conceived as possible are never entirely abandoned. Between the conventionally factual and the conventionally implausible lies a spectrum of possibles that are essentially limited (Zizek 1999, 162–164). It is within these limits that variant news propositions—true and fake—contest in the inherently political yet epistemically restricted field of truth deliberation.

Consideration of this epistemic element suggests looking beyond the subjective politics of fake news to also examine its implications on the epistemic limits of conceivable possibilities. Indeed, epistemic limits are themselves political, products of intersubjective articulations embedded in power relations. Nonetheless, the cumulative social reproduction of their presumption promotes these limits to a degree of sociological objectivity; that is, a degree of social convention that their existence shall be presumed independent from the perspective of their observer. The lack of attention to such an objective—objectified epistemic element in the existing literature reproduces the limited conception of "bullshit" news—that is, *fake news that is widely recognized to be false*—as mere appeals to political subjectivity, external and contradictory to the genuine quest for knowledge. The ways in which bullshit news also influences the latter remains unexamined. The next section builds on the works of cognitive psychologists Daniel Kahnmen and Amos Tversky to theorize the possibility of this examination.

Thought Endowments: The Cognitive and the Epistemic

Cognitive psychology is not concerned with the epistemic influences on thought as much as it is concerned with the thought process itself. The relevance of cognitive psychology to this article lies in its approach to thought as a cumulative process in which the truth-claims conceived as plausible at one point in time enact a cognitive precedence that impacts those conceived as plausible later on (Kahneman 2012; Nickerson 1998). Drawing on experimental research, cognitive psychologists Kahneman and Tversky (1982) theorized such cognitive path dependency as a function of the reliance of cognitive agents on cognitive shortcuts, or heuristics, to process new information through previous experiences. in this section, I build on three of the cognitive heuristics they theorized to examine the impact of fake news, even when renounced, on future evaluations of truth-claims.

The three heuristics most pertinent to this study are the availability heuristic, the representation heuristic, and the anchoring heuristic. Below is a brief explanation of each:

Availability heuristic refers to the cognitive tendency to pay attention to signals about which we have available *hypotheses*. It is why, for instance, we tend to immediately react to a fire alarm—even before the reason for the alarm is confirmed to be serious.

Representation heuristic refers to the cognitive tendency to *model* new experiences in terms of older ones. It is why, for instance, we are likely to presume that this article was typewritten, and not handwritten, based on the typical conduct pursued in familiar cases.

Anchoring heuristic refers to the cognitive tendency to resist drifting far away from one's initial cognitive positions. It is why, for instance, we are likely to pay a higher price for an asset whose initial price was higher than that whose initial price was lower, as the initial price serves as a *reference* for later evaluations.

These three heuristics facilitate the *re-cognition* of new cognitive encounters, that is, their realization in terms of accumulated cognitive propositions. Under the condition of information abundance, in which it is impossible to comprehensively screen all available information for every cognitive inquiry, it is necessary to set limits to each inquiry within practical and efficient contours. to that end, cognitive agents build on inherited cognitive endowments as points of inception from which thought begins; filtering, processing, and navigating new information based on the hypotheses, models, and references endowed from cumulative experiences.

Following from inherited endowments, however, does not necessitate their utter confirmation or mere reproduction. Cognitive agents often critique, amend, and even entirely challenge such endowments but are nonetheless anchored in them as originary orientations around which thought revolves (Nickerson 1998). The information may be entirely rejected; however, as the thought centralizes on the hypotheses, models, and references it initially suggested, this thought remains bounded by such information.

Resorting to cognitive reserves is further encouraged under conditions of urgency and uncertainty in which the deliberate screening of all available information becomes inefficient and ineffective (Kahneman 2012). These two conditions are characteristics of the contemporary media structure. on one hand, the open market of information social media brought about makes prompt navigation and evaluation of informational resources necessary to cope with and intervene into the plethora of information produced every minute. on the other, the abundance of diverse and contradictory information available makes the arrival at evaluations that are affirmatively reliable hardly possible. in such a situation, the decisive evaluation of new information on a case-by-case basis becomes impractical, the practical alternative being their recognition in terms of accumulated hypotheses, models, and reference points.

Essentially, however, our recognition of things does not rely solely on the endowments of our own experiences. Even the most solitary thinker draws upon the thoughts and experiences of others as references for her own thought. We also cannot build on the aggregate endowments of the experiences of all society's individuals combined; for the abundance and conflict of such endowments would defeat their purpose as heuristics that shortlist information to make it practically approachable. For these heuristics to remain productive, society must inter-relationally pursue another layer of shortlisting. Focusing on the individual cognizant, Kahneman and Tversky's model overlooks this inter-relational dimension.

Bringing "relationality" into the equation does not only imply adding it as a fourth heuristic to Kahneman and Tversky's model of thought endowments. Relationality also implies the reconception of the notion of thought endowments itself. The endowments that are taken for granted on the inter-relational level are those that resonate socially, not those that are necessarily believed to be true on the level of the individual. What matters is that society acts as if it were true or possible; that the social deliberation of truth is performed on the basis of its presumption.

The relational element, thus, transforms the thought endowments' domain of operation from individual cognition to the social episteme, the latter being the threshold of social convention "which makes possible the separation not of the true from the false, but of what may from what may not" (Foucault 1994, 168). in such a domain, social thought begins from and revolves around socially powerful, rather than individually convincing, endowments—hypotheses, models, references, and, I add, epistemic relations that resonate with the socially dominant common sense, not the beliefs of the individual cognizant.

Conceived from this perspective, the political functionality of fake news becomes a function of its capability to set itself as a dominant inception point from which the social discourse follows. The news might be critiqued on the factual level, even entirely refuted; however, it still delimits the discourse by fixing it on the question of the news' possibility. This fixation is not conditioned by the censorship of corrective narratives; for the credence of the news in such case is secondary to its function as a commonly relatable proposition. The abundance of counter-narratives might even increase the demand for such a common reference around which the discourse could be centered.

Social Media: Catalyst of Epistemic Endowments

Revisiting social media from this perspective sheds light on how it might exacerbate the power of fake news. While social media enables resistance to fake news' deception by providing an open space for counter-narratives, the radical openness of this space could also augment the influence of fake news' epistemic endowments, for several reasons discussed in this section.[2]

To begin with, the abundance of narratives and counter-narratives diffuse both the attention and the credence required to empower any of them

[2] This section is not concerned with the factors that limit informational emancipation on social media, which have been effectively studied elsewhere (Moffitt 2018, Dencik and Leistert 2015, Deibert 2012). Rather, it examines how the emancipation itself, the radical openness to counter-narratives, could also augment the influence of fake news.

over an overwhelming variety of alternatives. The nature of social media as a space where virtually everyone is a potential producer of news content facilitates not only the massive production of information but also the coexistence of contradictory narratives. The result is a situation of balanced weakness, in which no narrative is powerful enough to overrule its counter-narratives (Andrejevic 2013, 4–14). The free flow of information is often conceived as productive of a democratic public sphere in which truth is rationally negotiated between the diverse truth-claims available (Habermas 1989). But as it seems, the overabundance of contradictory information is rather causing "the demise of symbolic efficiency": the paralysis of the possibility of mobilizing a decisive narrative of reality altogether (Zizek 1999, 322). as such, the abundance of critical narratives on social media seems to weaken, rather than empower, critical epistemic praxes.

Moreover, given the almost unlimited information available on social media, platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are obliged to filter this information for their users; that is, to customize it to make its navigation practically possible. This customization is managed by algorithms that rely on the biases signaled in the user's previous interactions to speculate the information she would like to access in the future. in that sense, these algorithms presume what the user biases *are* based on what they *were,* and then "creates that which it presumes" by selectively exposing her to information that confirms these biases while hiding others (Fisher and Mehozay 2019). By systematically linking the information to which a user has access in the present to the choices she made in the past, these algorithms position the user in a "filter bubble" that reinforces her inherited hypotheses, models, references, and relations.

This "filter bubble," however, is not merely an echo of the user's previous choices. Since interactions on social media are, by definition, social, the algorithmic profile of a user is based not only on her personal choices but on the collective choices of the totality of the interactions on the online clusters of which she is a part. The user joins groups, pages, hashtags, and various other clusters that are

already endowed with hypotheses, models, references, and relations established by the interventions of others in the cluster. The filters endowed by these clusters are algorithmically structured based on the aggregate interventions of all their cumulative participants, a wide web of epistemic endowments that can hardly be representative of the individual choices of each user. The endowments of exogenous actors blend with those of the user's personal choices; immersing her in an "echo chamber" of self-reinforcing information in which it is difficult to determine what in her algorithmically reproduced biases originated from her own previous epistemic decisions and what were echoes of dominant discourses endowed on her "filters" from without.

Furthermore, the totality of the online clusters followed by the user remains to determine what will henceforth appear on her news feed unless she actively "unfollows" all such clusters on a "one by one" basis, a process that is practically hectic and is therefore rarely pursued in the absence of an immediate trigger (Finn 2017). This algorithmic path-dependency ultimately means that once a user accepts a particular piece of information she becomes consistently exposed to its likes. Even if she eventually rejects such information altogether, this rejection would not revoke her extended exposure to similar propositions that reinforce the epistemic biases the initial information signified.

Finally, the relative absence of legal mediation on social media facilitates the artificial manipulation of the said filter bubbles and echo chambers. Unlike formal media, propagating fake news on social media, usually through anonymous accounts, has trifling, if any, legal repercussions, making it a fertile ground for unchecked organized propaganda (Lipschultz 2017, 237–242). These "fake" accounts are often organized in troops of "bot armies": automated online agents that mimic human behavior to systematically propagate false messages on a wide scale (Dubois and McKelvey 2019). Bot armies do not only introduce fake information; they also manipulate the algorithms by sending fake signals that there is a wide base of interest in the information they propagate. as such, they trick the algorithms into more

frequent iterations of the news on social media news feeds, artificially enhancing the interactions with that news. These interactions include the reproduction of the fake news by parties with a vested interest in propagating it, who are made capable by such mechanism to distance themselves from the responsibility for the news forgery.

As such, social media augments the epistemic endowments of fake news on three main levels. First, the virtual openness of social media to all types of narratives and counter-narratives creates the state of epistemic wonder that reproduces the need for these endowments. Second, social media systematically prolongs inherited endowments through its extended algorithmic filtering of information in congruence with the cumulative biases not only of the individual user but also of the clusters to which she belongs. Third, social media complicates the possibility of resisting dominant endowments by making it virtually impossible to single out the original biases of the individual user from that of the dominant discourse or even that of the artificially manipulated information space. These three levels coalesce into a complex situation in which subjects are in a continuous state of epistemic doubt but also a continuous reproduction of inherited epistemic biases, all while being unable to deconstruct or locate the original sources of these biases.

Egypt's Numbers Game: Counting Heads, Discounting Votes

One case that evinces the inception of an epistemic repertoire with significant political implications through widely renounced fake news is the framing of the recent coup against Egypt's first-ever democratic regime as democratic. This framing relied on fake news about the headcount of demonstrators who protested against the democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, on June 30, 2013. Falsely referencing CNN and BBC, widely reproduced Twitter and Facebook posts claimed that "33 million" demonstrators protested on that day, allegedly comprising "the biggest [protests] in [world] history" (e.g., Akbar Masr 2013; Mansour 2013; Sawiris 2013). Preceded by and

anchored in an unverified claim that a civic campaign called "Tamarod [Rebellion][3]" gathered more than 22 million petitions to overthrow the democratic regime, this fake news facilitated the projection of the ensuing coup as an "obligatory response" to the alleged "calls of the Egyptian citizenry"—as indicated by the defense minister, Abdelfattah ElSisi (2013), in his coup mandate.

There are at least three palpable reasons to doubt the factuality of the said news. The first is its utter absence from the archives of CNN and BBC, the two media platforms with which it was allegedly associated. Second, the number of protestors it indicates is demographically implausible as it suggests that almost all Egyptian adults were on the streets protesting at the same time, with little exceptions other than children—teens below the age of 18 and elderly adults above the age of 60. The figure becomes even more implausible once we consider the equally massive demonstrations endorsing Morsi that concurrently took place.

Third, the implausibility of the announced protestors' headcount was also confirmed by systematic estimations of the crowds. Studies of crowd density suggested that the largest crowds in the June 30 protests must "have been of less, and possibly a lot less, [volume] than half a million people" (Brown 2013). Systematic analyses of event data, as reported in the news reports of the pro-coup newspapers themselves, suggested an "upper threshold" of "one million" (Ketchley 2017, 104). Geometric calculations of the maximum number of people who could fit in the total area of major public spaces that witnessed protests set the limit on a maximum of "2.8 million" (Blumenthal 2013). These estimates suggest that massive protests might have occurred but that their actual participants did not exceed a tiny fraction of the figure

[3] *Tamarod* is a grassroots campaign to register public opposition to the democratically-elected President, demanding him to step down. While it is often portrayed as dupe to the military, I concur with Julia Elyachar's (2014) assertion that "this [conception] is too simple. [Rather] the social infrastructure mobilized and extended by Tamarod to express political will was, like any infrastructure, available for utilization by other users with greater agency over composition of ends: here, most notably, the Egyptian military, and wealthy Egyptian businessmen [and media tycoons]." on top of the latter was Naguib Sawiris, the wealthiest person in Egypt and the owner of the highly-viewed on TV channel, who "gleefully told of having anonymously funded Tamarod to help overthrow Morsi" and used his channel to lead the broadcast of news (including fake news) about Tamarod petitions and protests.

propagated and are hardly significant compared to the 13.2 million voters who elected Morsi.

Equally doubtful was the claimed count of Tamarod signatures, often used as an anchoring reference to suggest the plausibility of the exaggerated protestors' headcount. The signed documents indicated were all gathered and counted by the openly partisan Tamarod campaign administrators who were the sole agents that had access to them. No documented proof of the claimed results was presented, and no verifiable efforts were made to validate the signatures, control for multiple or forged entries, or ensure the robustness of the counts in any significant way. Moreover, the campaign administrators proclaimed three weeks before the announced count that most of the signed documents had already been burned (allegedly by Morsi's proponents—Ahram Online 2013), thereby leaving no possibility of confirming the count at all.

These tensions brought about an intensive critique of the credibility of those figures (Holmes and Baoumi 2016; El-Masry 2014; Alexander 2013; Asad and Çubukçu 2013). However, as they became the main reference point in the debate on the matter of the coup's legitimacy, those figures were widely shared by both proponents and skeptics of the coup, usually in combination with reservations on their accuracy. Hence, while widely rejected, the anchoring of the social discourse on these figures reproduced a controversy about the electoral legitimacy of the democratic regime. Thus, the recurrently rejected headcount could still challenge the political legitimacy of a systematically validated democratic process. to explain how this situation was reached, this section examines the political and epistemic articulations the postulation of the false figures, as controversial yet referable news, instigated.

Approaching "Inception": a Note on Method

Methodologically, this analysis is an examination of the inter-relationship between the disruptive epistemic propositions put forth

by fake news and regime rearticulations. Fake news is approached in that context as "speech acts: discursive practices that enact or produce that which it names" (Butler 2011, 13). By naming a proposition, fake news endows that proposition as a controversial claim based on which epistemic and political articulations are revisited.

This analysis, thus, lies at the conceptual nexus of Michel Foucault's (1994) episteme and Antonio Gramsci's (1971) hegemonic articulation. The episteme is conceived here as the crystallization of the balance of knowledge conventions which, by being embedded in power relations, sets limits on knowledge acceptable henceforth. The hegemonic articulation is the process by which political regimes dominate through the enactment of knowledge conventions that postulate their dominance as consensual common sense. in Gramsci's original work, the articulation of hegemony seems to be directly administered by a fundamental dominant class. Nonetheless, the reading of Gramscian hegemony as a "discursive phenomenon" (*à la* Laclau and Mouffe 2014) suggests that it could also be produced "bottom-up," through knowledge propositions emerging from micro-political social interactions but then amassing sufficient power to influence higher politics. in such a case, macro-political rearticulations of power, such as regime change, could be traced back to mundane discursive acts, like fake news posted on social media.

Bringing Kahneman and Tversky's endowment model into this (Foucault–Gramsci) conversation, this analysis bears on how the utterance of fake news endows epistemic propositions that open the door for the revision of power-knowledge articulations and the regime arrangements they imply. to trace the implications of the fake news' utterance, this analysis begins from the moment the news was inaugurated to the public sphere; then it traces the social exchange of that news and the epistemic and political implications of that exchange. This exchange includes not only its mere reproduction, but also its reframing, adjustment, critique, and entire rebuttal.

The research examines this exchange on four main sites: (1) Facebook and Twitter posts by real and fake accounts, (2) online articles from formal media outlets, (3) Tamarod public announcement of the "count" of its signatures' campaign on June 29, 2013, and (4) the coup communiqué declared by the Egyptian defence minister on July 3, 2013. Aspiring to capture the political and epistemic processes created by the utterance of the fake news and leading to the declaration of a new regime articulation on its basis, the research timeframe is limited to the period between these two moments. That is, between the announcement of the alleged signatures' count and the declaration of the coup four days later.

The research is intended to trace the trajectory of the news as it unfolded and how such trajectory, when embedded in algorithmic filters, influenced and limited the social discourse. To achieve that, the researcher utilizes Baltar and Brunet's (2012) "virtual snowballing" approach, in which the research departs from an originary reference—in this case, the first post that announced the "news" of 33 million protestors—then follows the "related posts" the social media platforms suggest when this reference is accessed (then the "related posts" that appear when the latter posts are accessed; and so on). As such, the research sampling imitates the traditional snowballing approach—where initial subjects recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances, but with algorithmic rather than social relations as the driving force of the sampling process.

By being embedded in algorithmic filters, the virtual snowballing approach subjects the researcher to the same epistemic boundaries that framed the experience of the subjects of her analysis. As such, it serves this research core purpose: to capture not the "full picture" of the news space but rather the ways in which the utterance and reproduction of the fake news framed the studied subjects' interaction with such space.

The examination starts from the post from which the fake news of the 33 million protestors and its forged reference to the CNN appeared for the first time, posted by the Facebook page with more than one million

followers, Akbar Masr (sic). It then follows the various posts that reproduced the exact text this page postulated or its two main keywords: "CNN" and "33 million." The empirical interrogation begins with the posts that reproduced these keywords on the four main (most followed) hashtags that covered the events of June 30 protests, namely: (1) #Tamarod, (2) its Arabic version [#تمرد], (3) #Thawrt_30_Yonio [June 30 Revolution: #ثورة_30_يونيو], and (4) *#Yasqot 'Hokm El Ikhwan* [Down with the Brotherhood rule: #يسقط_حكم_الإخوان].[4] It also follows the references made to those posts elsewhere. These include other versions of the news that came to sight during the process of research by snowballing; most prominent of which were versions that referenced the alleged news to the BBC instead, or in combination with, CNN, and ones that added the term: "the biggest in history," usually referencing the same two media outlets.

Besides social media posts, the researcher examines media reports, analyses, and interviews related to the June 30 protests on formal media platforms that were commonly referenced by the said posts. These include the two outlets falsely referenced as the sources of the alleged news (CNN and BBC), in addition to four nonpartisan outlets (Reuters, the *Guardian*, *Deutsche Welle*, and *AlJazeera*) and four that were openly supportive of the coup (*AlShorouk*, *Alfajr*, *Copts-United*, and the *Atlantic*). The analysis focuses on these outlets' online rather than print or broadcast platforms as these were the ones cross-referenced on social media.

This examination seeks neither a comprehensive nor a representative analysis of the reproduction of these figures but merely the provision of a glimpse of the ways in which the fake news was replicated, contested, and rearticulated during the buildup to the coup. Neither the media outlets nor the social media accounts examined in this analysis entirely represent the media discourse. They only offer an entry point to the interactions around

[4] Arabic words are transliterated in this article as per the primary sources examined (sic). It copies the studied subjects' vernacular language which does not necessarily abide to any standardized codes of transliteration. The few references that do not provide an English transliteration of their texts are transliterated by the researcher based on the guidelines of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies (IJMES)* transliteration chart.

the studied fake news on social and formal online media and the intersection of such interactions with the political discourse signified in the speeches of the military leadership and Tamarod campaign.

"Popular Legitimacy": Figures Contested; Proposition Incepted

When Tamarod's official speaker triumphantly announced the campaign's gathering of an exact count of 22,134,460 signatures withdrawing confidence from President Morsi, his partisan audience rushed to celebrate their victory: "The people already overthrew the regime," they chanted (Badr 2013). The chant was not merely an affirmation of their subjective positions on the matter. It was also an attempt to postulate (socially) "objective" evidence for their case. in particular, the chant communicated to the public and other stakeholders that, according to the numbers just announced, which exceeded Morsi's voters by far, the popular verdict to overthrow the democratically elected president became objectively recognizable.

For the chanting audience, the fact that this numerical figure had no factual proof whatsoever did not matter, as what was politically productive was its formative, rather than factual, value. That is, its creation of a space of possibility that was unprecedented: the possibility of challenging Morsi's electoral legitimacy on the grounds of an unofficial headcount. It is the creation of this space that the audience celebrated as a victory that was "already" achieved once the count was announced, as the prompt chant suggests, before any steps were taken to confirm the validity of such count. as far as they were concerned, politically, it did not matter whether the numbers were true or false or whether the informal counts legitimately qualified as an alternative to formal elections. What mattered was its projection as such, the instigation of a repertoire of political performance based on these presumptions. This celebration was thus the first step in the repertoire of performing the coup as a response to the popular will. The announced figure was the reference based on which the performance was enacted.

The exaggerated numbers of petition signatures set the benchmark from which the exaggerated headcount of protestors could follow. The claim of "33 million protestors" was first projected by an anonymous page on Facebook, *Akbar Masr* (sic) [Egypt News], administered by an anonymous account, *Mo7by Masr* (sic) [Egypt Admirers], as a piece of news from CNN. This alleged news was mobilized in congruence with more plausible estimations provided by independent media outlets, such as the BBC's "tens of thousands" (Maqbool 2013) and Deutsche Welle's (2013) "hundreds of thousands."

Partisan outlets reproduced the exaggeration, often in combination with other more preposterous exaggerations. For instance, Alfajr (2013) newspaper and the online magazine Copts-United (2013) added that CNN also indicated that the protests were mentioned in the renowned *Guinness Book of World Records* as the biggest in world history. The Atlantic reproduced this "biggest in history" claim but referenced it to an interviewed Tamarod protestor (Reeve 2013). The title of the article, however, presented the claim as an undisputed given, without making an indication to its partisan source (except in the article itself). Meanwhile, Egyptian media figures, such as Egypt's richest businessman and the owner of the media conglomerate, *on TV,* Naguib Sawiris (2013), and the renowned *on TV* and state-television presenter Jihan Mansour (2013), used their social media accounts to reproduce those claims, adding the BBC as another source that affirmed the alleged news. as such, the coup-aligned media managed to push forward the claim that the protests were unprecedented, despite the availability of more nuanced narratives.

The majority of prominent media outlets, however, were critical to this claimed figure (e.g., Blumenthal 2013 in AlJazeera; Alexander 2013 in BBC; and Smith-Spark 2013 in CNN). But the very fact that these outlets dedicated full articles to addressing the factuality of the figure is on one hand indicative of its power and on the other reproductive of it. Cross-referenced, back and forth, between the articles that critiqued the claim and the few that assented to it, the figure became established in the

political sphere as a doubtful yet pervasive proposition; so established that it was taken for granted by most of the concerned political leaders, including Egypt's defence minister and coup leader, Abdelfattah ElSisi (2013), the main coalition of anti-Morsi opposition parties, the *National Salvation Front* (2013), the US State Department Spokesperson, Jen Psaki (as cited in Blumenthal 2013), and the Special Convoy for the Middle East Quartet and former UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair (2013). Neither of these leaders echoed the precise figure; yet they all presumed its reflection of some element of truth about the massiveness of the anti-Morsi protests.

Eventually, the figure made a full circle back to CNN itself. It was used as evidence by one CNN guest, an Egyptian former military general, and strikingly never corrected by the program's hosts (CNN Transcripts 2013). The arbitrary figure became so customary that its iteration engendered little, if any, concern that it might otherwise have raised, interestingly not even on the platform to which it had been phonily attributed.

It is important to distinguish the normalisation of the figure from the acceptance of its factual accuracy. The latter was far from true. Beyond personal Twitter and Facebook accounts, and very few online media platforms that were openly biased and barely credible (e.g. Alfajr, Copts-United), these numbers were rarely referenced without critical reservations regarding their factuality—even on platforms that were openly supportive of the coup (e.g. the Atlantic). Nonetheless, the conceptual proposition the numbers suggested, that the protests were massive enough to challenge Morsi's electoral legitimacy, remained powerful. Renowned media outlets, including CNN and BBC themselves (Smith-Spark 2013; BBC 2013), as well as Reuters, the Guardian, and AlJazeera (Fayed and Saleh 2013; Blair 2013; Iskander 2013), all combined their open rejection of the announced figures with an assent to the alleged precedence of the scale of these protests, paradoxically basing the latter presumption on the very same figures they rejected.

One particularly telling example is Adel Iskander's (2013) suggestion on AlJazeera Online that "even if the total numbers of petitions' signatures were half of the declared number, they would still amount to […] a dizzyingly large number." No actual evidence suggested that half or any significant fraction of the claimed figures signed the petitions or protested or that these figures were based on any actual count or plausible rationale whatsoever. Nonetheless, in trying to make sense of the figures propagated, many observers anchored in the presumption that at least a significant fraction of this figure must be true (see also, Al Aswany 2013; El-Saadawi 2013). as such, doubts about the figures' accuracy did not impede the relative acceptance of their suggestive proposition that the scale of dissent against Morsi might have outweighed his electoral legitimacy.

It was this proposition that was at stake in deciding the legitimacy of the coup regime. The fact that it was taken for granted as the basis of the multisided debate that contested the quantity of protestors and signatures and whether such quantity qualifies to legitimize the coup meant the projection of the coup as legitimate in concept and, hence, the opening of a space for political rearticulations that began from that presumption.

This is not to deny the persistence of critique to the narrative put forth by the coup propaganda. However, within the situation of ambivalence created by the persistence of these figures, those critiques were readily framed as part of a technical debate on a hardly decidable headcount rather than refutations of the alleged evidence upon which the coup was justified in the first place. One example of this maneuver is evident in Alshorouk newspaper's (2013) coverage of the BBC article (Alexander 2013) that criticized the claim that the June 30 protests were "the biggest ever," projected by the coup propaganda as news from the BBC. While covering the BBC article's arguments in sufficient detail, Alshorouk neutralized its critical undertone by a strategic shift in the title. Reframing it as an inquiry on quantity, Alshorouk replaced the original title "Was Egypt's uprisings the biggest ever?" with a technical one: "BBC investigates the true number of demonstrators

on June 30 protests;" shifting the debate to be on the precise number of protestors rather than the coup legitimacy and its false evidence.

Moving forward, the proposition of popular legitimacy outlived the fake narrative that initially mobilized its inception: that 22 million people signed petitions and 33 million protestors demonstrated to overthrow the democratically elected regime. The latter remained to be reproduced only in congruence with critical contentions. But at the heart of these contentions was the politically transformative proposition that democratic procedures could be outlawed by informal headcounts and that the actual headcount, although difficult to precisely determine, must have been close enough to the propagated numbers and hence massive enough to raise doubts about the legitimacy of the democratic regime.

It could be argued therefore that the fake news inception leveraged the coup—Tamarod camp on all aspects of epistemic endowment. First, it leveraged this camp as the side with a precise and hence transferable—albeit unwarranted—claimed hypothesis; as opposed to mere estimates referenced by others, including nonpartisan media outlets. Second, the exaggerated figures the fake news posited anchored the debate over the headcounts on an already inflated reference point. Third, the fake news instigated a debate modelled on the conceptual comparability of informal headcounts and electoral votes, a comparability that was, in and of itself, politically transformative. Finally, the fake news set forth a communicable proposition, an epistemic ground, around which various elements of the alternative political hegemony could come together; including, Tamarod activists, the military leadership, the loyalist media, and key political leaders. Making the claim, thus, in itself, leveraged the claim-makers in terms of evidence availability, benchmark anchoring, conceptual modelling, and relational articulation.

Social media: a Double Agent

In this context, social media was a double agent. at the superficial level, it facilitated an open and immense critique of the propagated figures.

However, at a deeper level, the broad base of controversy over the figures also meant broad participation in the reproduction of the notion the controversy took for granted as its common denominator: that a particular threshold of protestors puts away with the democratic procedures and renders the coup legitimate. Moreover, the wide participation in this controversy, and its implied reproduction of a wide variety of narratives, exacerbated the sense of uncertainty that minimized the symbolic power of every critical narrative. This controversy also facilitated the wide reproduction of the news, as a controversial possibility, by dispersing it along a broad range of different and even contentious sources. as such, social media facilitated the immense dissemination of coup propaganda, mostly in the form of critical debates on and around such propaganda.

In addition, the unmediated nature of social media made it a safe zone from which fake news could be perpetuated. The fake reference to CNN began not from a formal media entity, prone to legal prosecution, but by an anonymous Facebook page administered by an anonymous account. The legally unhazardous inception of such controversial news was followed by wider propagation by Facebook and Twitter users, including public figures with vested interests in facilitating the coup. Influential people, such as Sawiris and Mansour, as well as formal media outlets, such as Alfajr, added to both the reach and credibility of the news by reproducing it under their names. However, they could only do so because the news had already been originated elsewhere, exonerating them from the direct responsibility for forging it.

As such, social media was pivotal in making the news "common," albeit controversial. on one hand, it significantly facilitated the reach of the news and eased both its reproduction and the intervention in the debate around it. on the other, it facilitated the artificial promotion of the news by tricking the algorithms through bot armies, exponentially expanding its reach by causing more users to encounter and hence interact with the news. Through these two means, the news became eventually normalized that even formal media outlets, including those critical of it, felt obliged to reference it, albeit often critically.

Moving forward, the algorithmic filter bubbles ensured the continuity of the exposure of users who once accepted the coup propaganda, and hence "followed" its sources, to information from these same sources. For example, the number of followers of Akbar Masr, the page from which the fake news initially emerged, is today almost the same as it was in July 2013 (in fact, with a slight increase); despite the seven years of renunciation of the fabricated news through which the page became known. The increased realization that the news was fabricated did not, therefore, significantly affect the continued exposure of those followers to narratives that posit the same proposition. Prolonged by the path-dependent algorithmic filter bubbles, the endowments brought about by the fake news, being instituted in online clusters, outlived the news itself.

Conclusion

The fake news falsely attributed to CNN and BBC might have deceived a few into believing it to be real news. So is the unverified and hardly verifiable claim that more than 22 million citizens signed petitions to overthrow the democratically elected regime. However, the political function of these claims exceeded deception by far. Rather, their core functionality resided in their instigation of a debate anchored in the conceptual possibility that the military coup might have been expressive of the popular will more than electoral procedures. This proposition overwhelmed and outlived the narrative from which it was instigated. The headcounts were promptly contested and eventually renounced. Yet, the proposition to which they gave rise remained politically productive.

This case of fake news influence is particularly revealing for its historical–regional context: arising in the immediate aftermath of revolutionary uprisings in which social media proved capable of restraining authoritarian deception. This makes the case particularly useful to the exposition of the discrepancy between the function of fake

news as an instrument of deception, which was evidently constrained in this case, and its function as an instrument of epistemic inception.

On a more conceptual level, this case study touches upon one of the most pressing debates on the contemporary media condition: Why could not the significant alleviation of restrictions on communication social media give rise to limit the influence of fake news? The article contends that the unmediated space of communication induced by social media, although complicates the possibility of blocking public access to corrective information, also floods the public sphere with overwhelmingly abundant conflicting narratives. The latter complicates the processes of filtering, processing, navigating, and socially deliberating corrective information to construct effective alternatives to critiqued narratives, reinforcing the reliance on the hypotheses, models, references, and epistemic relations endowed by the same rejected narratives as the inception points from which social thought follows.

In such a situation, the centrality of narratives becomes a function of the social utility of their endowments, not their perceived factuality or credence. Fake news could thus function as a source not of deceitful information but of controversial propositions based on which power-knowledge articulations could be renegotiated. If we conceive of social hegemony as "predominance by consent" (Gramsci 1971, 506), the propositions endowed by fake news could be conceived of as spaces for the inverse "appropriation" of subaltern voices into the hegemonic discourse. Rather than incorporating these voices into a hegemonic articulation enacted *a posteriori*, these propositions rule over the process of political articulation from its origins by framing the epistemic basis of such articulation.

The mechanism described above makes the "inception" function of fake news more resilient than its traditional "deception" function. The deception repertoire is a straightforward zero-sum game in which the power of the dominant class is precisely situated in its ability to block

the dominated classes' access to resources that debunk their deceits, something that is becoming, thanks to social media, increasingly difficult. The inception repertoire, on the other hand, merges the production of the ideologues of the dominated with that of the dominant by binding them to the same epistemic endowments and hence alleviates the organic binary that makes the two-sided contention possible in the first place.

In that case, critique could augment, rather than resist, the sociopolitical hegemony. on one hand, critique contributes to the spread of the central propositions that form the basis of the controversy from which the critique emerges. on the other hand, critique adds to the already overwhelming bank of epistemic possibilities, reinforcing the need for taken for granted propositions to make an inter-relational discourse possible. The inception function of fake news, thus, might be even more powerful in a system of open communication, as the abundance and conflict of communicated narratives enhance both the spread of and the demand for the taken for granted propositions this news endows.

Hence, the acknowledgment of "inception" as an integral function of fake news opens venues for unpacking several complexities pertinent to our times. First, this acknowledgement makes possible the unpacking of the persisting influence of fake news on publics that are not deceived into believing its veracity. Second, this acknowledgement allows for a balanced evaluation of the role of social media in the dialectics of domination and resistance, one that equally takes into consideration its role in expanding the influence of fake news as much as it considers its role in debunking it. Third, this acknowledgement encourages us to think with more liberty about the unfolding changes in the modes of hegemony production and the interclass political dialectics it involves, given the ongoing global transition from centralized mass communication to a horizontal model in which communication is virtually open to all.

That being said, this acknowledgment leaves us with more questions than answers. What, in such a context, should legally and ethically count

as public deception? What regulations should be enacted to control against informational manipulation that is beyond traditional deception? And how could fake news which utter refutation does not significantly limit its power be resisted? These are some of the many questions that arise once we acknowledge that the modes of epistemic domination are going through fundamental shifts and thus demand new modes of analysis, policy-making, and resistance.

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Comment:

Censorship in the Study of Early Islam

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Abstract

This article argues that an important driver for complaints about anti-Muslim blasphemy has been the political and legal environment of Pakistan. It examines a case where an academic text on early Islam was suppressed because of fears over its reception in Pakistan. It argues that university presses ought to keep open a space where ideas can be critiqued in a non-polemical fashion, but that, in this case, the globalized network in which university presses operate has served to stifle open discussion.

Keywords

Censorship, early Islam, blasphemy, Pakistan, Britain

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The recent speech by Naz Shah (Member of Parliament, UK) has highlighted the particular devotion of Muslims to the person of Muhammad:

> For me and millions of Muslims across this country and [the] quarter of the world's population that is Muslim too, with each day and each breath, there is not a single thing in the world that we commemorate and honour more than our beloved Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)… It's not just a cartoon, and they're not just statues. They represent, symbolise, and mean so much more to us as human beings. (Twitter, @NazShahBfd July 5, 2021)

Shah spoke in the context of the government's legislation to defend statues of prominent figures such as Winston Churchill. While she appeared to defend the need for such legislation to protect the statues of figures such as Churchill because of their role as symbols of national unity, she suggested that there is a hierarchy of values that protects secular figures from recent history but does not protect religious figures from the past from defamation.

I do not intend to express an opinion here on the treatment of statues. But Shah's speech, and the reactions to it, do point to a conflict of expectations on how freedom of speech and historical enquiry should engage with figures from the past who are seen as foundational for religious communities. Can we draw a line between critique and defamation? And do attacks on individuals from the past equal attacks on contemporary individuals and communities that venerate them? In particular, I would like to point out some of the problems that surround the global academic discussion of Islamic history because of the expectations that surround blasphemy laws in Pakistan and its diaspora.

In Britain, many of the arguments that surround the depiction of Muhammad first emerged into the public sphere in the aftermath of the publication of Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988).

The burning of the novel by British Pakistanis in Bradford, and the broad dissemination of these images, highlighted an apparent divergence of values between Muslims and non-Muslims in Britain.

The political philosopher Tariq Modood has observed:

> Is not the reaction to The Satanic Verses an indication that the honour of the Prophet or the *imani ghairat* [attachment to and love of the faith] is as central to the Muslim psyche as the Holocaust and racial slavery to others? ... Muslims will argue that, historically, vilification of the Prophet and of their faith is central to how the West has expressed hatred for them and has led to violence and expulsion on a large scale. (quoted in Meer 2010, 25)

The Rushdie controversy has been represented as the moment when Muslim South Asians started to be identified (and to identify themselves) as a religious rather than an ethnic other. From this point, they ceased to be "black," defined by a shared experience of racial discrimination, and started to be "Muslim" (Modood 1989, 157–159; Eade and Garbin 2002; Birt 2009). The events surrounding the Satanic verses controversy certainly gave an impetus to the creation of the UK Action Committee on Islamic Affairs, whose leader, Iqbal Sacranie, would go on to found the Muslim Council of Britain and become a major advisor to the Blair government (Bowen 2014, 88–91).

The dominant response in Britain was to see the book burnings as an indication of Muslims' refusal to engage in normal political debate. Muslims were accused of displaying an "uncivilized" rejection of public norms of discussion (Schubert 2008). Mohammed Arkoun (1994, 4) has emphasized that "Western" expectations of political engagement are not always as neutral as they appear, and often require minorities to assimilate to majority culture if they wish to make their voices heard. Talal Asad (2009) has argued that European states conveniently forget the Christian origins of their "secular" ideas and of its violent origins (cf. Mahmood 2010; Asad 2003, 169–178). For Tariq Modood (1998; 2013),

religion should be recognized as a part of group membership that the state ought to defend, both through legal exemptions and dedicated media channels, but also through public recognition and celebrations that amount to a redefinition of traditions of secularism.

However, the quotation from Modood above illustrates several issues with these claims for equitable treatment that respects different cultural norms. Using examples from recent scholarship, I argue that, in fact, Islam is treated very differently in public discussion to other religious traditions. This has a number of substantive consequences for the academic study of the history of early Islam and how this is communicated to the wider public.

Imani Ghairat

Modood argues that the love of the religion is as central to the Muslim psyche as the Holocaust is to the Jews or the experience of slavery is to African Americans and Caribbeans. He may well be correct in his assessment of Muslim feeling, and the stereotyping of contemporary Muslims bears many comparisons to the stereotyping of Jews at the start of the 20th century (Meer and Modood, 2009; Døving 2010; Klug 2014; Hafez 2016). The Holocaust and African slavery are moments of suffering that, it can be argued, were inflicted by "the West" and reflect a kind of unredeemed sin within the West, whose culture and economic system generated these tragedies. Implicitly, the collective suffering of Jews and enslaved Africans in the past contributes to their suffering in the present and their continued need for mutual support.

At a practical level, a British Muslim community certainly did come together in response to the Rushdie affair. At this moment it found a voice and created institutions that it had not had hitherto. A sense that Muslims needed to register their political needs collectively underlay the agitation for religion as a census category, which finally occurred in 2001 (Sherif 2011; Field 2014). But the claims that were made about

the past during the Rushdie affair had a very different basis than the Jewish or African cases. While slavery and the Holocaust are undisputed events, which may have enduring effects on psychology, resources, or on social structures, the Muslim claim is not rooted in a moment of past victimhood but in an ongoing threat of vilification of "the Prophet" in the present day.

But what might constitute vilification is ambiguous. It is unclear to me that either the Danish cartoons of 2005 or the Satanic verses sought deliberately to offend all Muslims through the representation of the Prophet. The Satanic Verses is a modernist experiment that is primarily a criticism of Thatcher's Britain and a reflection on the status of migrants: it is far from clear that Rushdie sought to mock Muhammad (Werbner 1996; Fowler 2000). Some of the cartoons do seem to present Muhammad as a primordial figure that inspires Muslim violence or used anti-Semitic tropes, but others can plausibly read as critiques of contemporary fundamentalists, and their politicized use of religion rather than representations of Muhammad himself, that is, they are images in a Danish anti-clerical tradition (Klausen 2009, 21–22). Some of the cartoons published in the same collection lampooned far-right politicians or portrayed Muslims as victims (Klausen 2009, 14). Jytte Klausen (2009) has argued that Islamists in Muslim majority contexts played an important role in stoking controversy around the cartoons and determining how they would be interpreted. Together, the Rushdie affair and the cartoon controversies stimulated major debates in the United Nations in 2008–9, led by the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, in which a resolution was passed to combat the defamation of religion and called for laws to protect religions and their symbols (Otterbeck 2011).

Modood observes that Muslim sensitivities are particularly acute in this area because of a past history of European polemic against Muhammad. Muhammad has been depicted as a pagan in league with a demon, as a bloodthirsty conqueror, as a deluded follower of a Christian heretic, and as a sexual maniac or pedophile (Tolan 2002; Said 1995, 68–71).

Such ideas are periodically reused by the European far right, and I think that Modood (2018) is correct to point out that such rhetoric may incite hatred against all Muslims, who are presumed to share the sins of "the founder of Islam." Muhammad here serves as a metonym for all Muslims, through whom they can all be denigrated.

However, there is another past history that we should use simultaneously to read the Rushdie affair. The burning of the Satanic verses took place in Bradford, a town in northern England whose Muslim population was overwhelmingly from Mirpur in Azad Kashmir. This region is the origin of most Pakistani migrants to Britain and continues to preserve strong links to the former mill towns of northern England. British Pakistanis often send their children "back" to Mirpur for part of their education and marriage between British Pakistanis and relatives in Pakistan remains very common (Bolognani 2011; Shaw 2000; Werbner 2002).

The Pakistani background of many of the participants is an important part of the context for the Rushdie affair. The South Asian origin of the majority of British Muslims at this time is an important point of contrast with most European Muslims, which did not experience a comparable reaction against Rushdie (Modood 1989, 144). And an immediate context for the burning of the Satanic Verses has been located in Barelvi devotion to the reputation of Muhammad, which has even been considered to be excessive by other Muslims (Modood 1989, 154).

Pakistan inaugurated very strict blasphemy laws some twenty years before the Rushdie affair, which extended colonial-era bans on blasphemy to include defamation of "the Prophet." These laws had been enforced only very rarely under the Raj or in the first decades following independence, but they were used much more frequently under the rule of the military dictator Zia ul-Haq (Jaffrelot 2015, 323–337; 460–480). Religious minorities such as Christians and Ahmadis were especially vulnerable to accusations of blasphemy, especially in grey areas where differences of religious opinion could be represented as insults to Islam (Wagner 2015).

The blasphemy laws have continued to affect the way that Pakistanis are permitted to express themselves on social media (Asad 2021). The 2016 Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act permits the Pakistan Telecoms Authority to censor material that violates "the glory of Islam" or "public decency and morality." These laws permit the authority to ban platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook if they refuse to comply with takedown requests, a penalty that has already been used against TikTok (Shahzad 2020). The Asia Internet Coalition, representing Google, Facebook, and Twitter, criticized the Pakistani government for its lack of transparency and commented that "[the new rules] will prevent Pakistani citizens from accessing a free and open internet and shut Pakistan's digital economy off from the rest of the world."

The more recent cases of Asia Bibi or Rimsha Masih should remind us that an immediate context for the blasphemy accusations against Rushdie in Britain was the expectations of Pakistanis and British Pakistanis about religious expression. These laws have been disproportionately used against non-Muslims and blasphemy accusations have often stimulated vigilante violence, even before cases are taken to court. There is also an expectation that the accused should self-censor, and that anyone who defended or honored a blasphemer was also guilty of a crime against the collective body of Muslims. British Pakistanis objected that Christians were protected in Britain by (rarely used) blasphemy laws, but the level playing field that they desired was the extension of this law to cover all religions, rather than its elimination (Werbner 1996, 58).

A good illustration of how the Rushdie affair was read as an insult by religious outsiders against all Muslims is provided in Louise Archer's ethnography of male British Pakistani schoolchildren. She recorded a school environment that was highly polarized, and where community boundaries were expressed in religious terms. One of her interviewees expressed a desire to kill Rushdie "because he took the mick out of our religion […] all the white guys and Sikhs must have been laughing" (Archer 2003, 53).

Modood is surely correct to see the Rushdie affair as fundamental to British Muslim self-identity, but we do not necessarily use strongly held or vocal sentiment to determine how public discourse is managed. As Andrew March (2011) put it, we can empathize with religious pain without needing to use that pain as a basis for lawmaking. In a similar vein, he argued, the legislation on gay marriage may cause "religious pain" to evangelical Christians: recognition of this collective honor might affect how we discuss the subject, but not ultimately how we legislate about it.

The legal response to the Rushdie affair was to resist the claims of censorship. But at the level of how the topic of early Muslim is researched and how this research is disseminated, the reaction has been to encourage self-censorship and often to allow confessional narratives of early Islam to stand as the only available truth. I argue here that this shows a marked contrast with how other religions are treated. And like the Rushdie affair, I argue that Pakistan, and Pakistanis' expectations around blasphemy, have played a significant role in determining how this subject is treated in Britain.

Writing the history of early Islam

> Muhammad was a mercy sent by God to the entire world… to present him as less than this is blasphemy and it is the responsibility of those who have intelligence to direct the majority away from such contemptuous acts (Letter to New Haven Register, quoted in March 2011, 821).

This letter from an American Muslim illustrates how the idea of vilifying the Prophet might be defined very broadly. Here it is simply an attempt to present him as less than a universal prophet, a position that, if taken literally, would encompass any non-Muslim writing on the subject of Muhammad. One implication might be that only Muslims should write about Muhammad, or perhaps that outsiders might do so if they write as if they are Muslims.

The stakes here are high. There is a huge Arabic historical tradition on the subject of Muhammad. This includes vast collections of hadith and sunna, which describe Muhammad's sayings and actions as prescriptive for all Muslims. It also includes lengthy Arabic biographies (*Sira*, pl. *sirat*), the earliest of which was written in the mid-eighth century. The Sira is important because it provides a great deal of Muslims' "common knowledge" about Muhammad and provides the narrative contexts (*asbab al-nuzul*) for the understanding of different parts of the Qur'an.

For many, this body of material determines ideal Muslim behavior and ultimately underpins the premise that Muhammad was a prophet. But it is also the stuff of history, and the *Sira* of Ibn Ishaq (at least) forms the main primary source for many histories of Muhammad and early Islam. Works by Montgomery Watt (1961) and Maxime Rodinson (1971), for instance, may have understood Muhammad differently from believing Muslim historians, but they did so using the same source base, which they believed they could interrogate to provide a positivistic history of events. Watt in particular tends to take a sympathetic view of Muhammad: he presents a Muhammad who believes himself divinely inspired and his account continues to be favorably received even in circles that generally dismiss the works of "orientalists."

This tradition of Western historical writing on early Islam mirrors the broader tendency of western orientalists to be trusting of their sources and internalize many of its biases and perspectives. Dietrich Jung (2011) and Sadiq al-Azm (1981) have both observed that the criticisms that Edward Said made against orientalists, of stereotyping "Orientals" as unchanging and unchangeable, could also be levied against Islamists and Arab nationalists, who draw on a similar body of medieval texts to produce idealized representations of Arabs and Muslims. A good illustration of how this bias has worked in practice is the recurrent tendency among western orientalists to dismiss Shi'a sources as biased, as if the Sunni tradition is unbiased and normative (Bashir forthcoming 2022. Important exceptions are Madelung 1997 and Amir-Moezzi 2011).

The last quarter of the 20th century witnessed the emergence of new trends in approaches to early Islam by western academics. These have included efforts to situate the career of Muhammad and the Qur'anic text into a wider late antique context, where Arabia was influenced by the Roman and Persian empires (Howard-Johnston 2010; al-Azmeh 2014). Others have sought to use the methods developed in critical Biblical studies to investigate the Qur'an as a layered text, composed in multiple contexts with different attitudes to and engagement with Christian and Jewish ideas (Dye 2015; Pohlmann 2012; Segovia 2019).

This kind of revisionism has not been widely adopted in Muslim majority contexts (Daneshgar 2020). Revisionist reconstructions of Muhammad's career have, in some cases, been radically minimalist, and carry implications that are highly skeptical of the use of the hadith to understand Muhammad (in part because the incentives for invention of hadith were so great). None of these revisionist reconstructions have won much acceptance, but they have been much more successful in undermining confidence in the sources used to understand early Islam.

For many Muslims, part of Islam's exceptionalism is the existence of a vast realm of accurate information about the time of Muhammad, in contrast to the dimly known and disputed knowledge of Jewish and Christian prophets and the corruption of their legacies by those who claim to be their followers. In particular an accurate knowledge of "the Prophet" is what legitimates the rulings of the ulama. Statements of doubt in the classical narratives may therefore threaten personal faith, as well as religious authority, even where they are conceived as discussions of history.

Stephen Shoemaker's The Death of a Prophet

The controversy surrounding Stephen Shoemaker's *The Death of A Prophet: The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginnings of Islam* (2012) provides a good example of how sensitivities around

this topic can affect the production of academic history. I am grateful to Shoemaker for providing me with his correspondence with Oxford University Press.

Shoemaker is a historian and a student of religion, who started his career working on the history of eastern Christianity, especially on narratives about the Virgin Mary. The *Death of a Prophet* draws on early non-Muslim sources to redate Muhammad's death and argues that Muhammad led the Muslim conquest of Palestine. It is a scholarly work, but it is potentially controversial because it argues that later Muslim authors have altered original accounts.

Shoemaker's book passed an academic peer-review and the author made appropriate corrections. The delegates of the press normally publish books that have been accepted by the relevant section editors. But on this occasion, they became concerned that publication of the book might be too controversial for a Pakistani audience, important because of Oxford University Press's chain of bookshops in Pakistan. "Academic merit" was not the sticking point here, but security, and there was a fear that "mischievous elements" could use the book to cause problems, even if it was not published in Pakistan.

The book was sent out for review a second time, this time to anonymous Pakistani experts in the field (though we cannot tell the nature of this "expertise"). One of the reviewers was critical of Shoemaker's use of sources and his "rigid mindset," but was also adamant that blasphemy should not be a criterion for deciding whether or not the book should be published.

But another reviewer identified Shoemaker's aim as "creating doubts about the Prophet of Islam," employing "unauthentic sources." He observes that the citations "from most of the [seventh-century] Christian material" are blasphemous. He concludes that Oxford University Press should not publish the book "because it falls under the blasphemy code of PPC [Pakistan Penal Code]… because it will hurt the feelings

of Muslims all over the world… [and] because the reader has set in his mind to prove that (1) Early Muslim community believed in the very near end to the world; (2) Prophet Muhammad (PBUH [peace be upon him]) died after invading Palestine but Muslims falsified history."

Oxford University Press UK responded by refusing to publish Shoemaker's book, which was then published by the University of Pennsylvania Press and well reviewed. Shoemaker commented that it was hypocritical for Oxford University Press to respond in this way to blasphemy laws in Pakistan when they published historical criticism on the origins of Judaism and Christianity: in his opinion, they should either avoid all such scholarship or close their Pakistani branch.

Though Oxford University Press did not mention the issue in their correspondence, their fears may be intensified by the increased availability of academic books to the general public through torrenting sites such as libgen, or in summary form through sites such as Islamic-awareness.org. One result of this easy availability is that populations who are not familiar with the norms of academic discussion are being exposed to arguments that had occurred hitherto in restricted circles of specialists.

There may indeed be a real danger to Oxford University Press's staff in Pakistan if religious conservatives used the notoriously vague blasphemy laws as an opportunity to target bookshops as examples of Western cultural intrusion (on these laws see Hashemi 2008). And one might argue that, in the bigger picture, the responsibility for preventing this situation ultimately lies with the Western governments that bankroll Pakistan without requiring greater social and legal reform. Nevertheless, Shoemaker's point stands that Oxford University Press is not treating all religions equally critically. Nor is it being candid about how engagement in dogmatic environments like Pakistan affects its ability to act as part of a global public sphere that facilitates evidenced dialogue.

The reviewers did not all recommend the suppression of the book's publication for reasons of blasphemy. There is certainly a willingness

to engage with critical scholarship in some academic circles in Pakistan. But the comments of the last reviewer that seventh-century *primary sources* were blasphemous, and that these contravened the Pakistani law and Muslim public feeling, is highly problematic, especially where international connections mean that this sentiment affects the way that material can be published globally. It also indicates that the reviewer was not making any distinction between Christian material used in the seventh century and contemporary scholarship that analyzed it: to entertain it as a superior statement of events to the traditional Muslim accounts was blasphemous.

Studies of higher education in Pakistan have stressed that a common aim of humanities "research" is to demonstrate the superiority of "Islam" over "the West" and that many pupils outside elite institutions find it very difficult to entertain non-Muslim perspectives on religion or history (Mubarakshoeva 2013, 126–131; also, Durrani and Donne 2009 on the situation in schools). Similar binary arguments underlie the statements of the last reviewer in the Shoemaker case, where source criticism is taken to constitute criticism of the honesty of Muslims in the past, who are the pious forebears of Muslims in the present. Here the truth of the believer cannot be judged according to any criteria that they have not generated themselves: expertise is a monopoly of the orthodox.

In an environment where many Muslims feel victimized by the foreign policies of Western countries, it has been argued that criticism of Muhammad acts as another way of denigrating Muslims. But there is a crucial role for a university press in asserting the possibility of non-polemical critique, whose purpose is to ask similar questions of different societies. This process is crucial to establishing common patterns of development or the common origins of different religious traditions.

Such an investigation is threatening to those who wish to assert Islamic exceptionalism, whether to celebrate it or to criticize it. Some imagine Islamic knowledge to have been faithfully transmitted by pious forbears in the past, which preserved it from the kind of distortion (*tahrif*) that,

they argue, Christian and Jewish material has been subject to (the accusations of *tahrif* are made in the Qur'an: 2.75, 4.46, 5.13). Others see the Islamic world as peculiarly ill-equipped for modernity, where an unwillingness to adapt medieval ideas to contemporary situations has condemned a whole region to an unchanging stasis. Both ideas need to be opposed, and an important tool for doing this is to stress the common origins of Muslim and Christian thought and the similar paths taken by Muslim and Christian cultures.

We often think of globalization as a force that can open up societies to new ways of thinking and enrich the marketplace of ideas. Here, unfortunately, Oxford University Press's global connections have threatened to close down approaches to a subject rather than foster them. There is no obligation on anyone to follow the opinion of Shoemaker or any other "expert." But expertise cannot simply be dismissed or embraced because it is inconvenient or embarrassing or comes from a member of a different political or religious group. an academic press has a crucial role in civil society, through its ability to publish evidenced arguments that challenge vested interests and traditional interpretations, so that these arguments can be scrutinized in turn.

Conclusions

One might object that it is simply necessary to protect sensitivities in an area like early Islamic history. in response, I would argue that the reason that it is necessary to use source-critical perspectives to understand early Islam is, firstly, that it publicly levels the playing field to treat all religions as the same. To give special consideration to the objections of vocal, conservative Muslims provides the wider public with an image of Muslims in general as intolerant and censorious. The end result is for the state to endorse a majoritarian definition of Islam, which renders novel perspectives on Muhammad, or issues such as wine-drinking or figural representation, as un-Islamic (Ahmed 2016, 62–67).

Secondly, education ought to give students the capacity to criticize canonical discourses and identify whose interests they serve. This is as true of religious worldviews as it is of political worldviews: both rely on selective narratives to establish the proper behavior and attitudes of insiders and to exclude those who criticize the community and the interests of its leaders (Wood 2017). In educational environments where minority communities are the sole sources of "their" own history, there is often little room for dissenting voices to discuss how the custodians of minority narratives also engage in the suppression of internal minorities (cf. Hawkey and Prior 2011; Panjwani 2005).

The vilification of Muhammad has been a major point of contestation between Muslims and non-Muslims in recent years, a lightning rod for proponents of religious rights and freedom of speech. But concerns over the representation of Muhammad are not limited to direct mockery, like the Charlie Hebdo cartoons, or even the representation of Muhammad in literature, like Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. A globalized publishing industry can be reluctant to present academic voices that offer alternative reconstructions of early Islamic history. Ulama do have important expertise in one body of medieval sources, and I am not suggesting that these sources should play no role in discussions of the historical Muhammad. But other sources and perspectives also deserve consideration, as they do, for instance in the debates about the historical Jesus (e.g., Vermes 1973; Ehrman 2000). What is more, the way that we tell the history of this important period is not politically naive, and the contemporary reception of the period should itself provide a fertile area of study (note the brilliant example of Khalidi 2009).

To avoid exposing Islamic history to the same kind of critique that is used for other worldviews might be an effort to avoid conflict or a sign of what Segovia (2018) calls "colonial paternalism." But in countries where Muslims are co-citizens, and where their Islam informs their political thinking, it is appropriate to scrutinize the basis for this thinking, whether in terms of how Islamic norms are applied; the historicity of events that are used to generate those norms or the very

possibility of God or revelation. Such questions were certainly raised in Islamicate contexts, such as Baghdad in the ninth or tenth centuries, when free thinkers engaged in criticisms of organized religion of all kinds, even under the rule of a caliph who pronounced himself divinely guided (Stroumsa 1999). But this aspect of the Islamicate tradition is rarely discussed in modern curricula.

Edward Said (1994, xxv) commented that he had "no patience with the position that 'we' should only or mainly be concerned with what is 'ours,' any more than [I would argue that] only Arabs should read Arab books, use Arab methods and the like. As CLR James used to say, Beethoven belongs as much to West Indians as to Germans, since his music is now part of human heritage." I would argue that the same is true for the Qur'as and the Sira: as works of literature and as the basis for cultural norms they deserve critical engagement by all.

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Review:

Jörg Matthias Determann. *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life: The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World.* I. B. Tauris, London, 2021.

Jörg Matthias Determann. *Space Science and the Arab World: Astronauts, Observatories and Nationalism in the Middle East.* I. B. Tauris, London, 2018.

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Abstract
This review discusses two books by Jörg Mathias Determann. The books explore space science in the Arab world and Islam, science fiction and extraterrestrial life in the Muslim world. Both are detailed accounts, and they place their respective subjects in a historical context. The books also present and analyse topics such as science, science fiction, and astrobiology, which are rarely the focus of scholars of the so-called Arab and Muslim worlds. Hence, the books are important. They contribute to a broadening of the fields studying Islam, Muslims, and the Middle East by highlighting themes that require scholarly analysis.

Keywords
Islam, Muslim, Arab, science, science fiction, astrobiology, interpretations of Islam, extraterrestrial life, nationalism, history and modernity.

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These two volumes, written by historian Jörg Matthias Determann, *Space Science and the Arab World: Astronauts, Observatories and Nationalism in the Middle East* (I. B. Tauris 2018) and *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life: The Culture of Astrobiology in the Muslim World* (I. B. Tauris 2021), are welcome contributions to the study of Islam, Muslims, and the Middle East. Primarily, they are texts that engage with the phenomena of science fiction and space science in Muslim and Arab societies by situating them at the level of society and social enquiry. Fundamentally, the books intend to stimulate broader discussions about interpretations of Islam, creativity, futurism, pluralism and other worlds, knowledge and transnational flows of ideas in milieus usually represented as repressive, overtly religious, and not particularly imaginative and innovative. in my subsequent response, I will approach the books from a theoretical perspective rooted in the study of contemporary Islam.

In the preface to his last book, *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life*, the author makes several important statements. He begins the book by stating his intention, namely that the reader will explore little known and obscure facets of Muslim cultures and religion and learn about the work of scientists in Muslim majority countries performing research on extraterrestrial life. However, in the process, the reader also enters a world diffused with imaginative insight crafted in several languages, including Arabic, Malay, Persian, Turkish, and Urdu (p. xi). These statements are both factually true and exciting in equal measure. The book's true strength lies in its faithful gift to the reader of a key, one that unlocks a vivid, ethereal imagined world. Throughout the text, the reader's intellectual curiosity is wilfully excited through linking ideas about science fiction, astrobiology, and extraterrestrial life to everyday conditions in Muslim societies and to a variety of interpretations of Islam.

The aspirations behind Determann's more recent publication on Islam, science fiction, and extraterrestrial life closely mirrors his earlier book on space science and the Arab states. in the latter, the author

investigates the development of space science in Arab countries and roots the theoretical discussion in contemporary political phenomena, contextualising the nationalism(s) and histories of Arab science from the middle of the 19th century and onwards. In a sense, you could say the two books are built on empirical studies of materials that rarely form the focal topic of scholarly discussions on Islam, Muslim societies, and the so-called Arab world, and to a large extent in academia more generally. The premise of this book is truly unfamiliar territory to scholars and students of Islamic or Middle Eastern Studies. At the same time, the books contain an analysis of the modern history of science, science fiction, astrobiology, and understandings of extraterrestrial life that are contextualised with real insight and linked to further discussions among Muslims and non-Muslims about modernity, interpretations of Islam, and the role of Islam in a contemporary and transnational world. Both books explore themes surrounding science fiction, astrobiology, and space science, and discusses them within their broader social milieu of modernity and societal change. a conclusion drawn from both books is the need to understand the emergence of modern science from the 19th century onwards as a very different form of science from the knowledge production that took place in Muslim contexts during the so-called "Golden Age of Islam." Even as modern science draws authority from the rationality of great thinkers and a certain objective logic, scientists and others continue to cite interpretations of Islam or tenuous connections to a historic past to justify the implementation of modern methods. This imposition of religious links onto scientific method ultimately protects modern science and its dissemination from religiously founded criticisms.

Determann's two books are also structured in similar ways. The chapters discuss distinct themes. In a few cases, the two books overlap, especially in their examination of the history of observatories and their wider development in Middle Eastern societies in the 19th and 20th centuries. Most chapters usually start with a brief story, a personal presentation or an episodic narrative that relates to the chapter's themes. Thereafter, the author develops the key theme in detail. For

example, in *Space Science and the Arab World,* the second chapter starts with the story of Taleb Omran, a Syrian scientist and science fiction writer, and his fictional book that imagines a world where Arab scientists come together to form an Arab Science City. Omran's description of the joint efforts of Arab scientists to create a science city is actually the allegorical preamble for a critique of space science in the Arab countries and a discussion on how these developments can be understood as expressions of nationalism and cosmopolitanism. Through institutions like the *Qatar Foundation*, Arab space science becomes part of the politics legitimizing the modern state. Through transnational cooperation, it becomes, at least in ideological terms, a project for the service of humanity at large. As mentioned above, perceptions of nationalism and cosmopolitanism are served by a certain amount of nostalgic fondness, connecting today's efforts in space science to historical remnants of an earlier age of Islamic or Arab science.

An example of a similar structure in *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life* is the chapter entitled "Islamic UFO religions." The chapter begins by recounting some well-known sightings of unidentified flying objects over Kuwait in 1978. Following on from the opening passage, Determann describes earlier sightings of UFOs in various Muslim majority countries, deftly pointing out how Islamic UFO religions and Muslim ufology tended to emerge in minority contexts, especially in the U. S. The connection between the Nation of Islam and the Nuwaubian Nation, and the "Nations" belief in UFOs are presented as examples of Islamic UFO religions. This section of the book also describes how leaders within the Black movement in the United States, such as Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan, rationalised their understanding of cosmologies and mythologies in terminology inspired by science fiction and technology, a UFO jargon, of sorts. The chapter also demonstrates the links between UFO writing and flying saucers by popular writers like Erich von Däniken and science fiction films, and the formation of various Muslim movements, some of them Sufi, drawing richly from a transnational UFO literature in the formation of their own theology. The chapter ends with a discussion on flying

saucers as *jinns* and provides several examples of how flying saucers or UFOs came to represent the evils embodied by a variety of conspiracy theories, ones in which alien interventions have fundamentally altered the history of Islam, or even where AIDS is envisioned as a virus genetically engineered by advanced extraterrestrial species. Throughout, the chapter alludes to an intimacy between global adherents with a belief in flying saucers and UFOs themselves. They draw from the same literature, recounted sightings of objects and a common supply of classic science fiction literature, sometimes translated to local languages. This demonstrates science fiction's inherent transnational tendency and how the flow of ideas within radically different contexts poses a direct challenge to the abstract borders that exist between "the West" and the "Muslim world." By detailing the exchange of ideas between these two worlds, imagined as overwhelmingly different from one another, the author's strength lies in an ability to elucidate cracks in the surface of strictly defined social constructions, citing the complex social interactions that have shaped Islamic Ufology and made its existence possible.

In comparison with much of the existing scholarly literature on a field broadly defined as concerned with Islam and modern science, these two well-researched books by Determann operate closer to the level of politics and everyday existence. It brings fresh life to tired understandings of science and Islam in Muslim contexts through the affectionate portraits of enthusiasts writing and translating science fiction, professionals in the field of astrobiology, and through discussions on various "Muslim futurisms." The books retain a solid rendering of the historical development of contemporary imaginations of life on other planets or contemporary space science, and in this sense fill a gap in research about these relatively unknown parts of Muslim and Arab cultures. Whilst these books are important scholarly contributions, they remain characterised by a descriptive portrayal of these developments via careful, historical analysis. In this sense, they have opened the door for further fruitful research ventures.

In sum, Jörg Matthias Determann's *Space Science and the Arab World* and *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life* are essential contributions to the study of Islam, Muslims, and the contemporary world. They examine understudied facets of Muslim and Arab societies and culture. These books open doors for further investigation into the complex relationships between transnational flows of ideas and practices and contribute to broader discussions on Islamic and Arab modernity. Almost every chapter in both books has sufficient depth and academic rigour to inspire new research projects. Fundamentally, they are exciting additions to studies on creativity and contemporary Islam, and to developments in cultural production and modern science in Muslim and Arab contexts.

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Review:

Nasir, Kamaludeen Mohmed. 2020. *Representing Islam: Hip-Hop of the September 11 Generation.* Indiana University Press, p. 222, December 1.

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Abstract
The book Representing Islam: Hip-Hop of the September 11 Generation *(2020) by Kamaludeen Mohmed Nasir explores the entangled relationship between Islam and hip-hop. The book centers around Muslim hip-hop artists affected by the war on terror and the long-term consequences of the 9/11 attacks; increased surveillance, a securitization of Islam, and an amplified islamophobia, not only in the United States but around the world. The centrality of 9/11 for this diverse group of young Muslim artists is reflected in the fact that references to the attacks have been staples in aural, visual, and textual modes and occur as t-shirt prints, in punch lines, and metaphors as well as on record covers and sound bites.*

Keywords
Islam, hip-hop, globalization, popular culture, music, youth culture

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The book *Representing Islam: Hip-Hop of the September 11 Generation* (2020) explores the entangled relationship between Islam and hip-hop. The book centers around Muslim hip-hop artists affected by the war on terror and the long-term consequences of the 9/11 attacks; increased surveillance, a securitization of Islam, and an amplified islamophobia, not only in the United States but around the world.

Building on Karl Mannheim's influential essay "The Problem of Generations" the book describes the exitance of a 9/11 generation–born between 1980 and the eve of the events of 9/11, 2001 – for which the 9/11 terror attacks are a symbolic node that in many ways bonds them together and puts them in the same analytic framework for the author. The centrality of 9/11 for this diverse group of young Muslim artists is reflected in the fact that references to the attacks have been staples in aural, visual, and textual modes and occur as t-shirt prints, in punch lines, and metaphors as well as on record covers and sound bites.

Many previous studies that have focused on the concept of "generation" have primarily examined it from American or European empirical data. Here lies one of the great benefits of the book; Nasir takes on the topic from the perspective of a global sociologist who is as familiar with hip-hop in New York as he is with the hip hop scenes in Kuala Lumpur or Sydney. The author moves freely from one national context to another which gives rich empirical weight to his arguments and observations.

The book consists of an introduction which sets the theoretical stage for the investigation, and six lucidly written chapters. In the chapters, Nasir engages with much of the previous scholarship on Islam and hip-hop, providing a useful overview and in many ways connecting the dots between works. Each of the book's six chapters introduces and discusses theoretical issues of relevance for anyone who seriously wants to engage with Islam and hip-hop such as gender, human rights, and authenticity. The combined chapters underscore the importance of examining aspects of youth culture – for example hip-hop – to understand imperative aspects of what shapes Islam.

In one of the book's most interesting and innovative chapters, "Enemy of the State," Nasir investigates the relationship between hip-hop and states mainly outside Europe and the US. He points to the fact that "the potency of hip-hop often puts it at odds with the establishment" and that "governments the world over serve as the most important gatekeepers of hip-hop" (p. 135). In the context of authoritarian or soft authoritarian political regimes, Nasir argues that it is essential that scholars take hip-hop – distributed independently online – seriously as these artists often provide a counter-narrative to that of the governing elite.

In the above-mentioned chapter, Nasir touches on some examples where states have utilized hip-hop as "soft power" to obtain policy goals. This area is most certainly worthy of further critical investigation by scholars. I, for one, would be interested to read more about Muslim rappers who support the ruling elite. Contrary to the popular belief that rappers are always in opposition to the political establishment, there are more than a few examples around the world where hip-hop artists support and even act as mouthpieces for economic and political elites. This observation was made apparent when a long line of rappers such as Da Brat, 50 Cents, and Lil Wayne in different ways came out supporting the former US president Donald Trump.

This chapter, as all the chapters in the book, is rich in illustrative examples from around the world; for example, China, Singapore, Indonesia (I, for one, did not know that the former Indonesian president Joko Widodo was a fan of the heavy metal band Metallica), and Malaysia.

It has been nearly fifteen years since the hip-hop scholar and journalist Jeff Chang published the article "It's a Hip-Hop World" (2007) in *Foreign Policy* where he pointed to the fact that hip-hop had developed into a global means of communication. Kamaludeen Mohmed Nasir's important contribution to the field most certainly gives the reader a theoretically insightful and empirically thorough account of the Muslim side of this development. *Representing Islam: Hip-Hop of the*

September 11 Generation is highly recommended to specialized readers interested in Muslim popular culture, religion in general, globalization as well as avid hip-hop heads interested in the global impact of their culture.